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Chapter 1

The Lady in Black, the Noble Prince

April 6, Friday noon

A bird's eye view revealed people sitting and walking in an open air street-side restaurant. Short trees scattered among glass top tables cast shade on some of the patrons. Ten year old music fluttered in waves through the air to their ears. In the middle of this scene sitting at a table was a tall, slender light brown-haired man in his mid-twenties. His brown eyes were staring into the distance, not focusing on anything. He was deep in thought.

Before him on the table lay a plastic basket lined with wax paper. The basket contained a used napkin and a half finished sandwich. The napkin fluttered in a light, late winter breeze. Next to the basket sat a half emptied water bottle. The man had not finished his lunch because what he was thinking about curbed his appetite.

Years of experience had taught the bird overhead that this man was a prime candidate to provide lunch. Down the bird swooped, landing on a tree branch. The branch was a good place to wait for the right time to grab a morsel.

"What is wrong with me? I don't get it. My life... myself... I'm not right. My life's a failure. I'm a failure. God, what an idiot, what a fool!" Sitting at the small table outside the small change restaurant where he had always ate lunch; John contemplated his existence, his being, his soul. The sandwich's carbohydrates and sugars spread to the ends of his body. In the same way his mind's eye reached into every nook and cranny of his soul. He was in a trance-like state as he searched for answers to the questions that he often found himself thinking about. These thoughts he pondered about only when he was alone.

After minutes of thoughts John shook his head to break free of this trance. He wanted to stop himself from thinking. It worked. In order to fend off another trance, John concentrated on the birds that were on the cement sidewalk, on empty tables, and in the budding trees. Some of the birds were eating crumbs that people had dropped.

John's distraction worked for only a few minutes, then his vision blurred. Once again he found himself wandering through his empty and twisted soul. John tried to find answers to why he was who he was and what he could do to improve his feelings, and thus his life. Something inside John always seemed to draw his thoughts back into his soul when he was alone. Like a calf looks for his mother's milk, John couldn't resist examining himself when he was alone.

After a few minutes of self examination, John tried to resist the thoughts because he didn't want to stir up guilt, shame, pain, and the realization that he hadn't become who he had wanted to be. Whenever he began thinking these thoughts, John tried to concentrate on something else. At this sitting he fixated his thoughts on the birds near his tables; the birds that were busy overfilling themselves with left-overs. By focusing on the birds, he hoped that he could keep from concentrating on himself, his being, his soul.

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To ensure that the birds, his current saviors, wouldn't leave him, John tore off a piece of bread from his sandwich and threw it to the ground. Instantly, a bird left its perch on a branch in the closest tree and snatched up the bread.

Once again the distraction cause by the bird only worked for a short time. As quickly as the bird picked up the morsel, it took to wing and disappeared into the cloudless blue sky. Within a minute, John once again found himself asking, "Why am I doing this, distracting myself? What am I afraid of? I don't have anything to be afraid of. I'm not a bad person. Sure I'm not perfect, but who is? In fact, I'm better than most. I'm not a murderer. I don't steal. I always do good toward others. So, what is wrong with me?"

Somewhere deep inside, John knew the answer to these questions. He knew that he was lying to himself. He knew that he didn't want to think about himself because he knew that he would come to conclusions that meant change, and he didn't like change. He had grown comfortable with himself. "Yah! Like the frog on the hotplate," he thought as he mocked his own twisting thoughts.

John knew he should do something to become a better person. He knew what he had done. Yet, he had reasons for what he had done. He justified himself, "I have reasons for what I did and they're all good. The means justifies the end."

John couldn't accept that he was rationalizing his sins, errors, faults, and weaknesses while at the same time he knew that he was. He wouldn't accept this because it would mean change. "Change? How? Surely that could mean life would only get worse," John told himself.

After receiving neither new insight nor direction, John's contemplation turned to anger. "No! It's not me, it can't be. I don't have to change. Things around me have to change," he told himself in a spurt of rage. His emotions and thoughts tumbled, turned, and were digested just as the food in his stomach tumbled and turned as it was digested.

"Besides if I change it may be for the worse. Into what would I change?" He answered himself, "Probably a religious fanatic controlled by some cult egomaniac. I don't have to change. I shouldn't change. As the old saying goes, 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.'"

John smiled at his wit and it lead to a comfortable self-righteousness. "Yes, it's something around me; some cloud; some fate; some evil force after me, always flying over my head. That's why I always seem to pick the wrong line, the wrong job, the wrong stock, the wrong friends, and the wrong girlfriend," his thoughts continued. "And where is she anyway? Why is she late? She always seems to be late. Doesn't she know that I have to get back to work? She is so selfish, so self-centered, always thinking what's best for her. She never thinks of me." John looked through the crowd to see if Giselle had arrived yet.

Rather than seeing Giselle, John's eye stopped at another woman; a young lady who appeared to be a bit younger than he. He looked at her breasts, her waist, her thighs, and her legs. He undressed her in his mind. What he saw, he liked. A tight black short dress clung to her thin, perfectly curved body. Then he looked at her face. Blue green eyes sat perfectly in a pale clear face, puffy rosy cheeks perked up as she smiled, and a little nose danced on her

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face as she talked. She was so full of life, so full of energy. He wanted her; he wanted to have her.

“God! She is great! What beautiful long brown hair! What a great body! Why couldn’t she be my girlfriend?” John asked himself.

“She could if you’d just go over and ask her,” he answered, mocking his own fears.

John often did this when he saw such women. He’d get a rush of excitement and then self doubt would creep in. “No, what would a woman like that want with me?”

Then self comfort took control of his thoughts as he rationalized his doubt, “Besides, they always have attitudes when they look that great. They’re selfish and egotistical. They always want something. They always have hidden agendas. It’s better to just look because getting to know them destroys their beauty.”

John realized that the young beauty must have felt his glares for she looked in his direction. Guilt made John want to look away, but he couldn’t stop staring at the beauty.

“Sorry John,” Giselle spoke from behind him, kissing his cheek as she leaned over his shoulder.

John was startled. His eyes were freed from their trance on the lady in black. He moved to one side so his cheek could catch Giselle’s lips. “Did she notice that I was gawking at another woman?” he wondered. Just moments ago he would have dumped Giselle for the mystery body in black; and moments before that he would have dumped himself, letting the birds eat his soul. But now John pulled his composure together in order to gain Giselle’s affection. Now all his attention was focused on Giselle. He wanted to give her the illusion that she was the center of his world.

A part of John wanted to make Giselle’s day. However, the side of him that spoke was the selfish, fatalistic child, “You’re late. I’ve finished eating and my lunch time is almost over,” John snapped, as his eyebrows pointed down to form a V.

Giselle was hurt, not just because John was looking at another woman, but because he was speaking to her as if she was a young weak girl. He was treating her like the child she tried not to be. Somewhere deep inside Giselle knew that she didn’t love John. Yet, she just couldn’t get herself to admit it because another part of her wanted to gain all of John’s affection and attention. She wanted to be the center of his world and for the past few months she had done all she could do to make his world and attention revolve around her.

“Why do I long to make him focus his life on me?” she asked herself as she purposely sat between him and the other woman, the woman of John’s one minute attention. She blocked his view of her because Giselle wanted to be the center of John’s attention and because she wanted to let him know that she knew who he had focused on and what he was thinking about. “Why do I want him to know that?” thought Giselle as her jealousy caused guilt of her own. “Because I want him to pay for his misdeed by giving him doubt and guilt,” she answered herself in unbridled self justification.

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Giselle's justification only lasted for a few seconds. Soon she found herself asking, "Why am I like this? What is wrong with me? Why do I crave him and at the same time push him away? Why do I become his slave? What is so great about him that I long for him?" When she could find no answer to these questions she reasoned, "There is nothing great about John, nothing at all." She continued this train of thought by asking, "So if there is nothing great about John, what is so small in me that I am willing to settle for second best?" She concluded, "I shouldn't settle for second best." The conclusion made her feel good, for it gave her full reassurance that what she was now doing to John was just.

Giselle's vengeance gave her only a short satisfaction. Quickly pain found its way back into her soul as she continued to play her part in a less than enjoyable word game that she and John had been acting out time and again. She replied to John, "I'm late? That's ridiculous. You work salary and that's only until the ball season begins! Your hours are flexible and your winter job at your uncle's company is almost over. So you have a lot of time to eat and to do what we sometimes do after we eat. Don't act like I did something wrong." Giselle's eyes opened as she finished her argument, "Because of our afternoon delight you seldom schedule a meeting before two. You won't be late for anything and you know it."

"How do I answer that without missing a beat?" John thought. "Giselle is right."

John and Giselle wanted each other and they wanted someone else. They wanted someone to fulfill their dreams, to fulfill their needs, to be with them, and to need them. They knew that the person now sitting across from them would never be what they wanted. They were sure that the relationship that they had was temporary as they looked for the right person. John's right person was woman that looked like the lady in black. Giselle's right person was a man that was sure of himself, noble, selfless, honest, and rich. Giselle definitely wanted someone that was rich so she could stay at home while he worked to support them. She wanted a noble prince's money. Money would make her feel safe.

After consideration John knew how to save face and at the same time turn into a hero. This response would make him a noble prince. This empty answer came quickly to him because they had played this game before. John humbly stated, "I'm sorry for my tone. It's just that I want to spend some more time with you. Lately, it appears that our schedules are half an hour out of sync." The birds squawked for more meals, but it seemed as if they were mocking John's reply.

There was silence between John and Giselle as both thought the same thought, "We're out of sync because we are looking for something else, someone else, something to make us happy, and something to fill the void."

John had taken an early lunch hoping that there would be time for a quickie with Giselle, or maybe if he was even luckier, get the nerve to talk to a girl who looked like the lady in black. Giselle was late because she had spent time talking to a newbie at work, a bright young attractive man that she wanted to lasso, a man she felt could be her noble prince, a man by the name of Bob Newman.

Finally, they got the nerve to end it. Together they sighed as they whispered, "Listen," and then stopped. They knew what each wanted to say. Since neither wanted it to be their fault, neither continued the sentence. Instead, they looked into each other's eyes. In the brown and green they saw sadness; they saw a hole; they saw relief, and they saw hope. Hope not for

their relationship; but for a chance to find someone to make them right, to make them whole, and to make them feel at ease in a meaningless world. One hoped to find the lady in black; the other hoped to find that noble prince.

Chapter 2

Evening Cowboys

April 6, Friday evening

John sat at the bar as he waited for Marshal, his closest friend. He was drinking a beer; not his usual, if you could say he had a usual beer. The evening was young so not many people were in the establishment. There was nothing on the monitors that he wanted to watch. "Professional football," he joked to himself, "that's not a real sport, not like baseball. Football, sixteen games a season? Most football players only see a small amount of time on the playing field in half those sixteen games. How can that be a real sport? A real sport makes a player work every day for half the year. Baseball's a real sport."

Part of John didn't want to be at the bar because of what happened at lunch. Self pity wanted him to be home sulking and licking his wounds. Pain and self pity usually controlled him after a breakup.

The other part of John wanted to be at social gatherings like the ones which took place in a bar. A crowd full of strangers and semi-close acquaintances could help him keep his composure and his sanity. A blood stream full of alcohol could dull his senses, his feelings, his mind, and his soul. Alcohol had a way of making him be who ever he wanted to be.

John's gaze roamed the establishment. The owner had a love of the Old West. Pictures of horses, ranch hands, and cattle lined the wall. Eventually John's gaze landed on the largest picture which hung front and center of the wall. It was perhaps twenty feet long by eight feet high. It displayed several men on horseback as they led a herd of cattle to their slaughter. John noticed that birds were on the cattle's backs. He wondered why the cows allowed the birds on their back and why the birds wanted to be on their backs. Eventually, he realized, "The cows don't mind the birds because they were eating ticks, fleas, and flies from their backs. The birds get a free and easy meal. What a peculiar coexistence."

John thought about the true Old West days of the late eighteen hundreds and early nineteen hundreds. "What was it like to be a cowboy wandering in the open lands, free from concerns and heart aches. Perhaps these men were on the road because they're like me. They wanted to escape and be free. They wanted to be left alone. How much more out of the way and solitary could a trail have been? A need for isolation must have been what drove these guys to open lands."

He was not sure if this was correct, "Was it money?" John had heard the money that could be earned as a cowboy wasn't much. "Yet it was enough to buy land to start a new life, a life independent of parents, siblings, and old romantic flings."

"John! Getting a jump on me?" Marshal broke into John's thoughts and lifted his spirit. Somehow Marshal's company always lifted him up. Marshal was a good man, a good friend. He always seemed to be there at the right time.

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Marshal McCoy was a tall muscular man who had just turned thirty. His blond hair made his blue eyes stand out and pierce the soul of anyone who looked him in the eye. Yet, the slightly crooked curved-up nose that sat in the middle of his square face and just over an always present smile made Marshal approachable and easy to warm up to. He was a silent man. Yet, if you could get him to talk he always had a good story to tell.

John had met Marshal a ball season ago, when he joined Marshal's team, the Mudhens. John was a pitcher and Marshall was a catcher. Their team had an average season the first year John played on the team. After the first year John and Marshal worked on John's pitching technique.

The first season was not disappointing to either man because they always seemed to have fun. As one year turned into two, John and Marshal's partnership and friendship matured. Their camaraderie deepened as John's pitching improved. The team's second season promised to be better than the first. With this year's spring training they made themselves believe they could win the league's trophy and many would move up to the majors.

John replied with a sheepish smile on his face, "That happens even if you start before me Marshal. You always milk your drink." John had noticed that Marshal seemed to never drink much beer. Perhaps he could learn why this time; or better yet, achieve the whole point of the spur, to get Marshal to drink fast and get drunk with him. "First time for everything," John thought to himself.

From the first time they met, John knew that there was something different about Marshal. He was different from John's former high school and college friends. He didn't know what it was, but he preferred Marshal's company to theirs. "Now," he thought, "if I could only get him to drink more."

John hadn't seen his high school and college friends for several years, not since the graduations. After graduation they had gone their separate ways, not as to some joint decision, but as the result of life. Several old friends had left for distant towns because of new jobs. Others went back to their hometowns to marry their high school sweethearts.

The parting of ways with his old friends was the reason why John signed up to play on Marshal's ball team. The number of his friends and acquaintances had been drying up to the point of near loneliness. John wanted to meet new people and make new friends. So he joined the Mudhens, and made new friends. Marshal was the best of the bunch.

John's demeanor changed as he began to spill his guts to Marshal. "Well, it happened again, another break up. Giselle and I broke up." John thought it was funny. His feelings were different from at lunch. The hope of meeting someone new was completely gone. What was left was sadness and emptiness. Ever since the lunch break up, John began debating his decision to leave Giselle.

"What an idiot. What a fool. Why did I do it? Why do I always do it?" John kept asking himself as he sat alone in his living room that afternoon. "Why can't I stay in a relationship? None have lasted more than a year. Giselle was nice. She was pretty. She was smart. At first I thought she was down right sexy. But after we had sex a few times I began seeing her as something old, something used, and someone who didn't have much respect for herself. That

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was when the desire to find someone new grew in me until I had to break up with her.” And so it continued all afternoon. Now he was telling it all to Marshal. John punished himself by asking, “Why am I like this?”

At the bar John continued to pour out his soul. Pouring out his life’s problems onto Marshal was something that John did from time to time. The last time his soul spilled out in this manner concerned the subject of his relationship with his parents and siblings. That was less than a year ago, after his mother died. Those relationships were something that John didn’t like to think about much. “You can choose your friends,” John quoted his mother, “but you can’t choose your relatives.”

Marshal ordered another light beer as he listened to John. Taking a drink, he thought about how to respond to John’s many thoughts and questions. Finally, he accepted the fact that he probably shouldn’t answer John, nor should he give any comments. John didn’t really want an answer, even if it was the right answer. He knew that John wouldn’t hear it. John just wanted somebody to listen to his life’s problems.

Marshal had always been a good listener. He had learned at a young age that most people don’t really want to know the truth even if the truth would set them free from the pain caused by the burdens they piled on themselves. “Many people find a strange comfort in continual self pity,” Marshal stated to himself. The realization of this fact had often caused him to search for the reasons for this human truth. “Why don’t we want to know the truth even though it could help us? It seems that we humans would rather eat our own vomit over and over again rather than eat the truth?”

Marshal had formulated an answer to these questions quite a long time ago. Yet he often predigested these questions again and again. The answer that always followed his questions was, “We fear the truth because we are afraid if our sins and weaknesses are exposed we will be judged, condemned, and punished by our friends, society and especially by God. We fear that we will become an outcast. One of the universal truths of mankind seen in myself and everyone else is that people don’t want to know the truth because of this blind fear. What a fickle silly race we are!” Marshal has often told himself.

“Marshal,” John said after he emptied his beer and ordered another. John hadn’t noticed that Marshal was listening and at the same time diagnosing him. The effects of alcohol were taking their effect on John. “See those cowhands up there,” John pointed toward the huge picture before them. “Wouldn’t that be the life? Those were the good old days. The days when men could go wherever they wanted to and do what ever they want to. No hitches. No concerns. The land was open and they were free.”

“Free to sleep in the cold. Free to fry in the sun. Free to eat beans and dust every day. Free to not take a shower for weeks at a time. Free to pick the fleas from their clothes. Free to ride till their butts were raw and red. Riding for a vacation or a weekend is fun John. But riding for work is work, and work was no different then from work today. To me, the cows had an easier life than the cowboys. At least they had the birds to eat the ticks and fleas from their backs. At first glance it seems like those men had life easier than we do, John. But I’m sure that life was the same then as it is today,” Marshal replied trying to shed some reality into John’s dreaming heart.

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In John's words lay another interesting universal human fact that Marshal had often thought about. "Why do we always want to escape? Why are we always creating fantasies and placing ourselves in them? Why do we distort the truth of the lives of actors, leaders, sports heroes, music stars, writers, and people in the past and then envy their lives? Why do we wish to be what they are not, but rather what we make them out to be? Why are we always wandering from one fantasy to another? Why do we wander from one game, movie, book, TV series, and gossip to another? Why do we concentrate our hopes and desires on characters that never are quite true to life?"

Even though Marshal had formulated an answer to this question quite a long time ago, he still contemplated these mind boggling questions every time he saw it in himself and others, such as John was doing now. The answer he had formulated always concluded with this, "We seek to live in fantasy worlds because we don't like the world we have created for ourselves. Deep down inside we hate who we are and what we have made of our lives. We aren't satisfied with what life has dealt us. We don't blame ourselves for the life we have created for ourselves. Instead, we blame life and people; but mostly behind all the blaming we really are blaming God. Added to this blame game we live in the illusion that our life can get better because we believe life was and is good for someone else. The funny thing is that the examples we use to compare to our life aren't real. They are make-believe. They are fantasies. People may appear to be better for fleeting moments. They may appear to be full of joy and excitement. In reality the lives we use to compare to are own are fantasy. The reality is that the lives all people live are full of doubt, guilt, and fear. Everyone uses fantasies to escape from their reality. Hope not based in reality is fools' gold."

Marshal didn't want John to seek fool's gold so he added, "John, you don't want to go back in time and be a cowboy. You just want to escape from the pain that another breakup has given you. You're no different than the rest of us. We're all looking for the ideal life that can never be obtained. There is no Utopia. There is no Shangri-La. The Garden of Eden is gone, John. There is not, nor has there ever been a good old Wild West. I know. I lived there."

Marshal continued by giving to John the truth that there was something worth hoping for, "Don't get me wrong John. I believe that there is a better way to live than the way most of us have made for ourselves. There is hope for mankind and I know there is hope for you. That hope is based in reality, not in some dreamed up side show."

John thought about what Marshal was saying as he looked around the growing bar crowd. To elude asking Marshal what hope was better, John stated, "The cows had it better, huh Marshal? I think you've overlook one important fact. Weren't they being driven to their death?" John smiled.

Marshal burst forth in a loud belly laugh, "You're right John. You're right."

After a pause John exclaimed, "Oh my God, Marshal!" He leaned over towards Marshal as he spoke in a low voice. "There she is!"

"There who is?"

"The lady in black," John answered. "My God, I wonder if she lives around here, or perhaps she just works around here. I saw her today as I was having my lunch, before Giselle showed up that is." John corrected himself, "Well, as Giselle showed up." John lowered his voice and

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his eyes as he corrected himself again, "That is before Giselle and I broke up." Then stopping to gaze at the lady in black John exclaimed, "Damn, isn't she great!"

"John, you're not serious are you?" Marshal looked at John in astonishment. John had a crooked smile on his face. Marshal turned to the object of John's gaze. She was a young lady, the only one in black at a table of three young ladies. Marshal knew who he was talking about. John was right. The lady in black was astounding.

Marshal stopped looking at the lady in black and turned back to his friend. "Oh, I see. You are serious, or should I say delirious," Marshal corrected himself as he realized John was dreaming again. "Man John, even before you got out of yet another relationship, your relationship with Giselle, you were looking for another girl to ride. You know John, if you went back in time to the Old West you wouldn't have been a cowboy. You would have been a train robber, or bank robber, or a horse thief. Yes, you would have been a rustler."

John turned to talk to Marshal still smiling, "No, not a horse thief! I would have been a government spy, saving the country and gaining the girls. I would have been a man of the wild wild West." Then he laughed and took another drink from his beer. The beer was having its effects. It had changed John's attitude and helped him formulate a new fantasy to live in. The alcohol gave him the illusion that his world was lighter and brighter.

"You know Marshal," he continued, "Desire consists of treating a woman as a means, not as an end; and love consists of treating a woman as an end, not a means. Right now all I have is desire."

Marshal replied "John, that didn't make any sense, but I know what you're driving at." Marshal shook his head before he spoke again. He knew John was about to make a bad mistake. He wanted to warn his friend, stay and protect him; but he had to leave. "John, I have to leave. I have someplace important to go. I'd like to stay and stop you from making another bad mistake. But I can't. So all I can do to help is give advice. Do yourself a favor John. Don't do what you always do. Don't jump back into another relationship. Think about what you got yourself into in the past. Think about what you keep doing to yourself. Then you'll see that I'm right when I say you should wait. Ask God to give you strength to sort out your life," Marshal said as he stood and put on a light jacket. Then he concluded, "And don't drink yourself drunk. You'll likely get yourself in trouble again."

John paused as he remembered some past errors done in a drunken state. He had paid for some stupid decisions made while drunk. So he promised, "Alright Marshal. You're probably right. I'll stay away from the girls tonight," and to be truthful to the obvious he added, "But I won't stay away from the booze."

Chapter 3

For Sale, One Day Only

April 7, Saturday early morning

John lay in bed not feeling so good. His stomach was upset. His mouth and throat were dry. His body felt weak and worst of all his head raged in pain. Once again he had had too much to drink. He had gotten awfully drunk. In fact, he was pretty sure that he was still feeling the

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effects of alcohol in his brain. He should have taken Marshal's advice and left the bar with Marshal. Yet, he didn't want to leave with Marshal because he was enjoying the small fantasies that the alcohol was giving him. And now he was paying the price for that freedom.

"Nothing's free. Everything has a price. This is the price that I have to pay for last night's drinks. Every vice has its price," John thought to himself as his head thumped and his stomach turned.

John decided to get out of bed because his back ached from lying in bed too long, because his sheets and pillow cases were soaked in sweat, and finally because he had to relieve his bladder. After flushing the toilet John drank a sip of water. Instead of helping him, the water made his stomach turn and his head spin some more.

A shower, which usually helped sooth a hang-over, didn't supply healing. So John decided to take a walk. Breathing in cool fresh air and drinking a cup or two of coffee usually helped the headache go away. At least that was true in the past.

Exiting his apartment door John noticed a few people walking from here to there as they stirred up the morning doves that were cooing on the sidewalk. The cool late winter air made him shiver, but it seemed to work. He felt a little better. He pulled his jacket tight around him, looked down, and began walking down the street.

As he made his way down the street, John thought about what Marshal had said the night before. He began thinking about his life, his past, and the reasons why he couldn't free himself from certain bad habits.

Just before college graduation Grace Blackthorne had told John that she had accepted a job in another state. She said that this meant that they wouldn't be seeing each other any more. In fact, she said that she preferred it that way. "I'm really not in love with you John, and to tell you the truth I know that you really aren't in love with me. Lately, when we are with other people you ignore me, and sometimes you're even mean to me. You have shown me a part of yourself that you tried to hide from me in the past."

Grace continued as John grew uneasy, "But I see John Kirk clearly now. You love money John; you love my money. You'll do anything for money. I've even seen you take money from your parents. And money, I am now convinced, is the reason that you go out with me. You love my money John, not me."

Grace's parents were wealthy. They had worked hard their whole lives to build a small fortune. In fact, they had held off having children to build a wealthy little kingdom. Then, due to a motherly instinct, Grace's mother decided it was time to have a child. When their only child, was finally born they were in their late thirties. All this meant that Grace was set to inherit a small fortune probably before she was forty. Ever since Grace had graduated from high school her parents were giving her large sums of money over and above her college tuition.

When John had learned this about Grace he took a great interest in her. While still in college he began looking for an opportunity to be noticed by her. The opportunity came during a college party where a lot of attendees were getting drunk and looking for a good time. He captured her heart by coming to her rescue when a drunken older classman was trying to take off Grace's shirt. With a few well directed shots by John, Grace had broken free. She was

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grateful, and left the party with someone she thought would always protect her. She left with John. John left the party with hopes of marrying her money.

As John made his way down the paved sidewalk, he thought that it was ironic that what brought them together eventually separated them. The last day that he saw her was when she told him, "You love my money, John, not me." That very day he had made advances to another female college student only to be rejected.

John remembered the rest of that that day all to well. Grace had discovered John's motives and had let him know it. He hated her for the discovery and he hated himself for letting his guard down. For a while after the breakup John called her a witch, a bitch, and a number of other dehumanizing names. The name calling helped him rationalize his hate; hate not so much toward her, but more so toward himself.

Grace had lain open John's heart, his soul, his very being; and he didn't like it. She was right. He loved her money, not her.

Somewhere in his soul, John knew that his feelings toward Grace weren't because she wasn't pretty, or nice, or anything about her at all. She was a nice girl in many ways, and they had fun times together. It was just that he wanted her money so bad, to the point that he began hating her for it. Not so much hating her, but hating himself for what he really wanted and how he had planned to get it.

For three years he pretended to love her. At first this was easy. But after a few years his greed wore him down. Slowly, as he saw Grace spend more and more money, his anticipation grew into impatience. And impatience led to hate.

John's hatred for Grace and her wealth and his lack of patience to wait to obtain it fertilized and watered his lust for other women. Grace had found out about a few of them. She forgave him for the first few. But he could tell after the third one that she began to doubt his sincerity and his motivations. He knew that slowly the hero's badge that she had given him became tainted.

Eventually her doubt and his lust had worn him down to a point where he secretly and deeply hated her. Grace had remained innocent, loving, and rich. He had turned dark and hateful.

It was inevitable that John's secret would show. By the end of their senior year in college Grace had to accept who John really was. He was greedy and selfish. So she broke off their relationship the only way she knew how. In one swift blow she broke off their relationship even though it broke her heart.

John continued to walk slowly down the street as he thought about this. The relived past angered John just as it did back then. John was mad at himself for not sticking it out. He was angry that he had let all that money go. "Acquiring wealth," he always told himself, "was what life was all about. Any personal price was worth paying to acquire more wealth." This twisted philosophy of life was taught to him by his mother. She had engrained relentless cold greed in his young mind.

As far back as he could remember John could see how much his mother had loved money. Money and the outward appearance of wealth was the reason why his mother did everything.

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“She was a penny pincher,” people had said. They were right, especially when it came to him and his siblings. When it came to her husband, money was the only reason why John’s mother remained married to him. His pension fund, IRAs and 401ks were worth too much for her to leave him even though she hadn’t loved him for years. Like many people John knew, money was more important to his mother than love.

When John was old enough to understand his mother’s underlying life philosophy he cornered her and made her admit, “I’m willing to pay the price of being his wife to keep this wealth.”

This truth had taught John to learn how to work his parents against each other in order to get what ever he wanted. Something deep inside him liked living this way. He grew to love playing each other against themselves. It was a young boy’s way to pay his parents back for not loving each other, and perhaps for not loving him.

By his teenage years, John began telling himself that this is the right way to live. Those who hadn’t learned this skill were fools.

Now as John looked back at what he had done to his parents and to Grace, he told himself, “You are the fool. You’re no happier today then the day you made your mother confess.” As John made his way down the street his self anger and hate grew.

“What’s wrong with the acquisition of wealth?” He answered his self guilt, “What’s wrong with taking the easiest path through life? So what if it means I have to like someone to get their money. I’m not selling my soul.”

John paused to think about what he had just stated in his mind, “What am I saying, ‘selling your soul?’ To whom? To what? It’s impossible to sell your soul for there is no such thing as a soul. Even if there was, who would I sell it too? It’s not like there is a devil and God playing for my soul.”

John continued his walk down the street to the coffee house. He continued to look inside his soul and knew that what he had just thought wasn’t true. There was a soul for he knew that somehow every year that he had played his parents and Grace, he was losing something inside.

“Since there is a soul, there must be consequences for what we do,” he concluded. This realization was too much to bear. So he ignored this reality and changed the subject, “But who will look out for number one if not me? It’s not like a baloney sandwich is going to fall from heaven and land on the sidewalk in front of me. I have to find my own means and I choose the easy way to get it. I’m not going to be like the other losers in the cubes next to me,” John swore to himself thinking about his job at his uncle’s business.

Suddenly as he continued down the street toward the coffee house a flock of morning doves scattered in front of John. Some flew over his head. Then, “plop,” something hit his coat. He looked to his shoulder to discover that one of those rats on wings had given him someone’s baloney sandwich. “Great! Ask for something and you get it.”

John looked across the street to a dry cleaner that he had used before. Still feeling somewhat dizzy and hung-over, John made his way across the street and into the cleaners. He opened

the door and a rush of hot steamy air and chemicals rushed into his face and nostrils. They flushed and flared as he fell to the floor.

Chapter 4

Shade from the Heat

All time

Strange lights passed before John's vision. Shades of gray eventually changed into colored images. Finally, John realized that he was standing in a sloping open field of green that was perhaps five miles in circumference. In the distance he could make out trees that lined the field's border. Due to heat waves that rose from the motionless tall grass, the tree line seemed to move. The sight made him feel sick to his stomach.

John felt hot and sweaty. He looked up to see if clouds were going to shade him from the sun and heat. He did see a few clouds in the blue sky, but they were nowhere near the sun, nor did they seem to move. The rest of the sky was dazzling blue. As he looked up John noticed a small black object slowly flying overhead. He suspected that this was a hawk, or perhaps an eagle, or worst yet a vulture.

A nauseous feeling was coming over John as he continued to look up. So he dropped his head and looked down at his feet. He noticed that they were beginning to burn inside his boots. John looked around his surroundings and noticed a horse feeding on the grass a short distance away. The horse had a shining black coat. It was a mare.

John walked to the mare to see if he could ride it to the tree line's shade and comfort. John found that mounting the horse was not easy because the horse did not have a saddle, a blanket, or reins. When he finally did mount the horse John found it very uncomfortable. He wished it had a saddle.

John tried to make the horse move; but it didn't. So John began kicking it in the ribs with his boots. This caused the horse to buck and kick wildly. John tried desperately to hold onto the mare's neck. Eventually he catapulted into the air and landed on his chest. John's whole body writhed in pain.

John accepted that riding the horse to the shelter of the tree line was not going to happen. This angered him. He cursed the horse and kicked dirt in its direction. The horse could sense John's anger.

After John was satisfied that the mare knew his wrath, he considered his options to get out of the heat of the sun. A vision flashed in his mind. He remembered that as he was flying through the hot air when the mare threw him, he saw a place of refuge. He was pretty sure that he had seen a tree about a mile to the north in what looked like a small depression in the landscape.

So, John left the mare and headed in the direction of the tree. As he came closer to the area of shelter the tree that he had seen as he flew through the air became visible. At first only the top was seen. Then slowly the rest of the plant revealed itself. After the whole tree was visible, John realized that it was not a tree at all. It was actually a small group of very tall

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plants. They were perhaps fifteen feet tall. When he was within a hundred feet of the tree, John heard the sound of many birds roosting in the branches. They were cawing and hacking endlessly. The noise made John wonder why birds were so prone to making a continuous racket. Surely they did not, could not, make out one chirp from another. "Funny," he thought, "They sound like a crowd of people cheering at me during a baseball game."

When John was close enough to get relief from the sun by the plants' shade, the birds suddenly vanished into the hot dry air. The loud noise of flapping wings was the last sound that they made. John was relieved that his presence had caused the noisy birds to leave.

"Chirp," John heard a noise from behind him. He turned to see one bird remained.

"I can put up with one," John stated, "but only one."

The low branch line of the plants caused John to stoop down and sit on the ground. This was the only way he was going to get some comfort from the shade the plants produced. When seated John noticed that the ground was covered with yellow flower petals. "These must be flowering plants," he realized. "The birds must have been eating the flowers and seeds. No wonder they were so noisy. They were happy to be in this wealthy, lush plant."

Suddenly a swooping sound caused John to duck and then turn toward the source of the noise. The black bird that had been hovering overhead had swooped down and plucked the one remaining bird from the branches. It was then that John realized, "The other birds had left, not because of my appearance, but because they saw the predator coming."

As a feather floated down from where the captured bird had been roosting John thought, "The foolish bird that remained to eat a few more seeds deserved what he got. His greediness caused his ruin." John smiled because he hated the noisy birds.

John took off his boots to relieve his aching feet. Slowly his body temperature cooled down. He grew tired and lay down under the bush. He was about to fall asleep when he noticed a figure in the distance. Someone was approaching. At first, the figure seemed to have come out of the setting sun. John knew that was impossible. "So where did he come from and where is he going?" John asked himself.

Because the setting sun was positioned behind the approaching man, John could not tell who the man was. All he saw was a silhouette. Squinting and shading his eyes with his hands and his hat, John saw that the spurs had a determined walk. As the silhouette grew closer, John began to hear stirrups. "Is this man friend or foe?" he asked himself. John could not tell as the silhouette approached. The silhouette grew as it approached. Fear started to overtake John, fear of the unknown.

As the silhouette drew nearer, John hoped that the stranger did not see him. His hope was unrealized for the silhouette continued to approach.

As the figure drew closer John could have sworn that every once in a while he saw a flash of light come from the left side of his chest. "What is that," John thought.

"A badge!" he realized. A bit of relief overcame John as he realized that the approaching person was a man of the law, a man of order. "I'll bet he's coming to rescue me!"

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When the man of law and order was within twenty feet of John, John could still not make out his face. It was there, at twenty feet away that the silhouette stopped and stared at John. John noticed that one gun rested on each hip of the man of law and order. Fear and guilt rushed into John's body. His chest tightened, making it hard to breath. John had to work in order to wheeze out questions, "Who are you? What do you want? I've done nothing wrong."

Pointing at the land the man of law and order sternly answered, "This is not your land. This is not your field. These are not your plants. You do not belong here." Then pointing in the direction John had come from, the man of law and order stated, "You tried to steal the owner's horse. You have broken the law. Punishment must be administered."

Panicking, John avoided the issue of the horse and replied, "I don't know how I got here. I'm hot, tired, my feet ache, my head is spinning from the heat, and my body is in pain. Can't I take refuge from the heat for a little while longer? Then, I'll be on my way. I'll leave this land and these plants. The owner can have them back. I've done no harm to the plants or this field, nor will I."

"The law can not be avoided. Penance must be paid. A hangin' is the only solution," law and order answered.

Now in full panic John rose to his feet and answered in a high voice, "Hangin'! For what? I have done nothing wrong. Innocent! Innocent am I! I've taken nothin' from nobody. All I have on me is my own and it's all I own. All I have is all that life gave me. You are accusing me wrongly. Show me what I have taken. Have a trial! You'll see that I am innocent!"

Then the man of law and order who was still a silhouette to John pointed down the sloping hill. "You are not innocent. You are guilty. Look at what you have done!"

John followed the man's hand and looked in the distance to see that the horse that he had tried to mount was motionless on the ground. "Dead? But how? I was only on it for a short time, only a few seconds. Surely I am not the cause of that! It could not have been me?"

"You tried to steal the horse and now it is dead. You're guilty! No trial is needed. You are seen for what you are, a thief. The penalty must be paid. Hangin' is the only justice acceptable for this crime. Reconciliation is needed for the sake of the colt."

"Colt? What colt?" John asked. The man of law and order pointed in the direction of the dead horse again. A colt stood next to the dead mare. John had not noticed the colt.

At the sight of the colt John began running as fast as he could in the opposite direction of the colt. Because he had left his boots behind John's feet began aching. Slowly small cuts began to appear, blood began pouring out of his feet.

John turned around to see if the man of law and order was following; but before he saw anything something hit his shoulders and dug into his chest and back. John looked up to see that the bird that had been circling moments before over him now had him in her claws. He looked down and noticed that he was air born. Surely he would soon die.

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As the bird carried him higher and higher John looked down to see that the man of law and order was directly beneath him. He was standing in the middle of the open area and looking up at John. The man of law and order reached behind his back and pulled out a rifle that had been strapped onto his back. He placed the butt of the gun to his right shoulder and pointed the end of the muzzle directly at John.

“If the bird doesn’t kill me surely this man will,” John exclaimed. “This man never gives up. He never lets the guilty go. Has he become judge and jury?” But before the man of law and order could pull the trigger John heard a shot ring out from someplace among the trees. The shot just missed the bird that was carrying John away. John studied the area where the shot had been fired; so did the man of law and order. John could not see anyone among the trees, but apparently the man of law and order did. He lowered the gun and pointed it to the trees. John could faintly hear him say, “In the name of the law, lower your gun.”

Another shot rang from the trees gave an answer. The shot didn’t hit John or the bird, but it scared the bird enough to let John go. John plummeted to the ground.

As John fell from a terrible height he saw the man of law and order fire into the trees. A shot responded from the trees. Then the man of law and order stumbled, regained his stance and fired again. A scream was heard coming from the trees. John could not see what had happened but suspected that the man of law and order found his target. Then the man of law and order dropped his rifle and looked up at John again. The colt stood behind the man of law and order. Next to the colt was the colt’s mother. The mare was alive again. John was puzzled.

As John drew closer to the ground he noticed unexpectedly that hate was not on the face of the man of law and order, or in the face of the mare and colt. Compassion and love was all that could be seen. As an added shock to John the man who he thought was out to kill him stretched his arms forth as if to catch him. “How could this be happening?” he thought to himself. “Why would he do that? If I hit him surely he and I will both die. He can’t possibly think that he can save me.”

As the ground grew ever clearer and nearer, the colors began to fade until all that was left were black, white, and some grays. The silhouette of the man of law and order was now black on grey. Just as John hit the ground the black and grays vanished into a blaze of light.

Chapter 5

Out of the Blue

April 7, Saturday early morning

As John came to consciousness he looked up to find his newest desire staring at him. The beautiful lady in black was looking down at him. He was laying on the floor of the dry cleaners. She was standing behind the paramedics who were treating him. Behind her were people who must have been working for the dry cleaners. The workers were quietly talking among themselves. John did not notice the workers, for he was staring at the lady in black.

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“Take it easy sir,” said one of the paramedics, “You’re going to be alright. You passed out. Everything’s OK. We suggest that you have a doctor look at you. If you want we could take you to the emergency room so doctors can look you over to make sure everything’s OK.”

John barely heard him. He did not answer right away. He was groggy. Yet the excitement caused by the lady in black looking at him was doing a lot to revive him. “Surely she must live nearby. I’ve got to get to know her,” John thought to himself.

John turned his head slightly toward a paramedic, made brief eye contact, and answered, “No that’s OK. Thanks. I feel OK. I’m just dizzy; that’s all,” without moving his head John’s gaze returned to the lady in black. “How long was I out?”

“Not long, perhaps fifteen to twenty minutes,” the other paramedic answered. He noticed the focus of John’s attention and so stated, “She was the first to help you when you passed out I’m told. She’s a nurse who happened to be in this dry cleaner. Look’s like you have a guardian’ angel.”

The term guardian angel had briefly snapped John back. “Was he talking about the nurse or the man of law and order? Wait,” he continued thinking, “How could he know about the dream?”

John started to sit up. His upper body weight was now resting on his elbows and butt. It was cooler on the floor because fresh air was streaming in the slightly opened door to the dry cleaners. Someone acting as a door jam was watching the excitement that was playing out in the dry cleaners. “Man he looks pale. Pretty bad,” he said to no one in particular.

“Ya, but his color is coming back now,” someone else softly replied.

John sat up. His full body weight was on his butt now. In this position his head reached hot moist air. He felt sick to his stomach again. He fought the reaction to throw up. He did not want to reveal to the lady in black that he was feeling bad. He wanted to look strong. John couldn’t let this opportunity pass him by. “Thanks for your kindness miss?” he paused hoping to get her name.

“Nightingale,” she finished John’s sentence. “Mary Nightingale.”

As the paramedics packed up their gear John continued his discussion with Miss Nightingale, “I want to repay you for your kindness. Can I buy you a cup of coffee or something? That’s where I was heading, to get a cup of coffee.”

Smiling a paramedic joked, “No thanks. It’s just part of our job. Just make sure you have a doctor check you out.” A smile formed on the face of several in the small store. Everyone knew John was addressing Miss Nightingale.

The other paramedic continued, “Sure you don’t want us to drive you to the hospital?” He reached down to help John to his feet. John smiled back, took the paramedic’s hand to stand, and shook his head no.

Miss Nightingale, the real target of John’s question answered, “Sure, if you feeling up to it. A coffee would be fine.”

“Alright people, back to work. Show’s over,” the owner of the store exclaimed as he waved his hand in circles, motioning to the back of the store.

John answered Miss Nightingale, “Ya, I’m alright. Walkin’ in from the cold to this hot steamy smelly air just over whelmed me,” John took off his coat, turned to the owner and handed it to him, “Could you have this cleaned?”

“Sure, Mr. Kirk. Feelin’ OK? Sorry to see you fall down. I’ll tell you what, this one’s on Mr. Gallus,” the owner, a middle aged oriental man, was referring to himself as he took the coat and passed it to a young oriental girl who had just arrived at the counter.

“Thanks Mr. Gallus. I’m fine. I’ll come by later this week to pick it up.”

“Thanks Mr. Kirk. Do you want to pick up your clothes now?” Mr. Gallus replied.

“No thanks. I’ll pick them up on my way back from having a coffee,” John answered and then turned to open the door for Ms. Nightingale.

“Perhaps last night added to your collapse today?” Miss Nightingale stated as she made her way out the door.

“What do you mean?” John replied as he followed her out.

As cool air and excitement rushed around him, John thought to himself, “Did she really notice me last night?” The action-rolodex in his mind quickly reviewed all he had done while in the bar. His thoughts continued, “Hope I didn’t do anything foolish or stupid last night. Was it that evident I was getting drunk? I don’t want her to think I’m an alcoholic; ‘cause I’m not.” Doubt continued to roll through his mind, “Did my state of mind show? I don’t want her to think I’m a manic depressive or anything like that; ‘cause I’m not.”

“I saw you at The Dusty Trail last night. You were with a friend. Someone who left early,” she answered as they turned into the coffee house.

John opened the door for Ms. Nightingale for they had reached the high priced coffee house. By now he was cold for he only had a light shirt on. The smell of rich gourmet coffee and cinnamon made him feel better, or was it because the beauty walking past him as she entered the door was with him. “Is she improving my day or what?” John asked himself, not because he was searching for an answer, but because he felt honored that such a woman would choose to be with him.

“Things are looking up for old John,” he concluded as he walked in after her. He looked down to watch her butt rock from side to side. John imagined wonderful things happening in his future.

Chapter 6

Because Mommy Says So

April 6, Friday noon

Of Seeds

Giselle Fowler walked away from the outdoor restaurant with composure and grace. Her long shiny blond hair flowed and fluttered in the light breeze. Her long legs carried her slightly overweight body quickly to her car. It was parked down the street and out of eye shot of the restaurant where John remained seated. When she reached the car she reached into her little red purse which matched her shoes and suit and pulled out her car keys. After fumbling with the keys, she quickly opened the door, slid inside the small car, and closed the door. As soon as the door closed tears began to flow from her hazel eyes, down her rosy cheeks, and onto her small chin. Some tears eventually dropped from her chin onto the front of her dress and down her cleavage which she always managed to show.

“Look at me. All grown up and crying like I did in high school,” she scorned herself.

“Will you ever grow up? It’s just a relationship with one boy. You don’t have to cry after every break up, do you Giselle? Be stronger than that for crying out loud. Women can’t afford to be emotional and weak in today’s world.” In her head Giselle heard her mother ask her the same questions and make the same point that she did when she was still alive.

Giselle did her best to listen to the mother in her head and stop the tears. She did so the tried and true way, by analyzing and tearing down the cause of her pain, in this case that was John. “What did I ever see in him? Why did I want him? What did he have that could make me happy for the rest of my life? Why did I even fantasize that he would be a good husband? What was I thinking? I wasn’t even in love with him. He isn’t worth the tears. It was a mistake going out with him this long.”

“Your mistakes are causing you to run out of time,” her mind’s mother told her. “You’re past your prime; next month you’ll be twenty-five. You’re way over weight, your cheeks sag, your breasts sag, and your hips are way too big. They’ve always been big. And it takes ten times longer to get ready in the morning than it did only a few years ago. Girl, you’re over the hill. Your chances of getting a good man are almost gone,” her mind mother so unkindly warned her.

In reply Giselle thought, “I don’t want to get just one man. I’m not looking for Mr. Right. I’m not looking to get married anytime soon. I’m looking to rise up the corporate ladder, maybe even to the top. There’s no time to get a man and marry.”

“The top is impossible for you,” her mother retorted. “No matter how much women’s lives and chances have improved, the odds of making it to the top are still less for a woman than it is for a man, even if he has less than half the abilities that you... I have.”

This familiar mental argument which resulted from the real thing in her past had caused Giselle to pull herself together enough to start the car and begin the drive back to the office. After she had parked her car in the building’s parking lot she looked at herself in the mirror. The tears had smeared the rouge on her cheeks; so she reapplied some to her face. She looked down to see that the tears that had landed on her outfit had dried up without leaving any stains. She pushed up her breasts and exited the car. “Time to find a real candidate,” she told herself. Giselle wanted to convince the mother in her head that she had indeed grown up.

“That’s it. Use everything Mother Nature has given you,” her mother spoke approvingly.

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As Giselle entered the building the mother inside her saw through her act just as her real mother always did, “You can’t fool me young lady. I know what’s really inside you.” Her self confidence was cut down at the self realization; but not to the point where she lost her just regained composure and grace. She made her way to her desk, grab what she needed for the first afternoon meeting and made her way down the hall keeping an eye out for the newbie. He was nowhere to be seen.

Giselle made it through the afternoon by keeping the hope that she could break away from the everlasting meetings long enough to see the office newbie before the end of the day. Perhaps she could find a way to convince him to ask her out. However, there was no sign of him through the afternoon.

As the last meeting dragged on, Giselle stared out the window watching birds play in a small water fountain. They distracted her thoughts. The water fountain was six feet round and about one foot deep. In the middle was a collection of four cement flamingoes with their backs to each other. Their beaks were pointed up and out allowing water to be sprayed out of their beaks and into the fountain.

As Giselle watched the live birds playing and washing in the water she saw a group of people leaving the building. She noticed that the newbie was among them. Her hope to talk to him would not be fulfilled today. “So much for wishing on a shooting star,” she told herself.

Giselle left the office after the meeting was over without saying a word to anyone. She stopped by her desk, picked up her purse, and headed out the door. The drive home was as stressful as always. “Just another cruddy thing to do on an otherwise cruddy day,” she told herself as she drove down Maple Drive.

Signaling to turn left and onto the avenue where the duplex that she lived in was located, Birdhouse Avenue, Giselle felt somewhat relieved. “Just a little bit longer, then I can relax and forget about the day,” she consoled herself. Then her mind’s mother sarcastically added, “How can you forget a day like this? Will you ever forget today? Probably not.”

The terrible events of the day passed through Giselle’s mind. That was followed by all the bad things that ever happened to her in her life. After she reviewed her life, she once again relived the bad events of the day.

Giselle thought, “Why is it so easy to remember all the bad things that happen in our lives, even those that had happened years ago? Why is it so hard for us to remember the good things that happen to us even a few days ago? Why are we more fatalistic than optimistic? Why are we depressed more than we are happy? Why is the grass always greener on the other side of the fence?” Giselle had often wondered these things. She wondered why she and everyone she knew were like this.

As a young teen age girl Giselle had concluded from studying her middle school classmates from afar that she was one of the few people who thought this way. “Negative over positive, darkness over light, this was not the norm,” she told herself.

However, a few years later, after talking to her high school friends and her mother about this Giselle began to see that most everyone had the same thought pattern that she did. “One of the advantages you can gain over another person,” her mother told her, “is to realize that

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people are more negative and insecure than they appear to be. All people are negative thinkers, not positive thinkers.”

Although Giselle came to see this as true, neither her mother nor her friends could tell her why people were this way. Not until recently in her life did someone give Giselle an answer to this universal human truth. Giselle was told, “Mankind apart from God is unsettled, unthankful, and restless. We are unthankful because we do not understand. We do not understand because we do not accept. We do not accept because we do not have faith. We do not have faith because we are afraid. We are afraid because we know that we are proud and stubborn. Pride leads to unsettled, unthankful and restless people. Such people are negative.” This explanation was given to Giselle by her upstairs neighbor a year ago. Giselle’s upstairs neighbor was Uhura Lincoln.

Giselle’s self pity distracted her to the point to where she did not notice that she had cut short the left hand turn onto the avenue that she lived on. A horn snapped her out of her dazed state, but not before she sideswiped the car sitting in the left hand turn lane. This was the car that had blown its horn at her. A ripping noise was heard as her rear driver side panel caught the bumper of the car seated at the intersection. The shock and the stress broke down all the composure that was left in her. Tears again began to flow down Giselle’s cheeks.

“What are you, fucking blind lady?” a man in his mid fifties yelled as he stepped out of the car. The man’s hands were over his dark black haired head and snapping back and forth. He was walking to the front driver side of his car to get a good look at the bumper. When he had leaned over to get a closer look, the white old T-shirt that he was wearing popped out of the old pair of jeans he was wearing. Thus some of his back and crack were revealed. The man didn’t notice nor care that Giselle sat in her car wiping the tears from her cheeks as he straightened up and continued, “Where the hell did you learn how to drive? You better not damn well have damaged my car. It took me five years to restore this beaut’ and I’m not going to take it kindly if some dame hurts it.”

Fear that this might turn into some road rage incident, Giselle thought that it was best to stay in her car and not say anything until the man calmed down. She reached into her purse for her cell phone and dialed 911 and she said to her self, “All men are heartless jerks.”

“Lark County Emergency Services. How may I assist you?” a lady calmly said on the phone.

“I’d like to report an auto accident at the corner of Birdhouse and Maple,” Giselle answered. She had regained her composure enough to answer calmly and clearly.

“Has anyone been hurt?”

“No.”

“Is an ambulance needed?”

“No. Everyone is fine,” Giselle had started to answer the operator when the owner of the other car reached into her window, tore the cell phone out of her left hand, and closed it. In shock and fear Giselle leaned toward the center of her car.

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"Listen, lady," the man said in a calm and apologetic voice. "We don't have to get the police involved do we. We both know it was your fault. My car wasn't damaged. All the damage is on your car. I'm willing to forget about this if you are." Then he reached out his hand to give Giselle back her phone, but not enough to make it easy for Giselle to grasp.

"What..? Why..? Who do you..?" Surprised by the man's sudden change in demeanor and grabbing her phone caused Giselle to stutter as she looked for the right words to say.

Then she heard her mother say inside her mind, "Take action missy. Let this man know who's in control. Don't let ass-holes walk all over you. Bullies back down when they see a woman of rage."

"Give me my phone!" she exclaimed as she reached out to seize it. Then she opened her door and started to wave it at him as she slowly walked toward him. When the door flung open the man stepped back so that it would miss him. Stepping back threw him off balance. In a gesture of submission he threw up his hands as he stepped back some more. This caused the front of his T-shirt to come out of his jeans and thus revealed his belly button which sat in the middle of a small pot belly. A minute ago the man was a raving swearing maniac. Now Giselle had transformed him into a rodeo clown, dodging her horns. Giselle was proud of her accomplishment. She was now in full control of this jerk.

"What right do you have to obstruct justice? If I want to call the police, I'm calling the police," Giselle yelled at him as she took a step toward him. Her eyes were red because of the tears, but to the man it looked like she was in a fit of rage. The anger and frustration that had built up in her all day flashed out of Giselle and toward the T-shirt man like sparks of lightning flashing out of clouds and towards the earth.

In power, rage, and vengeance Giselle threw the phone at the T-shirt man. It whizzed by his head and passed in front of a truck that was driving down the opposing right most lane of Birdhouse Avenue. The truck driver slammed on the brake, turned his head toward Giselle, and looked at her with wide opened eyes. Behind the truck a car's tires screeched and its horn began to blast. For a brief second Giselle thought she recognized the driver of the car; but it was blocked from her view when a bus pulled along side it and stopped. The bus was in the left lane of the opposing traffic. The bus driver stared at her. With all this attention on her, Giselle now felt in full control of the entire intersection.

Giselle turned to look at her car. A two foot long gash that started from the fender went back to the rubber bumper which was peeled back. Then she looked at T-shirt man's vintage car's chrome plated bumper. There was no damage. "Figures that I would get all the damage," she told herself. Relief came over her when she remembered that she was the cause of the accident. Yet, she decided to not let the man out of her lasso, nor lose control of the intersection. "Better to keep him off guard so that the police don't come. I don't need another point on my driving record."

"Listen lady," the man started. Giselle turned and glared at the man. She kept a stern look on her face as he continued, "I don't have insurance yet. I'm just taking it for a quick spin. It's my first chance to drive it in nice weather. I couldn't pass it by. I won't bother you for anything if you just let me go on my way. I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you. Please lady?" he begged.

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Pride, joy, and relief flushed through her veins as she thought it over, "I have conquered this man. I have conquered this intersection. I have the upper hand and I'm free. I've won. Let him go and then get the hell out of here in case the police show up."

"Alright mister. You can go. Get out of here fast and I won't press charges," she said to him in a harsh voice.

"Press charges? It was your fault lady," he replied.

"Do you want the police to find out you're driving without insurance?" she smartly stated.

"Alright, I'm going."

Both of them got into their cars and drove off.

No more than fifty feet down Birdhouse Avenue what really had happened began to sink in to Giselle. She hadn't won anything. She had caused damage to her car that would take weeks, if not months to pay off. By the time she had parked her car into the duplex that she was living in Giselle came to the point of breaking down.

Giselle had a hard time unlocking the door of the duplex because tears were welling up in her eyes again. As she opened the door a bird began to sing. It was Pelapee, her pet bird. The bird was perched in her cage singing happily to her master.

Giselle did not notice the greeter. She dropped her purse and made her way to her bedroom. She collapsed on the bed, sunk her head in a pillow, and began to cry, cry, cry. Giselle fell asleep in a pillow of tears.

Chapter 7

Among the Reeds

All time

Darkness engulfed Giselle Fowler. Cool moist air chilled her to the bones. An aroma of dank moss filled the air. Beneath her feet was slimy rock for she was not wearing shoes. Ahead and above Giselle could not see anything. To the left and to the right there was only blackness. Behind her Giselle heard the faint roar of thunder.

Giselle turned around, being careful not to lift her feet for she was afraid that she would lose her footing. In the short distance that lay ahead Giselle saw a shimmering light. Some thirty feet away it looked almost like diamonds covered one wall of the dark hole that she was in. Slowly Giselle made her way toward the spectacle of light by sliding one foot in front of the other. Occasionally Giselle's toes hit a rock which gave her great pain. She cursed and swore at the inanimate object as if it was its fault and not hers. "God damn rocks. What a God forsaken place! Where am I?"

As Giselle approached the glittering light the constant thunder increased in volume. Slowly the flashing lights in the wall in front of her grew in luminosity casting a dim glow to the point where she could see where she was going. As she stared at the flickering lights excitement grew in

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her heart for she believed that she was about to become rich. When she was ten feet from the wall of diamonds she saw that the wall was moving, or rather, the diamonds were moving. She realized that the wall was not full of diamonds, nor was the wall made of rock. Rather it was a wall of moving water. Giselle realized that she was behind a water fall. "What am I doing here, in this cave of deceptions?" she wondered as hope turned into anger and fear.

"How am I to get out of this chamber of rot?"

Giselle looked to where she had been by slightly turning at her waist, "Behind me there is no source of light." Then Giselle returned her gaze to the water fall, "So behind this wall of falling water must be a source of the light and my only way out. Where there is light there must be escape."

Giselle reached out her hand to touch the fast moving water. It was cold to the touch and drove her hand down with a force that she did not expect. She raised her hand back in front of her and probed farther into the water. "I need to see what was on the opposite side," Giselle told herself to overcome fear. At about a foot through her fingers and wrists were no longer being forced down by the water. They had broken through. They were free from their captivity.

Giselle allowed the other hand to break through the water. Slowly and gently Giselle moved both arms around in the rough shape of her body to be assured that nothing was blocking the way of escape. Eventually, Giselle was satisfied that a way through was large enough for her to jump through. She had the faith and the nerve to break through to the other side.

"But to where?" she asked herself. Once more she probed her hands through the opening to answer that question. Giselle reached to the edge of the opening. It was slightly smaller than the cavern's width. On the side of the opening Giselle grabbed something and pulled it in. She looked at her prize with what little light there was streaming through the wall of falling water. It was a plant, a grass or some sort of weed; she was not sure which it was. "Botany is not my expertise," she reminded herself.

In spite of a lack of plant expertise Giselle was convinced that on the other side lay open air and that the sun shown overhead. With courage she exclaimed, "Well, time to step through the looking glass Alice." Giselle took a deep breath and jump through the wall of shimmering water.

The falling water pushed Giselle down hard. At first she tumbled and turned in a pool of very cool water. However, she soon gained control of her motions and swam toward the light which was obviously the surface of the pool. Just when Giselle was wondering how much longer she could hold her breath, she broke through the surface and gasped for air. Then Giselle wiped her blonde hair and water from her hazel eyes.

Giselle looked around the surface of the water. She saw reeds growing thirty feet in front of her and twenty feet to either side. Behind her was the waterfall that she had broken though. It was perhaps forty feet wide and twenty feet high. Although it was hidden from sight, Giselle knew that behind the water fall was the door of her escape. The water cascaded over a mossy rock wall that stretched from horizon to horizon. Overhead clouds briskly moved through a hazy blue sky.

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Believing that she could not climb the slimy wall Giselle decided to swim toward the reeds. Among the reeds were flamingoes. The flamingoes were eating. Giselle knew that flamingoes were large wading birds native to tropical brackish waters. They had long necks and legs, downward-curving bills, webbed feet, and pinkish-white feathers with black wing quills. Occasionally the birds stood on one leg and bobbed their heads in the water long enough to eat. The scene reminded her of a vacation spot she went to in her youth.

Giselle swam towards the reeds and the birds. Her actions startled most of the flamingoes and thus they flew away. Her swimming eventually brought her to shallower water. Her feet touched a murky bottom. She did not like the feeling of her feet being in the mud, so she swam as long as she could. Eventually Giselle could swim no more. It was too shallow. She had to stand. When Giselle stood she noticed that she was in her pink night gown. Being wet the gown clung to her slightly overweight body. She pulled it away from her skin and shook it as dry as she could.

When the reeds were just in front of her the water was less than knee deep. She stopped for a brief moment to look around, and then continued to walk until she was just within the reed line. At the reed line Giselle stopped to survey her surroundings.

On her left and right was an endless sea of reeds. Behind her lay the rock wall. Occasionally all along the rock wall, small water streams cascaded into the marsh which she now stood in. The waterfalls sparkled in the sun giving the appearance of moving diamonds. "If they were only real, then perhaps I could buy my way out of this God-forsaken land," she told herself.

In front of Giselle near the horizon the reeds ended in a large sea or perhaps an ocean. Giselle corrected herself, "Land? What land? All I see is water, reeds and flamingoes." Giselle laughed.

The only plants to be seen other than the reeds were tall yellow flowering plants that grew in patches on the top of the rock wall. The yellow flowering plants were perches for some other kind of birds. Other than those birds, the only animals to be seen were the flamingoes. The flamingoes maintained their distance from Giselle with the exception of one.

As Giselle looked for a way to escape her wet smelly surroundings, she noticed a small area where no reeds grew. It was about half way between the rock wall and the sea, directly in front of her. She decided to make her way to this spot for perhaps it was a piece of dry land.

As Giselle walked closer to the open area, she noticed one flamingo had not left her. It stayed with her. It too, was slowly making its way toward the open area. When she arrived Giselle found dry land as she had suspected. It was a sand bar perhaps twenty feet long by ten feet wide. It was a fine escape from the sea of reeds which had cut her shins until blood dripped into the water.

When Giselle walked onto the sand bar she lay down half exhausted from the swim and the walk. Lying down she noticed that the flamingo had accompanied her through the reeds had joined her on the sand bar.

As she lay down on the sand Giselle began to dry out. After ten minutes Giselle turned her head to look at the flamingo that had become her companion and a source of joy. "My savior," she said to it. The pink bird looked beautiful, elegant, and sleek. It stood motionless, like it

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was a statue or one of those plastic yard ornaments that people had placed in their yards in the 50s and 60s. She loved the bird and was glad for its companionship.

Soon to her delight another flamingo joined the first. It was taller than the first and stood behind Giselle's first companion. The sun was behind it so it cast a shadow on the first.

"Welcome to Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," Giselle greeted the new bird. "We're on a Magical Mystery Tour," she added. "Must be some Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da trip I'm on," she laughed at her wit.

At those words for no apparent reason the second bird began pecking the first. Again and again it jabbed its beak into the first flamingo. To Giselle's surprise the first bird just stood there taking the beating. Confusion and anger filled Giselle. She sat up and yelled, "Just what the hell are you doing? Leave it alone!" When the taller bird ignored her, in fact both of them did, Giselle's anger turned to rage. She wanted to save her savior so she stood up and flapped her arms in hopes that her actions would scare the taller away.

Splash, swish, chomp; out of the marsh appeared an alligator or crocodile, she did not know, and snatched up both birds. Since Giselle was flapping her arms when the beast appeared she did not have full balance. She stumbled backward and eventually landed on her knees. There the two remained facing each other, the beauty in a pink nightgown and the beast with a grey scaly hide. Pink feathers floating in the air were all that remained of the two birds. From a distance it looked like Giselle was worshipping the beast that was baring its teeth. The smiling beast looked like it was accepting worship.

Giselle's heart beat rapidly and loudly. Her eyes were wide open and sweat formed on her palms and on her forehead. Thoughts of horror flashed in Giselle's mind. "I'm dead," she quickly concluded.

Yet, the animal did not move. It stood there staring at her and hissing. "Is it full? Is it satisfied? What are its intentions?" Giselle wondered.

Five minutes passed. Giselle calmed down. She began thinking about her savior, the pink flamingo that had become the beast's meal. Fear and anxiety were replaced by anger and rage. "You brute! You beast!" She yelled at the animal. "How dare you take what is mine! How dare you harm the innocent! Curse you for destroying what is beautiful!"

She did not know how to do it, but Giselle wanted to kill the beast. She grabbed some sand to throw at the griming predator. As Giselle was about to release the sand another beast from behind leaped out of the water. It went for Giselle's legs and clamped down. She screamed as the pain ripped through her body. Within seconds the pain went away as adrenaline surged through her veins.

The beast began dragging Giselle into the water and reeds. Desperately Giselle clung to the sand. She knew that they did not eat large prey right away. They drowned large victims, keeping the carcass under water while slowly feeding on the decaying meat. Grabbing the sand did not slow her decent into the water.

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Giselle did not want to be a carcass so she grabbed at some reeds as they passed by her. The reeds did not stop her movement toward the water. She screamed, "Help, help, help! Someone! Anyone!"

Giselle continued to scream until her head went under water. She looked up and again saw shimmering diamonds. As she looked the diamonds turned to red rubies.

"Thump, thump, thump," as she went deeper and deeper. All she could hear was her heart beating its last beats. "Thump, thump, thump." Then her vision blurred and things faded from crimson to grey, and then to black.

Chapter 8

At the Time of Decision

April 6, Friday evening

Thump, thump, thump. "Giselle, honey? Are you alright? Giselle?" Thump, thump, thump.

Giselle opened her eyes. She was still in bed. Her pillows were wet with tears and the sheets were wet with sweat. The red dress that she had worn to work was no longer on her body. It was twisted around her head and the covers were twisted around her legs.

"Giselle what's wrong?" Thump, thump, thump; someone said as they pounded on the back door.

"Coming," Giselle answered. She sat up in bed, freed herself from its grip, grabbed a loose T-shirt and old jeans, hurriedly put them on, and made her way to the back door. The back door opened to a small hallway where stairways to the left went to the apartment upstairs and a door to the right opened to a small back yard.

Giselle did not hesitate to open the door for she knew who was on the other side, her upstairs neighbor, Uhura Lincoln. Uhura was a beautiful chocolate colored woman with big brown eyes. Uhura's hairstyle often changed. Now her hair was in the style that everyone wore in the sixties, inspired by the look of Diana Ross and the Supremes. Uhura looked like Mary Wilson, but didn't want people to remind her of this. "So why in the world did Uhura choose this hairstyle?" Giselle did not know. "It does make her look older than twenty-three. Perhaps she is wearing it that way because she is dating an older man, Marshal McCoy, and wants to look more his partner than his daughter," Giselle concluded. Because of the touchy Mary Wilson issue and because Uhura was dating an older man, Giselle chose not to ask her about her hair style. "Either way I'd be accused of harassing her. Besides, in a few months she'll change her hair again. Then it won't matter." Giselle told herself these things when she first saw the new hairstyle appear less than a month ago. Giselle rolled her eyes in half amusement and half aloofness as she saw the hair style again.

"Giselle, look at you! I heard you crying and yellin'. What's wrong honey? Did someone hurt you? Is that someone still here? I'll club him if he is," Uhura asked warmly as she looked over Giselle's shoulder.

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"No one's here. Come on in girl. We need to talk," Giselle pleaded and then corrected, "I need to talk."

Giselle and Uhura had met during their freshmen year in college. Their first quarter as roomies also saw them taking business classes together and studying together. They bonded like they were the sister that neither had.

Even though Giselle was almost a year older than Uhura, their relationship made Giselle the younger sister. Giselle always went to Uhura for comfort, direction, and help. It was never the other way around. Uhura had been there when Giselle's mother died. That was the year that they graduated.

Uhura seemed to know the answer to all of life's problems and had a way of presenting the answers that neither offended nor could be avoided. Often Giselle would ask Uhura, "How do you know so much about life?"

"My grandmother raised me with the wisdom of two lifetimes. She led me to the light when I was three, and I've been standing in it every since, praise be to the Lord!" Uhura would answer.

As a reciprocal to Giselle's question, Uhura would ask, "How'd you get so smart girl?" No matter what class they took, and they did happen to take all the same classes throughout college, Giselle's excellent grades propelled her to the front of the class.

"My mother raised me with the knowledge of two lifetimes. She taught me to read when I was three, and I've been reading ever since, praise be to Dewey," after a pause she would add, "As in Dewey decimal, girl!" With this said both of them would laugh so hard people would stare or yell, "Keep it down."

Giselle and Uhura were a perfect pair. Uhura helped Giselle with life's tough questions and Giselle helped Uhura with professors' tough questions. Without Giselle's help Uhura would have made it through college, but wouldn't have made the dean's list. Without Uhura's help Giselle would have made it through college, but would have been a junkie.

"What was all the crying about?" asked Uhura as she and Giselle sat down at a small table located in the kitchen.

"I had a terrible day Uhura. I broke up with John during lunch, and I got into a car accident on the way home from work." Giselle looked down at the table. Shame and melancholy had filled her heart as she broke the awful news.

"Ya poor girl," Uhura consoled her friend as she placed her hands over Giselle's hands. Giselle had placed her forearms on the table when she sat down. Uhura's eyes were filled with compassion and love as she looked at Giselle and continued, "Are you hurt? I mean did you get hurt in the accident?" In the next room Pelapee was singing a happy song not at all in tune with her owner's mood.

Giselle looked Uhura in the eye as she answered, "No. It was a just a fender bender. I wasn't paying attention as I turned onto Birdhouse Ave. So I clipped this old fuddy duddy's antique car."

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She continued to explain as she leaned back in her chair, "I would have seen him sitting at the intersection if I wasn't thinking about what my mother would say to yet another break up."

Giselle made a fist gripping nothing in particular as she continued, "My mother's been dead for three years and I still hear her stupid remarks about my life. Even when she's dead she brings disaster into my life. Will she ever go away and let me live my own life?"

"You can't blame your mother dear. You're just thinking of what she might have said if she were here. You're putting words in a dead person's mouth. Your mother raised you on her own. She's all you knew for twenty years, after she and your father broke up. Because of that she's a big part of you, and that's something you're never going to change. For better or for worse, what she's taught you and how she raised you will always be with you. You can't change that." Uhura began to explain.

"However, you can change how you view your relationship with her. You have to learn how to forgive her. You also need to forgive your father. You hate someone that's not in this world, your mother; and someone who is not in your life, your father. That's not good. Hate is never good." Uhura continued. She had explained this to Giselle before. Yet Giselle had been unable to change.

"Resentment held in the heart will eventually turn into hatred. Hatred festering in the heart turns into rage. And rage destroys people. Hate's like a cancer on the soul. It keeps growing till it kills. If you don't forgive your mother it'll keep bringing disaster to your life. If you don't forgive our father the same could happen. It's not your parents who have to change; it's a lack of forgiveness that needs to change."

"You've told me this before. But how? How can I forgive a dead person and someone I don't even know? It's not like I can go to a dead person and say, 'I forgive you; now leave me alone,'" Giselle stated in frustration. Giselle had stated her true feelings for her parents during a time of confession with Uhura shortly after Giselle's mother passed away. At the time Giselle didn't want to hear what Uhura had to say because she had hoped her feelings would fade overtime. By now Giselle believed that those feeling would never go away, and this troubled her. In fact Giselle knew that Uhura was correct. The resentment she felt toward her parents, especially her mother, was only getting worse.

Smiling Uhura said, "Going to a person and saying 'I forgive you,' or 'I'm sorry,' helps heal the soul; but it's not the key to a healing heart. Healing, true relational healing starts with a healing between us and God."

Uhura was somewhat apprehensive about bringing up the need for a true relationship with Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. She loved Giselle and did not want to threaten the relationship they shared. Yet, she knew such apprehension was caused by selfishness, fear, and doubt in the power of the living God. She had often prayed for Giselle and knew that the most important thing in Giselle's life would be to begin a life of faith in God through Jesus. So Uhura took a deep breath, silently asked God for strength, pulled her hands from the table, brought them to her chest, pointed to her heart with all fingers, and continued.

"You know that I never knew who my parents were till I was a teenager. Before I knew who they were, a part of me was curious and a part of me was frightened. I wanted to know who

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they were because they were my parents; but at the same time I really didn't want to know who they were for fear that they could be a prostitute, alcoholic, drug addict, criminal, or whatever. And no matter what my grandmother said, I could never forgive them for abandoning me. Worst of all I began to resent and rebel against my grandmother because she never told me if they were alive, who they were, where they were, nor why they had abandoned me to her." Uhura was looking directly into Giselle's eyes as she spoke. The reliving of this story sincerely poured from Uhura's soul out of her eyes and into the needy eyes and soul of Giselle.

Uhura continued, "My grandmother told me it was for my own good and that someday she would tell me about them; but only when I was old enough. I accepted her words until I became a teenager. When I turned thirteen I felt I was old enough to begin to know the truth. But she did not. She refused to tell me about them." Now Uhura's hands were in a fist. She slammed them on the table.

Uhura regained her composure and continued, "So I started to do things that were bad for me only because I knew it would hurt her. It didn't matter to me that it hurt me as long as I knew it hurt her. Somehow I believed I could either force her to tell me about my parents, or at least hurt her for hurting me by keeping silent. It was stupid. It was illogical. It was juvenile. It was a sin. And it did not work as I planned. My resentment toward my grandmother's silence grew into hatred. Hatred turned into rage. If it wasn't for a miracle of God I know it would have killed me."

Uhura shook her head slightly as she spoke. She stopped this in order to wipe back the tears that were forming in her eyes. "The folly of youth," she slurred.

Uhura looked into Giselle's eyes again. "Girl, I was just like you are now. So I know that if you don't turn to Jesus for help in this matter, you're going to wind up being a bitter old lady. Maybe you'll even die before you fulfill your potential in life."

Uhura's words reminded Giselle of her dream. The vision of the beast was so fresh and so real that she swore she could still feel the teeth of the beast in her thigh. Giselle reached down and rubbed her right thigh as she asked, "How can Jesus change my feelings for my parents? How can a relationship with Jesus do that?"

"When you allow Jesus into your life he makes a promise to you to make your life and your being better. He works with you to eradicate habits and patterns of your nature that damages and distorts a beautiful and comfortable you. Jesus promises those who believe in him, that their life will be better because his desire is to make the image of God in you grow and the image of sin and death to die. But it's up to you dear. He wants to be not only a part of your life, but a part of you. He will not force himself on you for he is gentle and good. Rather, he puts the invitation out and waits to see if you'll accept it. Only God can eliminate the destructive feelings we have for our parents."

Then Uhura asked the life changing question, "Do you accept Jesus' invitation?"

Giselle pondered her friend and mentor's words. Uhura silently prayed to her mentor and God, Jesus.

"Ding Dong," the front door bell rang.

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Uhura quizzically looked at Giselle as she asked, "Are you expecting anyone?"

"No." Giselle got up from the table and walked to the front door. Uhura followed as she wondered why there was a distraction at this time of decision. She didn't know that Giselle's heart had been moved to the point of acceptance. Yet Giselle did not open her heart out of fear of losing control of her life. Giselle did not trust God. She did not want God in her life. She wanted absolute control without knowing that she was also rejecting his loving protection and guidance.

Giselle's trembling hand reach out toward the cool door handle. She leaned over to look out the peep hole. What she saw made her heart pound faster and harder. The skin from her neck to her tail bone tightened causing her backbone to shudder as if it had been suddenly chilled. Blood rushed to her face causing it to feel hot to the point of making her break out in a cold sweat.

"It's a police officer," thinking of the accident, Giselle notified Uhura. She opened the door to see that it was actually two police officers. Behind them sat their cruiser and a neighbor who had stopped walking their dog to see what the police officers were doing. Fear, guilt, and embarrassment took control of Giselle for a brief second till she was able to gain control of herself. "May I help you?" Uhura was looking over Giselle's shoulders wondering what this was all about.

"Would it be alright if we could step inside and talk?" the officer directly in front of Giselle asked.

"Ah, sure alright," Giselle replied. She opened the screen door slightly. When the police officer grasped it she let go and stepped back far enough to allow the officers inside. Directly behind Giselle, Pelapee sang a sweet but haunting song. Uhura stood next to the song bird.

The lead officer looked at Giselle. "Is this your residence?"

"Yes. What's this all about?"

Turning to Uhura he asked, "Do you live here also madam?"

"I live in the apartment upstairs. She's my friend," Uhura said as she pointed to Giselle.

"I see," the officer replied. He turned his attention to Giselle.

The mystery and sense of authority made Giselle uneasy. She took a small step backward until Pelapee's hanging cage pressed against her back. The bird fluttered its wings as it moved from its perch to the opposite side of the cage. Giselle felt cornered. Her eyes opened a little wider as the thought hit her, "Does this have something to do with the accident? Did that clown report me? No, I doubt it. What reason would he have to do that? How about the truck driver or the bus driver? No, not them. So, what's this about?"

Giselle's questions were soon answered. The other officer reached into his pants pocket and pulled something out. The object was hidden from Giselle. The officer stretched his inverted fist in front of her. The he turned his first and opened his fingers revealing the hidden prize. Giselle's chest tightened as she tried to take a breath. Her eyes open revealing the white of

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her eyes. She stepped back slightly which caused Pelapee's cage to fall backward. The bird squawked as it came crashing down. Giselle turned to watch it fall. It seemed to take forever to hit the ground. Uhura reached to stop it, but not in time. The seconds seemed to last forever.

Giselle screamed, "Noooooo!" This was followed by a moment of silence as she bent over to examine her bird. Pelapee was dead. Tears filled her eyes and cascaded over her cheeks. "Pelapee! No. No. No. Pelapee. My bird is dead." Giselle's shoulders sank and her chest collapsed. A lifetime of tears rained down on the bird's carcass. The tears paused for a brief moment on the feathers and then slid down to the carpet.

"God, why did you allow this?" she whispered. Hate for the God she did not allow in her life filled her heart. She hated a God that would cause so much senseless pain and death.

Giselle looked up at Uhura and bitterly asked, "God couldn't stop this?"

Giselle told herself, "God only wants to inflict pain and death. I'll never forgive him for this."

Guilt and shock overtook the officer who held the noose of a bird's death rope. He looked into his palm and stared at the cell phone.

Chapter 9

Ranch Tiers

April 6, Friday evening

Marshal McCoy walked out of The Dusty Trail concerned about John's intrinsic nature. He truly believed that John's bad habits and way of thinking would lead to some disaster, or maybe either a physical or mental breakdown. "God? What can I do to help John? How can I protect him from the mistakes he's about to make?" Marshal addressed God on his friend's behalf. Marshal believed that John's future was grim if he didn't change.

"How can I be so sure of John's future?" he continued to address God as someone would address a friend.

"The answer lies in my past," Marshal answered his own question. "I can't forget what I did. I know what you, my God used to bring me into your corral." Marshal started his car and exited the parking lot of the Dusty Trail. He relived his life on the McCoy Ranch of his youth.

"Mornin' Marshal," Marshal's mother always greeted him before he entered the kitchen to eat breakfast. She was dressed in long legged jeans, a blouse, and a smile. She was seated at the kitchen table reading Life magazine. Next to her was a bowl full of cold oatmeal.

"Mornin' Mom," Marshal replied as he walked into the kitchen. He was dressed in Wrangler long legged jeans, a button down horizontally striped shirt, and tennis shoes. The shoes looked out of place unless you knew that it was baseball practice day. Marshal strolled into the kitchen as if nothing was wrong. He sat down next to his mother who was looking at him with an inquisitive look. She was determining if her boy was going to be naughty or nice today.

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"Sleep in a bit, did we? Your brother is already at his chores," Mrs. McCoy questioned Marshal to aid her into coming to a proper conclusion about what Marshal was going to be like today. Young Marshal more times than most had a bad attitude about life and the McCoy ranch.

Knowing he was being closely examined, Marshal replied, "I did sleep in, well not much that is. No doubt you didn't sleep in either mom. So why do you say 'we'?" Marshal smiled trying to coax the conversation away from the examination. The expression on his mother's face did not change.

Young Marshal noticed his charm wasn't working so he continued, "I don't have anything to do before practice, so I really didn't sleep in." Marshal did have chores and he knew it. He was hoping that his mother wouldn't remember them so that he could later use her forgetfulness as an excuse for not completing them.

"Now if your father heard you say that he would think otherwise. He'd give you more chores to teach you a lesson for such ill word games. Then you'd be truly late for ball practice. Do you want me to ask your father if you have chores?" his mother replied as she set some more oatmeal before Marshal. Marshal looked away from his mother's glare and down at the bowl before him. He knew better than to answer the question that both of them knew the answer to. Marshal accepted that his mother would win this conversation as she always won them. Yet something deep and dark inside him kept engaging her in them.

After a moment of silence Mrs. McCoy continued, "Eat quickly, feed your chickens, patrol the east fence, and you'll still be able to make most of ball practice."

"Yes, ma'am." Marshal quickly ate, got up from the table, kissed his mother on the cheek, and grabbed his straw summer ranch hat before he rushed out the door.

"Don't get your shoes full of dirt and manure! Why don't you wear your boots until you get to practice?" Mrs. McCoy yelled to young Marshal as he ran down the sidewalk to the barn.

Marshal kept running acting as if he didn't hear her. He didn't want to wear his boots because he didn't like wearing them. They reminded him of the ranch which in turn reminded him of chores. "Anyway," he began rationalizing to himself, "I don't have enough time to finish all my chores and still make it to practice."

Marshal hated the chores that ranch life cursed him with. As long as he could remember he was always given something that had to be done. The McCoy's had hired hands that could do the job better than he could, that he was sure of. Yet, for some distorted reasons his father and mother saw fit to assign him and his brother the tasks.

"It's important to learn early in life that after The Fall mankind has to work hard to keep his God given garden neat and successful." This was one of many well worn educational statements Marshal's father always told his two boys. Marshal didn't believe any of them. He hated all of them. But he never told his father these things because his father would have used his loving velvet hand to impress the statement onto his son.

Today Marshal's chore was to ride his horse up and down the east fence to make sure it was intact and able to keep the cattle inside their ranch. The east fence was a mile away from the house on the other side of a small hill. Marshal's inspection ride was a three mile trip up and

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down hills and across the cold water of the Yellowstone River. When Marshal would reach the end of their ranch he would have to backtrack to go to the ballpark. The ballpark was on the south side of town.

The McCoy family lived a few miles south of town between two snow capped mountain ranges. Last winter brought a lot of snow in the higher elevations. The snow was now melting. The melt collected into mountain streams that flowed down rocky tops until they came upon the tree line. The mountains' sides that surrounded the twenty mile wide valley that the McCoy's lived in were covered with a thick pine forest. The tree line abruptly ended at the base of the mountain's ranges. The streams jetted out of the forest as if they were in a hurry to be warmed up by the sun. From there the mountain streams swiftly flowed between foot hills and valleys. Generations ago Marshal's ancestors had cut down most of the trees in the valley to allow grass to grow so that their cattle would have plenty of room to graze in. Eventually the mountain streams dumped the cool fresh melt into the Yellowstone River. The Yellowstone River started in the national park and left it over forty miles upstream from the McCoy ranch. Then the river raced to the town about five miles downstream. All the residents and many of the visitors to this open land often stated that it was one of the prettiest privately owned places in the US. It also happened to be the area that Marshal wanted to leave as soon as he graduated from high school.

Marshal loved to play baseball because his skill and talent promised him a chance to play in the big leagues. The big leagues meant escape from the ranch's cold winters and especially the endless work that the McCoy Ranch required. Marshal's hope was to be a good enough player to leave the hard ranch life behind. The young Marshal McCoy believed two things to be true; the ranch was hard; baseball was easy.

Years later while driving his car from the Dusty Trail Marshal remembered his naive notions of how things were supposed to be. He smiled and slowly shook his head as he headed down the city avenue. After traveling year after year with a minor league baseball team, Marshal began to slowly appreciate that while on his parent's ranch he had lived in one of the most beautiful places in the US. Marshal laughed out loud at the misguided ambitions of his youth, "If I only knew then that all jobs, even baseball, require hard work to amount to anything. Father was right. If a man doesn't work hard he'll never amount to much. A man will never make it to the big leagues, even if he has skill and talent unless he works hard."

After a few seconds of further reflection Marshal added, "Even if a man has skill and talent, and works hard it doesn't guarantee that he'll make it to the big leagues. Look at me. I'm still in the minors and I've worked hard for years. On the climb out of the ranch and into baseball I've found that many guys have skill and talent. Yes sir, my father was right," Marshal said to himself. "Every garden has to be tended to produce a rich harvest. Weeds need to be pulled and fences need to be tended."

Marshal's reflections generated sadness and regret as he remembered what happened after he left his parents ranch house ignoring his mother's words. "If I would have known then what I know now, I would have stopped myself from making the stupidest and costliest decision in my life."

The transformation day for young Marshal continued with feeding chickens that he was raising for a FFA project. He was trying to see if different types of food would affect the weight and taste of chickens. Some of chickens in his experiment were eating from the ground; "the old

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fashion way” as his father would say. Some chickens were eating from plain old corn that he had grown the year earlier. It wasn’t easy raising corn in northwest US, but he had succeeded beyond people’s expectations. Last years “Great Corn Experiment” had won Marshal a blue ribbon at the county fair.

Marshal fed some other chickens expensive enriched feed that his father had purchased at the feed and grain store in town. The last group of chickens Marshal fed corn that he had enriched himself. The “secret” to his enriched corn came from hunches that he had about what made chickens fat and tasty. Marshal’s father called his secret recipe “psuedo-science” and not worth entering into “The Great Chicken Experiment.”

In the end none of his feedings mattered because a fox had gotten into the chickens before the experiment was over. Half of the chickens were either eaten or were injured beyond use. The other half was so mixed up that Marshal couldn’t tell which one came from which diet. After the fox attack the only way that Marshal could have known which of the four groups tasted better was by asking the fox and that was impossible because when Marshal found it he shot it.

Marshal stopped at a traffic light as he reflected back to his lost experiment. Hatred for that old fox filled his heart. He gripped the steering wheel with both fists and ground his teeth together. “If I were to live it all over again, I would still kill that fox.”

A silent voice replied, “The fox was only doing what he was made to do. Ownership does not mean anything to foxes for they own nothing, they gain nothing, and they lose everything. They eat, multiply, and die. Your place is not to kill the fox; you place is to feed the birds even if foxes are the only ones who eat them.” Marshal did not know what to think about this now. He would have to reflect on it later.

After Marshal fed his chickens on the transformation day of his youth, he saddled his horse and began calculating how long the ride along the east fence would take, and compared the results to the time that the baseball practice would begin. He figured that no matter how fast he rode past the fence, he would not make the start of the practice. By the time he was ready to mount the horse he had decided his course of action. He grabbed his glove and put it in the saddle bag instead of a two-way radio. If he would have taken the radio his father might have called him and figured out that Marshall had not ridden the east fence.

After Marshal mounted the horse, he pulled the reigns to the side and took off. Marshal led his horse east as if he was going to ride the fence. Then, when he was over the small hill and out of sight of the house, he made a sharp left turn away from his duty and toward the baseball field.

Marshal arrived at the ball field early enough to play in the adlib game that always took place before practice. After the adlib game practice started and went so well that the team believed that they were ready to win this weekend’s game.

Marshal smiled briefly as he continued to drive his car toward his destination. “Baseball was so much fun during the days of my youth. I wish I could go back in time and live it all over again.” Then the smile left his face as he remembered what took place after the baseball practice. “What happened next happened because I abandoned the fence and went to baseball practice,” he corrected himself. “No I don’t want to live that over again.”

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Marshal's memory was not all that had changed for the worse. As his car headed down Birdhouse Avenue, Marshal had to come to a sudden stop. The truck in front of him had stopped for what seemed to be no reason at all. The tires of his car squealed as if they were in pain.

Marshal laid both hands on his steering wheel which made the car's horn scream as much as he wanted to. But Marshal did not scream. He kept his composure. "Good thing I'm not in too much of a hurry. I doubt that I'll be late for my destination," Marshal told himself. "Still I can't sit here too long; a few minutes at most."

Marshal silenced his horn and turned his attention to his left. In the intersection were two cars facing opposing directions and just past each other. "They must have just been in a fender bender," he told himself out loud.

Marshal noticed that one car was a classic '57 Chevy. It was heading in the same direction as he. Marshal thought to himself, "Somebody has a lot of time on their hands to restore that car so finely. It's funny how people can find time to do work on objects and then say they have not enough time to help another." After studying the car and the man next to it he softly said with a small smile, "That car looks like the car that Jaybird drove last summer."

Jaybird wore a T-shirt and jeans and stood on the other side of the classic car. Marshal recognized the fellow elder of the church that they attended. Jay Hawthorne looked different dressed this way. Up until this time Marshal had only seen him in a suit and tie on Sunday mornings, and a leisure coat and dress pants during elder meetings.

Jay Hawthorne preferred to be called Jaybird. "That's what they called me when I played high school basketball in Indiana. I was an aggressive ball player in my day. 'Jaybird' Strikes Again' the newspaper headlines always read," Jaybird always told his fellow church goers. Yet, the exact high school and what years he played were never revealed.

Jaybird also told people that he was a retired doctor. Marshal suspected this claim. Yet, Marshal did believe that Jaybird had something to do with the medical profession at one time. "At least Jaybird knows a lot about animal physiology," Marshal explained to Uhura one day. Marshal had been dating Uhura Lincoln for the last few years.

Marshal had noticed in the two years that he had known him that all Jaybird wanted to talk about was the best places to invest money and the best places to live in Florida during the winter. Marshal was tired of hearing Jaybird's "great investment of the day" plugs.

"How after two years of half living in the area and half living down south was Jaybird able to remain an elder is a mystery to me," Marshal told Uhura.

"To me," he continued to tell Uhura, "even though I'm the youngest elder at church, I believe that a man needs to live full time in the area that his flock lives in, in order to help the ones he's supposed to over-see. And what is even funnier is, as far as anyone knows Jaybird's only lived in this area and gone to our church for two years, not long enough to be trusted with such an important position. Why doesn't anyone check his past?" Marshal asked not expecting Uhura to answer.

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"I'll tell you why," he answered the question himself. "Jaybird was chosen as an elder only because he says he was a doctor and gives away free golf games at Inverness. Just because someone's a doctor doesn't mean they'd be a good elder. It's simply politics. In politics it's not what you know or how good of an administrator and shepherd you are, it's how much you scratch the other elder's back. The first time I saw him I knew there was something not right with Jaybird; something sinister. I don't know just exactly what it is. Perhaps, someday I will, and when I do, it'll be the end of Jaybird politics." Uhura seldom said anything to Marshal when he made these statements. She just looked at him in the eye and nodded her head. She agreed with Marshal, and although he appreciated her agreement, he wasn't looking for a verbal agreement. Marshal wasn't looking for anyone to verbally agree until he had the proof. Marshal knew this and Uhura knew this; and that was good enough for the both of them.

Jaybird explained to everyone that his retirement consisted of spending his winters somewhere on Florida's Gulf Coast and spent his summers on the north coast. This year he was going to spend his summer in the same place he did last year, on the south west side of Lake Erie, fishing during the day on his lake boat and going to a Mudhen's game at night. So for a second year Jaybird was elected to the elder board. "One more year of hearing investment sales pitches after elder meetings," Marshal told Uhura when Jaybird was elected.

At the intersection of Birdhouse and Maple, Marshal turned his attention away from Jaybird and toward the other member of the accident. Opposing Jaybird was a woman that Marshal had only caught a glimpse of. When he began looking at her a bus pulled up along side of Marshal's car and blocked his view of her. Marshal thought that he had recognized the young lady. He waited for the bus to move so that he could see her again; but it did not move right away. Neither did the truck in front of him. Marshal said to himself, "Stuck in traffic again. Why do I always seem to get stuck in traffic?"

On the other side of the bus Marshal heard a brash conversation, but couldn't make out the words. "Road rage is a symptom of the lost state of my bitter and angry generation," Marshal thought to himself. Then he said a quick prayer for his fellow elder and the young lady engaging in an argument.

After his prayer Marshal resumed his thoughts of that fateful day on the McCoy Ranch. "Practice had gone well and it would have been a perfect day if not for..." Marshal stopped this train of thought as he recalled; "The only unusual occurrence at the baseball practice was when we heard sirens leaving town. Sirens were always paid attention to by the town folk because they were seldom heard in the town of three thousand. When sirens did sound everyone in town stopped what they were doing to find out if someone they knew was in an accident. If it was fire trucks that left town, everyone wanted to know which direction they were headed and whose house they were going to. And of course if it was the county sheriff's siren the gossipers would speculate who got the speeding ticket."

Like the rest of town, Marshal and his teammates stopped to listen to the sirens head south out of town. They were headed in the general direction of Marshal's ranch. Then the coach yelled, "You've got to learn to let nothing distract your attention outside of the field if you want to be winners. Always keep your mind on the game even if you're in the dugout."

"I wish I would have listened to mother as much as I listened to coach. Then my father never would have gone out looking for me, and would have never had come across the rustlers."

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While Marshal was at practice that day, his parents had received word via a phone call that rustlers had been seen near their ranch earlier that morning. Naturally Marsha's parents were worried for their son. Rustlers have been known to shoot anyone who came upon them because ranchers by law are allowed to kill rustlers without restitution and punishment.

Rustlers stole cattle by entering ranches from seldom used county roads during full moon nights. They drove pickup trucks that hauled trailers through openings that they had made in the ranches' fence. Once in a ranch they would force a few cattle into the trailer, kill them, and drive off the ranch and down the deserted dusty county road to a secluded spot. There they would butcher the steers in private. When they were finished, they would leave the county, never to be seen a gain.

Marshal's parents' fear for their son grew when they investigated the stable and learned that Marshal had not taken a radio, a bad habit that Marshal had gotten into lately. The only way they could contact Marshal Jr. now was to ride the fence that he was supposed to have ridden. Marshal senior saddled his horse and put his Winchester 73 and Colt 45 in their rightful place.

"Do you think you'll need those?" Mrs. McCoy asked her husband with worried eyes. A weight was coming on her that made her weak in the knees. She grabbed for the stable's railing to keep from falling and tried to look strong.

Marshal senior turned toward his wife, put his large hands on her shoulders, and drew her near. "They're only precautions, more of a habit than anything. Call the neighbors and tell them that I'm riding the east fence south. Robin will ride it north." Robin was the senior hired hand. "Ask those north of us to check the range in case he's on his way to practice." He drew her near and kissed her on the forehead. "Better call coach's wife. Ask her to check and see if Marshal's there." Then he mounted his horse and rode out the stable.

Mrs. McCoy jogged toward the house and then stopped as she heard him tell a hired hand, "Tell Robin to ride the east fence north. Rustlers are in the area. Tell him to bring some company in case he finds them."

Mrs. McCoy knew her husband meant a gun as much as he meant another man. She waited to make sure her husband was out of ear shot, and yelled to Robin who was just now mounting a horse, "Send someone after Marshal Sr. in case he runs into the rustlers. He thinks he can handle everything on his own. But he needs help like the rest of us." Then she turned and ran into the house.

Marshal senior's horse was the fastest on the ranch. So it was unlikely that anyone could catch up with him. Still Robin followed the directions of Mrs. McCoy and asked one of the other hired hands to follow Mr. McCoy. His employers did not say it, but Robin knew that they were looking for their son more than they were looking for lost cattle. "I want the rest of you to divide up and check the rest of the fences. Keep an eye out for the older boy as you ride!" he shouted to the rest of the crew that had by now gathered around the stable to see what all the commotion was about.

"Should we bring guns?" one of them asked.

"Not everyone, only one per group. Knowing you guys, if more than one has a gun you'd probably shoot each other." Then Robin took off.

Marshal senior made his way south to the very end of his property. There he found an opening in the fence with fresh vehicle tracks leading to the county dirt road next to the fence. "Rustlers" he said through grinding teeth as he looked up and down the deserted road. Although they were nowhere in sight he believed that they might still be in the area butchering his cattle. He turned away from the fence and followed the tracks into his property. Eventually the vehicle tracks disappeared into cattle tracks. Marshal senior studied all the prints to determine if there were horse tracks among them. He found none. "That doesn't mean that Marshal wasn't here. They could have taken the horse and Junior. If they didn't hurt him, they wouldn't leave him around long enough to identify them."

After he considered how his wife would react he radioed in, "Marshal here. Rustlers entered with vehicles on the south east side. They can't be seen. Looks like they're heading south towards the park with some cattle." By "park" everyone would know that he meant the national park. "Good news is that there are no horse tracks out here. Leads me to believe Marshal's not with them. Over."

"Good," his wife responded. "No one else has reported in yet. I sent someone after you, so don't be surprised by them. Over."

Just then Marshal Sr. saw a horse come over the hill to the north of him. He withdrew the Winchester and pointed in the man's direction. The man stopped riding and began waving his hands in the air. "I think he's here. Over," he told his wife.

"Good. Over."

"Good thinking gal. Thanks. Over," he replied as he returned the weapon to its place.

Then Marshal Sr. waved back at the man. "We're going to follow the vehicle tracks down the road to see where they lead."

"Marshal. Please don't ride outside of radio contact. Over," his wife added.

"I won't. Over." He responded as the hired hand came up beside him. Marshal wasn't being quite honest with his wife. When he rode beyond his ranch's radio reach he would still be within reach of the surrounding ranch's radios. Each ranch used its own frequency. So he would have to take his radio off his ranch's frequency and put in onto the neighboring ranch's frequency. Still the news of his progress could be relayed back to his wife via the phone lines. So he didn't meet the letter of his wife's word, but he did meet its meaning.

"Tell Robin to bring the rest of the hands to this opening and to wait for my instructions. If I can figure out where the rustlers went we might be able to cut them off. Over."

"Sounds dangerous. Why not wait for the sheriff to take care of it? Over."

"He will if he gets to them before I do. I ain't letting them get what's mine if I have anything to say about it. Rustlers got to know that we ain't easy targets. They can't take what is mine and get away with it. Over," Marshal senior responded as he and the hired hand rode off his ranch and down the dirt road. He meant his son not the cattle; but he didn't let her know that.

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Later, Marshal Jr. learned of this conversation and his father's decisions from his younger brother. When Marshal Jr. rode into the ranch after baseball practice he knew something was up. None of the hired hands were to be seen and all the stables were empty. When he took the saddle off his horse he again heard the sirens. They could be faintly heard south east of the ranch. The sound grew louder which meant that they were heading towards the ranch, on their way to town. It was then that his younger brother ran into the stable and told Marshal what had happened. It was the worst day in Marshal Junior's life.

Marshal sat in his car waiting for traffic to open up. The same knotted feeling that he felt thirty years ago twisted his intestines once again. The thought of sirens seemed so real, as if they were screaming loud in his ears all over again.

"No, that isn't sirens," he told himself in a split second. He looked up to gaze at the rear view mirror and tightened up, "God, it's squealing tires behind me."

A car thrust itself into Marshal's rear bumper shooting his car into the truck that had been blocking his path forward. His car was as helpless as a croquet ball that gets slammed across a lawn of grass by a mallet only to smash into another ball. At the same time that Marshal's car was hit, the bus next to him pulled away revealing an empty intersection. The accident that had been there vanished only to be replaced by an accident that Marshal was now a part of.

Marshal began rubbing his neck. "What happened? How will I ever be able to explain this to the police? Will they believe me? There is no evidence of the other accident. It caused this accident and they got away scott free. The only witness is the driver of the truck that I just hit," Marshal told himself as he started to call 911.

Chapter 10

Opening Day

April 7, Saturday late afternoon

Among the tall brick and concrete buildings of downtown sits the minor league ball park. The facade of the ball park matches the facade of the tall buildings. Mr. Gallus, his family, and friend Bob Newman are among the crowd that had begun to gather outside the four large metal gates into the park. The gates are set to open in less than an hour. The two policemen who had visited Giselle's apartment the night before are now mounted on horses named Klinger and Muddy. They make their way past the third base gate where Mr. Gallus, his family, and Bob Newman stand. Both policemen are staring at the images flashing up on the big screen above right field. Right field is on the east side of the ball park. Opening day music fills the air.

Outside the right outfield and beneath a large screen the policemen are watching a collection of picnic tables and awnings that are waiting for people to arrive and order food. Behind the screen and outside of the ball park in a closed off street are a collection of inflatable play areas filled with children whose parents are waiting to enter the second base gate and order food from the concessions under the awnings.

Most of the park's 10,000 individual blue seats are on the south and west side of the field. The seats are empty with the exception of a few birds that are jotting up and down among the seats

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looking for something to eat. The south seats face the first base line. The west seats face the third base line.

Above left outfield and on the north side of the field beneath a large video screen is a twenty foot wide walkway. Here many spectators will peer over the outfield fence. The fence frames the entire field. Next to the north video screen is the second base gate where the mounted police, Mr. Gallus, his family, and Bob Newman patiently wait to enter the park.

"Look's like a great day for a game, blue sky and cool spring air. Thanks for inviting me," Bob said to Mr. Gallus. "You're too good to me."

"No problem," Mr. Gallus replied. "You're a good friend and a good business partner."

The south east corner of the ball park is a collection of brick and concrete buildings. In the corner of these buildings is a raised seating area which is proudly named The Roost. Under it is a ball park bar named Coop-A-Cabana.

The green playing field is fifteen feet below the four streets that surround the ball park. It is mowed to perfection in a checkered pattern. It is outlined with a red-brown dirt warning track. The ground crew is laying base lines and watering the infield's dirt. A few players from both teams are warming up in the outfield.

There is activity in the many concession stands which are under the upper deck. The workers and volunteers get ready to serve the crowd who will soon be entering the park. Smells of hot dogs, hamburgers, pizza, gyros, popcorn, nacho chips, and roasted peanuts are starting to fill the air.

The lower, upper, and luxury spectator seats are held up by a concrete and steel base that houses a catacomb of walkways, storage areas, and two locker rooms. In the home team locker room Marshal and John have just finished dressing and are talking about opening day.

"I was hoping to be the opening pitcher. Aren't I good enough?" John questioned Marshal out of despair. He was looking for an answer.

"Don't sweat it. You're scheduled as relief pitcher. This is only your second season. If you get a chance to pitch an inning later in the game, show them how much your pitching has improved from last year. Just relax and I know that after your first time on the mound you'll become the team's starting pitcher," Marshal swatted John on the shoulder and headed up the tunnel that leads to the home team's dugout which is on the third base side and onto the playing field. John followed as far as the dugout. Marshal noticed that John stopped so he added, "I need to get this old body warmed up, John. I'd advise that you come out of that dugout to work out with me or at least look at the blue sky. It'll cheer you up and help you prepare mentally for the game. I'll bet it's almost seventy. God, thanks for this beautiful day to play another game."

On the other side of town Giselle put down "To Kill a Mockingbird", sighed, got up from her living room chair, headed toward the back door, and climbed the stairs that lead up to Uhura's apartment. Before she could knock on the door, it opened. Uhura stood in the doorway. She was dressed in a neat blouse and slacks. Giselle looked up to Uhura and asked, "Do you want to go with me to buy a new Pelapee?"

“Now? It’s opening day and what a beautiful day it is. I can’t miss Marshal’s opening day. Aren’t you going? You have season tickets too,” Uhura stated with a smile as bright as her clothes.

“And see John? No, I’m not ready for that. I’ll pass thank you,” Giselle answered.

“Marshal told me that John’s not the opening pitcher today. So you probably won’t see him. Tell you what. If you go to the game with me, after the game I’ll go with you to buy a new Pelapee. Deal?”

Giselle considered the proposal. Then she reached out her hand, “Deal on one condition. If John starts warming up during the game, we’re leaving early.”

“Girl your break-ups affect me in more ways than one. Wish you’d stick to one guy. Life would be easier for me.”

“I’m not a one man girl,” Giselle replied. “No offense intended. You’re a one man girl and I’m not. It’s science, not personal.”

“I’m not offended,” Uhura stated, “And it’s not science, it’s personal.”

Giselle and Uhura started down the stairs and out the back door where Giselle stated, “Can’t find one worth sticking with. Probably never will.”

Uhura smiled and stated, “Should I tell your next boy friend that?”

“You do and I’ll club you.”

In a suburb closer to the lake, Jaybird pulled his ’57 Chevy into Mary Nightingale’s driveway. She lived in a two bedroom house nestled at the end of a cul-de-sac. Mary exited the house and checked the door to make sure it was locked.

“Afternoon,” Jaybird greeted her as she opened the door. “Ready for an afternoon in the ball park?”

“Do you think it’s wise for us to be seen together?”

“Sure. Who will see us together in the car? At the game we’ll be in a luxury suite with twenty other people. No one will put us together as long as we don’t talk to one another. Today’s a prime opportunity to work people over. Baseball and money-making, what a beautiful day,” Jaybird smiled baring his teeth as he backed his car out of the driveway and headed for downtown. “After the game you can leave with your new prospect. What’s his name? John? I think it’s a good time to introduce him to our little investment.”

“I just met him,” she replied. “Don’t you think it’s a bit early?”

“You know what you’re doing. Don’t hit him too hard with it. Just drop a seed. Later, I’ll water it. Girl, you don’t realize that your body makes weak greedy men stupid. You’ve scouted him out. From what you told me is he weak, insecure, and most important greedy.”

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A commercial plane headed for the airport flew over Jaybird and Miss Nightingale as they made their way across a bridge that spanned the wide Maumee River. The airport was west of downtown. The plane landed, pulled up to the jet way, and the pilot turned off the engines and the seatbelt sign. A red haired, green eyed woman and her son got up from their first class seats and grabbed their luggage from the overhead compartment.

“Is this where we’ll be living mommy?” the toddler asked.

“Yes dear,” replied his mother. She was a woman who constantly worked out and kept in shape. She was dressed neatly, as if she were wearing a uniform. The uniform tried to hide her large breasts and full hips.

“Thanks for flying with us Johnny,” the stewardess said as she patted the little boy on the head. “And you too Ms. Blackthorne,” She added in a low whisper, “It’s good to see a Sky Marshal flying with us.”

“I’m not a Sky Marshal,” Grace answered.

“But the itinerary says,” the stewardess did not get a chance to finish.

“The itinerary is wrong,” Grace glared at the stewardess until she recognized that Grace did not want the people exiting the plane to know that she was a U.S. Marshal.

Grace and Johnny left the plane and gathered their other belongings at the luggage turnstile. Then they rented a car and drove to a downtown high rise condo that had been rented for them by the U.S. government. Traffic was heavy.

When they entered the already furnished condo on the seventh floor Johnny ran around from room to room to check out his new home. His bedroom and his mother’s bedroom were next to each other. Each bedroom had a door which opened up to a shared balcony. Johnny opened the door in his room that led to the balcony, exited onto the balcony, and leaned over the fence. “Mommy look! There’s a carnival and baseball game. Can we go?” the little boy exclaimed as he pointed toward the carnival in the street below. The baseball field was across the street from their condo.

Grace joined her son on the balcony to examine the view. They were on the east side of a minor league ball park. The back of a huge video screen blocked some of the view of the stadium. The stadium was slowly being filled with patrons. The street below Grace and Johnny had been blocked off. In the place where cars would normally have been moving were air inflated play centers and awnings. Children jumped, climbed, ran, and tumbled with shouts of joy. Some children were gathered around two mounted police officers.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to go,” said a man who joined them on the balcony. He had been waiting for Grace and her son to arrive. “Sorry for not meeting you at the airport; but since you needed to rent a car, I thought meeting you here would be acceptable.”

“That’s alright,” Grace addressed her superior. She thought about her son’s request, “Do you have tickets for the game? Look’s like it’s sold out.”

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“Opening day always is; but a U.S. Marshal doesn’t need tickets to enter the park. We can enter any game at anytime claiming it’s for security reasons,” he answered. “You should go. I’m going to the game. I believe the prop’s going to the game too. He’ll probably be in a luxury suite. He usually get’s invited to sit with prosperous people of the community. He’s got them believing he was a doctor. He’s also an elder at a local church. People give him respect and free access to things that normal folks like us only dream of. You should go. It will give you a good chance to see our subject in action. Not too tired from the flight are you?” he asked.

“I just landed and I’m already on the job?” Grace asked as Johnny pulled at her pants stating, “Please mommy,” over and over again.

“You can’t call going to a ball game ‘on the job’.”

Grace thought about it for a few seconds. Then she picked up her boy and said, “We’re going to the carnival and the game, Johnny. Guess you’ve got to eat something; and since I’m not up to cooking we’re going.”

“Yeah! We’re going to a game! We’re going to a game!” Johnny began to sing as they headed back into the condo and out the door.

The first few innings of the game saw Marshal McCoy doing a superb job catching. In the third inning he hit a home run over the wall in right field into the picnic tables where Mr. Gallus, his family, and Bob Newman were seated. Mr. Gallus caught the ball.

Meanwhile, John Kirk sat on the bench in the dugout eager to get into the game and show his stuff. John had a renewed confidence since meeting Ms. Nightingale. It was as if the despair that possessed him at the small chain restaurant was years behind him.

Grace Blackthorne, her son Johnny, and her superior gained permission through the two mounted police to enter the ball park. They made their way to the press box behind home plate. The press box was equal in height to the luxury seats on the third deck of the seating area. This gave them a perfect hidden view of their subject who was using the alias Jay Hawthorne.

Jay Hawthorne, more commonly known as Jaybird, spent most of the game talking to fellow fans in the luxury suite. Unknown to the U.S. government was the fact that the beautiful, long brown-haired, blue-green eyed woman in the luxury suite with Jaybird was his partner. She was going by the alias Mary Nightingale.

Giselle Fowler and Uhura Lincoln were seated next to each other in the middle of the first row of section 108. Their seats were between home plate and the home team’s dugout. They were also directly below the luxury box that Jaybird and Mary were conducting business in. At the end of each inning Marshal left home plate, took off his catcher’s mask, and smiled and winked in the direction of Uhura. Giselle and Uhura were having a good time.

Inning after inning the game continued the same, both on and off the field, until the end of the sixth inning. The Mudhen’s starting pitcher was getting tired. He allowed several walks, hits and four runs. This put the Mudhens’ three runs behind. When the starting pitcher’s downtrend started, the Mudhen’s pitching coach sent John Kirk out to warm up. Just before

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the start of the inning an announcement came over the speaker system, "The Mudhens make a call to the Hen Pen. They call up a lefty, John Kirk."

Mr. Gallus turned to Bob Newman, pointed to the John who was walking to the mound, and said, "We wash his clothes all year long. Just the other day he passed out when he entered the store. I think he had too much to drink the night before."

Bob replied, "How 'bout I get close enough to get a good picture of him. The next time he comes into the store you could ask him to sign it. Then, you can hang it on the wall so that on the way into the store customers will see it. It would be good for business."

"Great idea!" was Mr. Gallus' reply.

Bob began to make his way to the seating behind home plate. After a few minutes he made his way to the aisle that lead to Giselle and Uhura's seats. He paused to let people by and then made his way down the stairs. As he did so he also reached into his pocket and took out his cell phone camera.

Giselle had just reseated herself when she heard John's name being announced over the speaker system. At the hearing of John's name she stood and looked toward the pitcher's mound. A feeling of dread came over her. Uhura, who remained seated, looked at Giselle to see what she would do. Giselle looked down at Uhura and stated, "Let's go girl."

"Come on honey. Marshal's having a great game. Can't we stay? As a relief pitcher John will only pitch this inning. Then the closing pitcher will end the game," Uhura started to present a case to convince Giselle to stay. As Uhura talked Giselle returned her gaze at John. She kept staring at John. John was taking warming up pitches. His throws to Marshal reached 100 mph. Uhura saw the anxiety of Giselle's face, and so relented. "Alright girl, we can go. Don't let it be said that Uhura doesn't keep her promises. Let's go get you a new bird."

Uhura was closer to the stairs. She led the way through the people seated and standing in their row. She stopped just outside the aisle, waiting and watching Giselle make her way through the people. When Giselle reached the end of the seats they turned to walk up the stairs together. There they met Bob Newman.

"Bob, imagine meeting you here," Uhura said to him.

Giselle's eyes widened as Uhura suddenly addressed the newbie that she was trying for weeks to get to know. Giselle briefly turned her attention from Bob to Uhura and asked herself, "How does she know Bob?"

Giselle's mother answered, "She's trying to steal your prospective boyfriend."

"Impossible," Giselle responded. Then Giselle returned her gaze to Bob.

Giselle wanted the handsome, browned-haired, and browned-eyed man to recognize her. So she asked him, "Bob, do you love baseball as much as I do?"

Uhura eyes widened, she leaned back slightly, and turned toward Giselle. "How does she know Bob?" Uhura asked herself. "And what's this sudden love for baseball? She only goes

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to games because of John and me.” Uhura was not one to keep her opinions to herself; so she spoke up, “What you talking about girl?”

“Hush,” Giselle responded as she smiled at Bob with all the charm she could muster.

Not knowing who to address Bob said, “I came with the Gallus family. And yes, I love baseball. We want to get a good picture of this new pitcher so we can hang it up on the wall. He’s a patron. He’s got good potential. Don’t you think?”

“Yes I do. Although I think he’s got some personal quirks that he needs to get rid of if he wants to grow up and succeed,” Giselle answered.

“What?” both Uhura and Bob asked Giselle.

“Can you make way? We want to get through,” asked someone on the stairways with Giselle, Bob, and Uhura. This broke up the three way conversation. Giselle and Uhura continued up the stairs, and Bob continued down the stairs.

Giselle spoke first, “Now whosa surprisin’ who?”

Uhura answered, “Girl, you don’t surprise me; you scare me. And it doesn’t matter if you talk like that or not; you always seem to hit me like a mountain falling into a valley stream.” That ended the conversation until Uhura and Giselle reached the car.

When John’s name was announced over the speaker system, Mary Nightingale had been talking to a young man who was trying to convince her to join him after the game. She was debating with herself on what to do. “Can I handle two prospects in one night,” she asked herself for she knew that John also wanted her company after the game. At the sound of John’s name over the speaker system, she turned toward Jaybird and motioned with her head for him to take a look at John. Jaybird knew that she was indicating that he was one of their prospects.

Jaybird was seated in the luxury box near some wealthy local businessmen, but was not speaking with them at this particular time. He accepted Mary’s nod and looked at John who was warming up on the pitcher’s mound. Then some commotion in the main concourse’s seats directly beneath Jaybird caught his attention. Giselle’s conversation with Uhura had brought them to his attention.

Mary had been studying Jaybird to see what his reaction to John might be. His change in attention caused her to excuse herself from the young man she was talking to and sat behind Jaybird. “What?” she whispered to Jaybird.

“I know those two young ladies,” Jaybird replied. He stood to get a better view of them as they made their way to the stairs.

“Trouble?” Mary asked as she stood so that they could keep their conversation low.

“Don’t think so,” then he changed his mind, “Might be. We can talk about it later.”

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When John's name came over the speaker Grace was in the press office box leaning over her son and wiping his face. The young lad had just finished eating an ice cream cone. When she heard John's name she said to no one in particular, "Can't be." She rose to look at the pitchers' mound. At the sight of John, Grace's college years came back to her like a ghost in a graveyard haunts visitors in the night.

Her superior had been watching Jaybird. He had noticed that Jaybird and an attractive young lady seemed to be silently communicating with each other. "What?" he asked Grace. If he had not been so focused on Jaybird he might have heard her. He didn't so he asked, "What?" again.

Grace did not answer. Her superior wasn't looking for an answer. He was more interested in getting Grace's take on the possibility that Jaybird was working with the young lady now talking to him. "Grace what do you think of that?"

Grace answered him; but not about the subjects that he was asking about. "Sooner or later I knew I would have to tell John. But I was putting it off until Johnny was older. Is it God's intent for me to address the issue now?"

Grace knew that her God was a God of healing; not only between God and individuals; but also between human individuals. "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who trespass against us," she continued to speak out loud. "If there is someone who has harmed me it would certainly be John. If I am to be true to the teachings of my Lord, then I am to forgive John, not just in my head and heart, but also in action; apparently, sooner than I wanted to."

Grace's superior turned toward her in complete puzzlement, "John who? What are you talking about?" Grace returned her concentration to Jaybird and decided that he might be working with the lady he was silently talking to.

Chapter 11

A Bad Reason to Attend Church

April 8, Sunday morning

Giselle woke up early the next morning, Sunday morning, something she seldom did. After a shower she sat at the mirror in her bathroom and began to put on a face. "Sunday morning and I'm awake," she said humorously amazed at herself. "Won't Uhura be surprised when I meet her on the steps?" Giselle was able to work up a smile in the midst of a half awake state. Uhura had shared with Giselle during the ride away from the ball park that Bob went to the same church as she did. Giselle had shared with Uhura that Bob worked at the same office she did and that she wanted to lasso him; a revelation that Uhura could only laugh at.

Giselle was not alone in her thoughts this Sunday morning. Her mother also spoke up. "Just what are you up to today young lady? Strike that, I mean, getting old lady. This is not good. Getting so desperate to find a man who will stay with you that we have to go to church now do we? Church going men aren't noble princes, and they certainly aren't rich. They give, give, and give to the church. The church takes their money and makes them feel guilty about giving nice things like diamonds to their girlfriends and wives. Lasso a sucker like that and you'll end up barefoot, in the kitchen, with hordes of children around your dress, and naked every night

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just so you can feed his unquenchable needs only to feel guilty about it afterwards. You'll probably have to give up your job too."

Fear crept into her heart as she realized that this was all probably true. "I have never been to church as far as I can ever remember. What is it like? I really don't know. Everything I know about it I've only heard and seen from secondhand sources."

"That's right," her mother consoled, "Best to stay home."

"But Uhura goes to church every Sunday. She also goes other days of the week as a volunteer. She's the nicest person I've ever known. It can't be all that bad. Besides, I like this man. If I get him in bed with me just once, he'll stop going to church." With those thoughts Giselle believed she was ready to get dressed. She put on her best not-to-sexy dress. Finding a modest dress amongst her many outfits wasn't easy because most were quite revealing especially in the cleavage area. "If it goes well today guess I'll have to buy more outfits, and that isn't so bad."

Giselle made her way from the bedroom into the living room where her new bird was greeting her with a new song. "Hello my pet. Want something to eat and drink?" she said as she filled the bird's feeding tray and drinking bottle.

Giselle opened the front door and picked up the newspaper. Then she made her way to the kitchen, grabbed a cup, filled it with coffee, and sat down at the kitchen table. As she listened for footsteps going down the back steps she opened the newspaper and read the headlines, "Mudhens Win Opener." "Kirk Saves Game." "McCoy's Bat Screams Victory."

"Good thing I don't read the sports page," Giselle said just as she heard the door to Uhura's apartment close. Giselle took one last drink, got up and opened her back door. "Hi girl," she said to her friend.

Uhura didn't miss a beat as she made her way down the stairs. "Bet ya thought ya gonna surprise me didn't ya. Ya shoulda know by now girl, that I know ya way too well to be surprised by ya. I knew the moment I told ya Bob goes to the same church as I that da ya'd be comin' this morning," she said with a smile and excitement on her face. Uhura felt like a cat that had caught a bird. "And to think all these years of me inviting ya to come and ya never came. If I would'a known that it takes a handsome man to get ya to come to church I would have had them lined up around the block."

"Uhura, why do you always talk like that when you have one over on me?"

"Because dear, as my grandmother always told me," Uhura answered, "'A rubber rock doesn't hurt as much as a real one and it still makes the point.'"

After a brief silence Giselle changed the subject, "If you would have had handsome men lined up around the block I would'a went to hell and back with you." Then she corrected herself, "Guess I should rephrase that since I'm a church lady now." Uhura and Giselle made their way out the back door.

"Going to church isn't about what ya say, girl. It's 'bout who ya know and what ya know about yourself," Uhura said as she got into her car. "I've been tellin' ya that for years, but ya still

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don't get it. If it takes a man to get ya to come to church, what'll it take to get ya to understand what it all means?" They entered Uhura's car.

"Some more of them soft rocks?" Giselle asked but didn't expect an answer. In reply Uhura gave her a smile and a shy wise glance as she started the car.

On their way to Uhura's church they picked up a few teenage girls. Uhura always picked them up because they had no other way of going, even though they wanted to go. Uhura was their Teenage Mentor.

John woke up early the day after opening day, Sunday morning, something he seldom did. The sound of the shower woke him. He sat up in bed, swung his legs over the side of the bed, rubbed his face and rough beard, and looked at the clock. It was early. "What's Mary doing getting up so early on a Sunday morning?"

After Mary finished her shower John's inquiry as to her intentions led to a shocking answer. "I have always gone to church ever since I was a little girl. It's a habit I never break. It's what anchors me, being that I always seem to move once every few years. It's the only non harming habit I have. And there are always a few kind people in churches. Some are as mean as they come. I avoid them and hook up with the kind people. What are my intentions this morning you ask me? I'm going to church. Do you want to come?" Mary was being truthful. Yet she did not tell the whole truth. Going to church had two more benefits. It was a safe place for her and Jaybird to make plans and adjustments, and it was the place where she would bring her prospects to meet Jaybird. Jaybird would then reinforce her statements that their investments (although the prospect never knew that the two of them worked together) were the most profitable and safe.

John thought about it before he answered. He hadn't attended church since he was a young lad. All he remembered was sitting in a boring Sunday school class. The young child in him didn't want to go. At the same time the grown man in him didn't want to lose his appeal to the beautiful young lady that spent the night in his bed. So he answered, "Sure. Any time with you is always a pleasant time."

After his shower John inquired as to which church Mary attended. He learned that it was the church that Marshal attended. "My friend attends that church. He has often asked me to go with him. But I've always declined. Won't it surprise him when I show up this morning?" he told her.

Marshal woke up early the morning after opening day, Sunday morning, something he always did Sunday mornings. Part of his Sunday morning routine was to go to the home of a few teenage boys, pick them up, and bring them to church. Like Uhura, Marshal was a Teenage Mentor.

Marshal brought these boys to church, which is where they wanted to be, because no one else cared enough for them to bring them anywhere let alone church. Marshal also spent Friday and Wednesday evenings with these boys, both off season and whenever the Mudhens played at home, with the exception of this week because he was in the car accident. While explaining to Uhura the reason for his absence afterwards, Marshal had learned from Uhura that Giselle was the woman in the accident. The police cited Giselle so that the accident that he was in

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was fully explained. Uhura explained that Giselle was not happy with being cited for the accident, especially when the man that she hit didn't care.

A few of the regular adult congregation, like Jaybird, did not like Marshal and Uhura bringing the "misfit generation" to "their church." Yet, since most of the other elders and the head pastor supported this act, Marshal and Uhura kept bringing them. Unlike in past generations, the Teenage Mentors did not meet in classrooms and talk at the kids. Rather, they interacted with them, played games with them, and most importantly got involved in their day-to-day lives. This wasn't easy and at times wasn't rewarding. Yet, to Marshal, Uhura, and some of the other Teenage Mentors it was needed and a necessity in their lives as believers.

Being a professional athlete helped gain the boys respect for a little while. Yet, if his love wasn't sincere, the boys knew it almost right away. "There's some truth in the statement 'the innocence of youth,'" Marshal told Uhura one day.

She confirmed this by stating, "It appears that when we're younger our hearts aren't as hard as they are when we're adults. That is to say, in youth we can tell if someone sincerely loves us or is a fraud easier and quicker than when we're older."

Marshal continued the thought, "Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that, outside of a relationship with God through Jesus, the older we get the harder it is to love people. As we go through life we are let down and hurt by people, and we do the same to others. The more we are let down and hurt, the harder our hearts get. We don't like it; we don't want it; and especially we don't want to admit it. So we shut our hearts down; that is to say our heart becomes hard. Some people are so shut off from the world they naturally assume that everyone hates them and will only hurt them, and the only way to make it through life is to look out for oneself."

Jaybird woke up early the morning after opening day, Sunday morning, something he always did Sunday mornings when he lived up north. Part of his northern Sunday morning routine was to go to a fancy coffee house to buy a cup of coffee. Then he would sit at a small table and think. Sometimes he would calculate his financial situation; most of the time he would think about the past. This morning, because he had seen Giselle and Uhura sitting together last night, he thought about his past.

Although he was pretty sure that Giselle didn't know it, Jaybird had gone out with her mother a little less than thirty years ago. They were living in Indiana. They had an on-and-off relationship until a few years after Giselle was born. He was pretty sure that he was Giselle's father; but her mother would neither confirm nor deny it.

When Giselle's mother had become pregnant, she and Jaybird had come to an agreement. He would pay a hefty monthly child support fee if she wouldn't bring him to court. He didn't want to go to court because he didn't want to draw attention to himself. Jaybird especially didn't want to gain the law's attention, for at the time he had been illegally smuggling African diamonds into the country.

After careful consideration of his past, Jaybird came to the conclusion that after this summer he and Mary would have to close the door to their investment scheme in this part of the country. They would have to open shop in another part of the country.

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Grace woke up early the morning after opening day, Sunday morning, something she always did Sunday mornings. She showered, made coffee, toasted a bagel, and selected a grapefruit to eat. Then she woke up her boy and poured him a bowl of cereal. "We're going to church today," she told him.

The week before Grace had searched the Saturday local paper in order to select a church to attend. She wanted one that had a good day care where she could drop her son off when she went to work. Her visit this morning would help her decide if this church fell in line with her beliefs, and had what she wanted in a day care.

"Will there be kids there? Will they be nice?"

"Yes, plenty of nice kids go there." Grace studied her son and thought about his father, John Kirk. The revelation that he played on the local minor league team had kept her up most of the night in prayer and thought. By morning she was convinced that her son would meet his father in the next few weeks; exactly when and where she did not know. Just how his father would react she did not know. She prayed that he would accept his son and be a good father to him.

After breakfast Grace dressed her son and then herself. Then they drove to the church that Grace had selected to attend the week before. Just outside the front door they were greeted by Bob Newman, "Welcome to Lake Front Church, my name is Bob. Are you new to our church?" He was one of two greeters assigned to the front doors.

"Yes, thank you."

"May I assist you in any way?"

"Yes, could you please direct me to the children's care area?" Grace replied.

"There's a desk just inside the doors. There are people there who can tell you all about our children's ministry," Bob replied. Then Bob addressed Johnny, "How you doing young man? You sure look handsome this morning." Johnny looked at him, but did not respond.

"Say thank you dear," Johnny's mother instructed him. Johnny obeyed.

As they walked away a group of young women approached the door.

"Bob, imagine meeting you here! Seems we got more in common than baseball and work," Giselle stated as he walked up with Uhura and the teenage girls.

"Another mountain comes down," Uhura exclaimed.

Giselle gave Uhura a nagging look, "Ignore her. How about we all sit together?" Being the first time that Giselle went to church, she did not know that she and Uhura would be spending the first hour in a room with the girls, chatting about whatever the girls wanted to talk about. Then they would attend the main worship service.

"Sure, as soon as I'm finished out here I'll be going in. Uhura, I usually sit with the Gallus family. Why don't you introduce her to them?"

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After an hour of coffee, snacks, greetings, meetings, and study groups The Lake Front Church came together as a congregation in the main meeting room. In the room sat several hundred people who came for all the right reasons. Next to them sat people who came for all the wrong reasons. Close to the front and off to the left of the stage was Mr. & Mrs. Gallus, Bob Newman, Giselle Fowler, Uhura Lincoln, and Marshal McCoy. Behind them sat a few teenage girls and Grace Blackthorne. A few rows behind them, Jaybird sat by himself. He always sat along the aisle so that no one could see him nod off during the sermon. Just behind him in the last row sat John Kirk and Mary Nightingale.

After the congregation sang some contemporary Christian songs, the senior pastor, Jose Comentarista, got up to speak. "Before I begin to speak I want to apologize. Up until yesterday early evening I was fully prepared for today. Then, the Spirit of God began to press on my heart a subject different than the one that I had prepared. All night I wrestled with the following verses out of John 12. Look them up, if you have a Bible."

Pastor J.C., as everyone called him, continued by reading the passage, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. Now my heart is troubled and what shall I say? 'Father save me from this hour?' No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again."

Pastor J.C. stopped reading and looked up and into the congregation. In a calm and reassuring voice he began to convey his thoughts and insight into the passage. "Jesus spoke these words after his final entry into Jerusalem; the one where he rode on a donkey and a large crowd hailed him with verses and palm branches. At seeing this reception the religious leaders remarked to one another, 'Look how the whole world has gone after him! They were so jealous of him that in a few days they crucified him.'"

Pastor J.C. put down his Bible and continued, "The religious leaders were right in saying 'the whole world' has gone out to Jesus because the verses just before the ones I just read say that Greeks asked to talk to Jesus. You see, during the time of Passover, Jewish converts from all over the known world came to Jerusalem. To these Greeks, his disciples, and the rest of the crowd Jesus spoke of his coming death, and how his disciples would follow his example."

Walking to the left side of the stage Pastor J. C. continued, "Now look at your Bible again. Jesus made his death very clear in the verses that follow the ones I just read. He said, 'But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself.' He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die."

Even though there was a small clear podium on the stage, Pastor J.C. hardly ever stood behind it. At this time in his delivery he was slowly making his way to stage right. He began gesturing to the congregation as he continued. "Look at the pews around you. What do you see? You see Europeans, Africans, Asians, and Hispanics like me. You see old and young. You see white collar, blue collar, no collar, students – that is what-to-be collars," there were a few laughs as he continued, "and jersey collars."

Pastor J.C. stopped his walking and smiled as he stated, "By the way I want to congratulate the Mudhens on a fine victory yesterday, some of whom are sitting among us this morning." This brought laughter and cheers from the congregation. Pastor J.C. raised his hands as he stated, "Just don't elevate them to godhood. Lord, knows there's enough sports worshipping going on around the world, almost to the point of having believers join in on the pandemonium."

Some more laughter was generated from the congregation as someone said, "Amen to that pastor."

"Now let's get back to the passage. So here we got all these people grouped together into what is called the Church of Jesus Christ. What does Jesus say of us? He calls us 'those who serve me' and those who 'follow me.' And what does he say to his followers? He says, 'I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.' What does Jesus mean by dying, losing life, and gaining it for eternal life?"

At this point in the sermon John noticed Grace. He spent the rest of the service staring at her and thinking. He no longer heard Pastor J.C.'s words. Mary noticed her prospect's change in attention. She wondered what was between him and the lady he was staring at. She would have to find out.

Chapter 12

A Thorne in Each Side

April 11, Wednesday

"Well, you sure surprised me on Sunday John," Marshal McCoy stated to John Kirk. They sat next to each other in the dugout. The Mudhens were playing a business man's game. A business man's game starts at 1:00 pm so that area businessmen can take the afternoon off and watch a game.

"Yah, I surprised myself."

"What made you come, Mary Nightingale?"

"You know her? How? You didn't indicate that the other night at the Dusty Trail. Why didn't you tell me? You knew I wanted to meet her," John tried to act surprised in an attempt to change the subject.

"Of course I know her. She attends Lake Front Church as I do; doesn't she?" Marshal answered and then added, "You didn't answer my question, John."

"Why do you ask questions that you already know the answer to?" John asked.

"Because you need to hear the answer as much as I do. Did you enjoy our little church?"

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“Sure,” John replied with reservations, “Your church is not what I expected. I expected pews; men dressed in funny clothes; some words spoken that I didn’t understand; sitting and being talked at; and being forced to sing songs that were on the hit parade two hundred years ago. Is every Sunday like the one that I experienced?”

“No. For example, if you come tonight with me, to our teenage meeting, you’ll see another side of Christianity.”

John considered Marshal’s invitation. He wondered if Grace Blackthorne would be there. Since he had seen her on Sunday, he had wondered what she was doing in town, how long had she been in town, and if she had changed her mind about him. But instead of asking about Grace he asked, “Does Mary go on Wednesdays?”

“No. I’ve never seen her there on Wednesdays; only on Sundays. Of course I’m quite busy on Wednesdays, so maybe she’s there and I just don’t see her. Uhura will be there though.”

“Go figure.” Uhura’s presence brought a different twist on Marshal’s invitation. John had noticed that Giselle was sitting next to Uhura. So he asked, “Will Giselle be there too?”

The crowd began to cheer as a Mudhen got a hit. This meant that Marshal needed to get his bat for he would be up soon. As he began to walk away from John he answered, “Can’t say. Do you want me to find out?”

“Would ya?”

“If she isn’t, will you come? I’m assuming you still want to avoid her.”

“I do. Could you find out? If she isn’t I’ll come with you.” With John’s positive answer Marshal went out to the field to warm up. When the time came for him to bat, he hit a grand slam which led to a Mudhen’s victory against the Bulls. Defeating the Bulls always brought a deep satisfaction to Marshal. When he considered why this was so, Marshal concluded that perhaps it was the little boy in him still rejecting the Ranch, or perhaps it was a way to punish himself for the consequences of his actions so many years ago.

Jay Hawthorne made it a point to go to Lake Front Church on Wednesday nights. It was another chance to stir up interest in his investment scheme. In fact, thru attending this prominent middle class church he was able to acquire quite a lot of money.

Jay had a predetermined strategy for several years now. He stayed in an area working his scheme until one of three things happened; he was there for three years, he acquired \$300,000 dollars, or someone began to suspect his unlawful activity. Currently it looked like the latter two would require him to leave the area before the end of the year.

Grace Blackthorne was assigned the case revolving around Jay Hawthorne because she was an expert in international crime. The stewardess was correct in identifying her as a US Sky Marshal. It was her original profession; but not her current profession. Now she was a special operations FBI agent. Her cover of being a US Marshal gave her special investigative privileges without exposing the nature of her investigations. The case revolving around Jaybird had almost enough evidence to ensure a guilty verdict. All that remained was for her to discover who was working with him. She and her superior believed his partner was

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revealed during the opening game of the Mudhens. They had investigated Mary Nightingale's past. She had a history of illegal activity like Jay Hawthorne had.

Since Grace saw Jaybird at the Lake Front Church she decided to go on that Wednesday night to see if he would be there. "Besides," she told herself, "Johnny liked Sunday children's ministry so well, he would surely like Wednesday children's ministry too."

Marshal drove John and the teenage boys that he always brought to Lake Front Church to the church that evening. They were greeted by Jaybird when they entered the building. After hellos were exchanged Jaybird addressed John, "Say boy that was some swell pitching you conducted on opening day, and your appearances since haven't been bad either." Jaybird took the opportunity to reinforce Mary's proposition of investing in their scheme.

John stopped. The teenage boys continued on. Marshal patted John on the back and then followed them.

"Thanks," John answered Jaybird, "I doing much better with control this year thanks to Marshal."

"You keep this up and you'll be in the majors this year for sure."

Keeping his vanity in check John stated, "Well, I'm just playing one game at a time. There are good days and there are bad days. Right now, I'm going through a string of good days."

"It's always best to plan ahead John. When I was your age I planned ahead, and now I am enjoying my retirement. If a person plans ahead he won't be surprised by anything."

While Jaybird was making his pitch, John noticed Grace at the children's check in booth. Standing next to her was a toddler. This puzzled him. "Grace's married?" he asked himself. Then he considered the age of the boy and started to do the math. "That would make his birth less than a year after graduation. Was she pregnant when we broke up?" John studied the boy intently. In his features and demeanor he saw a Kirk. Feelings came over him that he could not process nor describe for he had never experienced them before. Grace looked in his direction. Immediately, John looked away, "Sorry, I've got to get going," he told Jaybird. Then he made his way in the direction that Marshal and the boys went. However, when he arrived at the room that they were in, he did not enter. Instead, he just walked the halls until he found an unoccupied corner, sat, and thought.

Chapter 13

What not to do with a Secret

May 2, Wednesday early evening

Giselle sat in her apartment staring at the screen. The local news was on; but she was not paying attention to it. Instead, she was considering the relationship between her and Bob. "Can it be called a relationship?" her mind's mother asked her. "After all, you and Bob went on three dates and each time you failed to keep him in your apartment. Perhaps, all he wants is a platonic relationship, and those kinds of relationships don't end up in a devoted relationship. Sure, at one time they did, when those kinds of relationship were forced onto people back

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then. These days a relationship without sex is a relationship that has reached the end of the trail. If he isn't interested in you sexually, surely he won't commit to a long term relationship."

At that point in the local evening news the sports came on. The highlight of the news was the Mudhens losing yesterday's game because of bad support from the Hen Pen. Giselle smiled at John's misfortune. She turned off the TV and decided to get a drink at The Dusty Trail. She sat at the end of the bar and silently drank a margarita.

John, Marshal and the rest of the Mudhen's had a day off. John's pitching had declined since he had concluded that the boy with Grace was his son. Both issues bothered him; the one between Grace and him, and the one between his son and him. So by the evening of his day off John headed for the Dusty Trail. He sat in a hidden booth and looked out a small round window. The window had evenly spaced boards which extended from the outside diameter to a central hub. This gave the window an appearance of a wagon wheel. John sat in this hidden booth looking out into the street because he did not want to be noticed by anyone and because he did not want to notice anyone. He just wanted to think and to drink; a combination that was sure to end up bad for John, unless someone intervened.

Marshal was concerned for his friend. He knew something was bothering him. During a few games Marshal had tried to find out what it was. John only stated that nothing was wrong. Being that they had the day off, Marshal knew where John would end up; so he made his way to the Dusty Trail.

When Marshal arrived he looked around to see if John was there. He noticed some people eating at the tables and a few men and women at the dimly lit bar. None of them were John. He was about to leave when out of the corner of his eye he detected movement in a booth that was directly beside the dimly lit bar. He smiled and shook his head, "Its John. Where else would he be if he had something bothering him?"

Marshal made his way to the booth. When he arrived he asked, "May I join you?"

"Sure," was all John said in reply.

Marshal motioned the barkeep for a beer and then sat down. "John, what's eating you?"

"Don't waste no time do you? Straight to the draw Marshal McCoy is, isn't he?" John answered. Not that John was cross; rather that he was tired, hot, and depressed. "Hot in this place don't you think Marshal?" Marshal didn't answer John's questions. He knew that John wasn't looking for answers. He was looking for someone to listen.

After Marshal received his drink and after the barkeep left the booth, John continued, "Marshal I have something to tell you that I don't want anyone to know. You're right, something has been bothering me. I don't know what the right thing to do is. Well, I think I know the right thing to do; I just don't know if I want to do it. I don't know what the consequences will be. I mean, on the one hand I want to get to know him; but on the other hand, what if he rejects me? Or worse off, what if his mother rejects me? I don't know if I could handle it if he likes me, but she keeps me away from him. Surely, she knows I live here because she saw me at your church several times starting from the first day I went there with Mary. And even though I've seen her after that first day, she hasn't approached me. She hasn't said anything to me." John was getting more and more animated and loud as he spoke. "You'd think that she would come

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up to me and say something. She knows I'm no dummy. I can add. I know he's mine. And she's got to realize that I know. But she says nothing to me. Why?"

"John, why is it that whenever you're in this establishment you never make sense?"

"What?" John considered his words and saw how they could be confusing. He continued, "Oh yeah. I guess I better start from the beginning." John then proceeded to tell Marshal about his discovery that the college romance that he had often told Marshal about had produced a son that he did not know existed until three weeks ago. John concluded his explanation with a sincere question, "What should I do Marshal?"

Marshal thought about how he was going to answer John. He knew that the right thing for John to do was to apologize to Grace and ask for reconciliation; if not for each other, then at least for the sake of the boy. Marshal knew first hand from the teenage boys that he mentored that children are better off with a father and a mother, even if they live separate lives. The worst thing for children is to have questions regarding either one of their parents.

"John, you have to accept the consequences of the decisions you have made in the past. What has happened is the direct result of who you are and what you did. You made choices then that were not the best. Don't do the same now. Make the right decision."

John asked, "Marshal, what is the right decision?"

Marshal answered in a way that John had not expected, "You have to recognize John that you are not innocent. This has happened because of no one else but you. You were at fault then and you need to do what is right now. You need to look at what you did, accept it, and then make it right. Reconciliation is needed. It's the best thing for Grace, the boy, and yourself. You shouldn't wait for her. You need to go to her and make things right. You need to set up a meeting with her to discuss this. I am willing to be the go-between, if you are willing to make things right."

John took his arms off the table and sat back as he asked, "I can accept that reconciliation is good. But how can you say that I am at fault?"

"Sex is no light matter John. Some people see sex only as a means to self and/or mutual gratification. Others see it as a way to establish and build a relationship. Although these things may be true between married people, what most people don't want to recognize is another reality of sex. Sex is the means for us to procreate. Modern man has devised ways to reduce the odds of conception; but even with reduced odds sex still produces children. Everyone who does not accept that sex produces children and that we are responsible for the best life for the children we produce will always be guilty. John, your sexual behavior produced a child and you are now responsible for the well being of that child."

John considered, believed, and then accepted Marshal's words. He was not the only person in the Dusty Trail to accept them. At the end of the bar sat a glass that had been emptied of its margarita and filled with tears. Next to the glass was a stack of bills and an empty chair. Giselle had left the bar and headed straight for the only place where she knew Uhura would be, Lake Side Church. Giselle didn't want to admit it. She still felt attached to John.

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Giselle arrived at Lake Side Church with the hope to find Uhura alone in the room that the teens meet in on Wednesday nights. Giselle was early, so the room was empty. After considering calling Uhura to see when she would arrive, Giselle decided to wait for her in an area of the building where she would be alone, but would have sight of the room. Since it was supper time Giselle was alone in the church.

After a few minutes, Giselle noticed that the young lady that John had been dating, Mary something, showed up. Hate and disgust filled Giselle's heart. A part of her wanted to burst out of hiding and tear the beautiful young thing to shreds. Yet another part of her held back from this crime of passion. "Is it fear, righteousness, or self pity?" she wondered to herself as she sat as quietly as she could.

Mary entered a small room as Giselle's mother said, "The young prissy didn't see you. Good. Let's see what little miss goody two shoes is up to."

A few minutes later Jaybird entered the building and walked into the room where Mary was located. He too did not see Giselle. "Well, isn't that Marshal's friend?" stated Giselle's mother, "Let's see what he and little miss hussy are up to." She then proceeded to quietly relocate to the room adjacent to the room Mary and Marshal's friend were in.

Jaybird and Mary began their weekly meeting discussing John. Jaybird started, "How's your prospect John Kirk doing? When I first talked to him a few weeks ago he seemed distracted. But your words since then have convinced him to invest a few thousand dollars into our diamond mine. John sure is greedy. He took the most aggressive investment plan and the fool didn't even check to see if the diamond field exists. The web page doesn't show him hitting it. You sure have got him boondoggled."

"Isn't it great?" Mary replied with a big grin on her face. "These church goers sure trust each other. You're such a genius. Any trouble with Giselle or her black friend, Uhura?"

Jaybird's demeanor changed. "No trouble," he replied in retrospect, "We've only run into each other a few times and neither seems to remember me."

Mary had known only a little of Jaybird's past. She didn't trust Jaybird to keep her in the future. She was curious as to how he was involved with these two ladies. Perhaps they were to be her replacement. She didn't like the thought of that. So she asked, "What's your link to these two women? I mean how can they be such a threat?"

"I don't want to answer that." Jaybird retorted. In the next room Giselle overheard every word. Since the conversation took a personal turn she wanted to know the answer to that question so much that she almost blurted it out, "Answer the damn question."

"One of the agreements between us was that anything that can affect and/or jeopardize this scheme has to be shared," Mary pointed directly at Jaybird's face when she sharply restated one of the agreements they had made two years ago. Two years ago was when they started the investment scheme in this area of the country. At the time Mary was new to high stakes crime.

"Get that finger out of my face," Jaybird grabbed her finger and bent it back a little. "Remember whose idea this was."

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After a defiant stare showdown that lasted less than half a minute, Jaybird smiled his best boyish grin, "That's one of the reasons why I invited you into my little jackpot, you don't back down easily." After a retrospect moment he corrected himself, "Hell, I've never seen you back down. You're like an eagle's claw. You'll never drop your prey until you're ready to eat it. Alright, do you want the long version or the abridged version?"

"I want the accurate version," she smiled back.

Jay smiled revealing his teeth, "That would be the long version."

"I was born in ranch country out west; upper west that is, in big sky country. Didn't have much of a home life; my father was an out-of-work lumber man. I only remember him being drunk all the time. Eventually, he stopped coming home. Barely knew the bastard, thank God. My mother worked all the time, so I never really got to know her either." Jaybird leaned back in his chair in order to take some of the apprehension out of the air. "I was always a trouble to her in high school. So she sent me on the road after graduation."

"After high school I hooked up with a group of young men who taught me the art of rustling cattle. Easy money, but quite dangerous; them ranchers shoot first and ask questions later. The law is on their side; they could kill us legally and never go to court. At first rustlin' cattle was easy. All we had to do was drive a few counties away during the night, kill a few cattle, butcher them on site, and drive away. We did all that by 1:00 am, and by dawn the coyotes, wolves, and birds of prey had cleaned up our leftovers; bones and all. This all went well until the ranchers discovered the power of short wave radios. This forced us to drive states away to get the beef."

"What's all this got to do with the two women at the game?" Mary leaned forward as she asked.

"Patience young lady. Enjoy the story. You want to know what kind of threat we're under don't you?" Jaybird replied. Mary relented, reclined in her chair, and waited for the story to continue.

"Well, all good things come to an end sometime. One night things weren't going so well. It took us longer than normal to get out of the area we were in; southern Montana just north of Yellowstone. We didn't know the area that well. We had driven quite far to get there. We got lost in the back country. While trying to find our way back to the main road two guys on horseback spotted us; must have been the rancher and a hired hand. Anyway they were between us and the only way out. An exchange of gun fire ensued. One guy on horseback went down and the other took off. So we just barely made our escape."

"Was the guy killed?" Mary asked nervously. She didn't want to be involved with a man wanted for a murder. If Jaybird was wanted for murder, she would end their partnership as fast as possible.

In the next room Giselle already knew the answer to that question. She knew the incident from another source. She had learned from Uhura how Marshal's father had been crippled in the gunfight. Giselle was amazed at the revelation that Jaybird and Marshal were linked in such a way. She wondered if Marshal knew what Jaybird did to his father. She wondered if Jaybird knew it was Marshal's father.

“No,” Jaybird answered Mary. “But it ended my rustlin’ days, which was OK with me. I was thirty-five and getting too old for that hard work.”

“I had already been looking for a chance to get out of rustlin’ when the gun fight happened. A few years earlier I ran into an old retired coal miner who said that in his youth he had worked the diamond mines in Africa. He told me that there were places in Africa where diamonds were scattered all over the landscape. All one needed to do was to get the natives to pick them up. At the time I thought he was just an old timer shooting off his mouth; but I checked out his story anyways. Turns out it was true. I started to set the deal up when I was still rustlin’; never told my rustlin’ partners of course. On the day I got out of rustlin’ I moved to the quiet farms of Indiana and ramped up business. Of course, as with anything that looks too good to be true, there was something to contend with and that was the De Beers.”

“Yes, the De Beers, you told me all about their lock on the world diamond market and how we needed to stay clear of their horns,” Mary stated in order to rush Jaybird along. She knew that soon people would be showing up for Wednesday night church, and that she would need to leave. Leaving before anyone arrived was a precaution Mary took so that no one would suspect that she had anything to do with Jay.

Jaybird was enjoying telling his life story to a beautiful young admirer. He continued, “Well, I found a way around the De Beers and used them to further my plans. I convinced a few local African officials that hated the De Beers that they could chase the DeBeers out of Africa. I suggested that they steal diamonds off the massive amounts of lands that the DeBeers owned and/or controlled. I promised to sell the diamonds that they collected in the States and funneled some of the money back to their little rebellion so that they could buy weapons and people. It worked quite well for several profitable years until Uhura’s father got involved. Because of him I had to shut down my little rebellion. Uhura was the black lady at the game.”

“Get out of here!” Mary exclaimed. As Jaybird had been unfolding his life story, Mary had slowly leaned forward. When she heard this disclosure she flung her body back so hard that the chair tilted backwards and her head hit the wall.

Giselle jumped at the sound of Mary’s head hitting the wall. She put her hand over her mouth in disbelief and bewilderment. She nearly fell off her chair; not because she flung her body back as Mary did, but because the thought of the implications of Jaybird’s statement made Giselle lightheaded and sick to her stomach.

Uhura fed her childhood to Giselle in bird size pieces. Giselle had always wanted to know more, but never pushed Uhura to tell her the full story. “If this man doesn’t tell me the full story now, I’m going to force it out of Uhura.” Giselle told herself. Then a hard realization hit her, “How am I going to break this news to her? This man destroyed her chances of a normal life in Africa.”

Jaybird asked Mary, “You ok?” Mary nodded yes as she rubbed the back of her head and motioned for him to continue. He did so. “Uhura’s father and a bunch of men had been hired to counter our little rebellion. In far as I know he never fired a shot. Rather, the smart rascal tracked the diamond trade to me and shut me down. Of course, it took him ten years to do so.”

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“By then you must have been rich,” Mary had new found respect for her partner. “Why didn’t you retire at that point?”

The smile that had been on Jay’s face disappeared, “You can never retire from a life of crime little girl. At first I stole cattle out of necessity; then, out of fear of my peers. Somewhere in the middle I became addicted to it, to the power I had over people. Power’s a potent drug. No matter how much I stole, I felt I never had enough wealth, never had enough power. I wanted more, and more, and more. So I went into diamond smuggling because it promised more wealth and more power. And now I’m into an investment scheme with you. Eventually, this life controls you, Mary. You can’t get out it. It’s a drug of the worse kind, and I know it will kill me someday. You ought to get out of it while you’re young.”

“You can’t scare me that easily old man,” Mary smiled as she replied. “Don’t think you can con me out of my share of our take.”

Jaybird considered Mary, regained his composure, and continued to retell his life story, “Anyway, when I first moved to Indiana, I hooked up with Giselle’s mother. She was a good lay, and a bitch of a woman to handle; just the kind I like to work with. Only she didn’t know that she was working with me. I would travel to Africa to purchase the goods, put them in some local trinket, and mail it to her through a partner in France. When I returned to Indiana, I would bring a copy of what I sent her with me. Then one morning while she was still asleep, I would exchange my empty trinket with the one she had that was full of diamonds. All this worked great until she told me she was pregnant with Giselle. Giselle’s the other girl at the game.”

Giselle’s mind went numb. She sat still. The small room around her shrank until she was in her own world. All her life Giselle wanted to know who her father was, and why he left her. She barely remembered him, but Giselle knew that the man who had just claimed to be her father was correct. Not wanting to be discovered and thus being forced to confront her father, Giselle quietly left the building.

Giselle returned to her apartment where she recalled her toddler memories of Jaybird, all that her mother had told her about him, and all that Jaybird had just said. Eventually, Giselle concluded that her mother was right; all men and all church goers were gullible hypocrites and fools. Anger slowly turned into rage as she sat alone in her apartment. Eventually, Giselle vowed to give all of them what they deserved. At the right time she would strike back and set them in their rightful place.

Unaware of Giselle’s presence and departure, Jaybird and Mary continued in their conversation. Mary interrupted Jaybird’s story, “Giselle’s the woman with Uhura at the game?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“How do you know for sure these ladies are who you think they are?”

“Because I have been tracking Giselle’s life from afar. About the time that Giselle went to grade school I moved out of her mother’s place, not that I stayed there every night, just that I had most of my stuff there. I moved out of her place; but not out of the area. I kept up the payments to her, kept shipping her trinkets, occasionally we slept together and I’d pick the trinkets up. At the same time I kept an eye on Giselle’s progress.”

“Why? Because of the money you gave her mom to support her?” Mary asked.

“No. Giselle’s got hold of a place in my heart that I couldn’t ignore. Strange as it must sound to you, no matter how much I might have tried, I couldn’t stop thinking about her. I’d wonder if she was alright. I’d wonder about her friends. I’d wonder about her health. I’d wonder about her future. I kept telling myself that I’d introduce myself to her when she left home, maybe if she went to college. Then when she hooked up with Uhura Lincoln in college I checked out Uhura’s past, discovered her real name, and just who her parents were. Because Uhura had learned of her past, I vowed to only watch Giselle from afar. Can’t take any chances in a business like this. Besides keeping Giselle away assured me that she could never be accused by the feds of knowing anything about what I do or had done.”

Mary began to consider Jaybird’s words and saw that she might have something that she could use against him in the future. Jaybird seemed to detect this so he warned her, “I don’t like that look. Don’t get any ideas. Try to use something against me and you won’t live to enjoy your short victory.” Then he added, “It’s getting late. We better break up. People will start to arrive. By the way, because of all this I’ve decided that we’re pulling out this summer, sometime after the fourth of July. So our next meeting will be on the first Sunday evening after the fourth of the July. I’ll let you know where later. Until then, no more meetings. Let’s stay apart unless it’s an emergency.”

Chapter 14

Reconciliation

June 1, Friday afternoon

John sat quietly in the elegantly decorated study at Lake Front Church. A dark wood chair rail separated light peach on the upper half and dark green on the lower half of three walls. Two of these walls contained an opened bay window framed in a dark hardwood. The view was a lot with large sycamores. Merle birds sang in the trees. Beyond the trees Lake Erie rolled gentle waves onto a beach sand shoreline.

The third wall of the study that John sat in contained a closed door framed in the same dark hardwood used to frame the windows. The fourth wall contained a mural of a southern swamp. Two peach, brown, and green floral couches wrapped one corner. The couches were separated by a large open wood end table. Two large wooden chairs with peach cushions faced the couches. John sat in one of these chairs. In-between and just behind the wooden chairs, on both sides of a bay window, stood tall finely carved bookshelves made of the same dark hardwood. The bookshelves were filled with several hundred books. The ceiling consisted of recessed dark wood panels. The floor was dark hardwood. In the middle of the floor lay a large dark-green Persian rug with peach flowers and light green leaves.

John was waiting for his friend Marshal to show up with Grace. John had asked him to be the messenger and if need be, the peacemaker between John, Grace, and her son. Marshal’s initial meeting with Grace resulted in the soon-to-take-place meeting between John and Grace with Marshal as the mediator. Uhura agreed to watch the boy in a separate room. If all went well, Grace would allow John to meet his son for the first time.

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John was leaning forward with clasped hands resting on slightly separated knees. He was in dress pants and a leisure coat. He had been staring so long at the floral Persian rug that thin streaking lights began appearing in repeating patterns. The imaginary light display satisfied him because concentrating on the light patterns was better than concentrating on the right and wrong words to say.

Seconds lasted a lifetime. Light patterns became boring. John's thoughts began to wander, "Why not leave now? Disappear to some other part of the country."

"You'll always wonder 'what if?'" he answered himself. "No, I'm staying. It's the best thing to do," he concluded.

Eventually Marshal entered the room, followed by Grace. Grace was dressed in a smart trim suit that looked like a dress uniform. Marshal wore a plaid shirt and dark corduroys. Marshal closed the door after Grace entered. She sat on the couch across from John. Marshal sat on the other couch. All three were seated forward and straight

Marshal was the first to speak. John and Grace intently looked at Marshal as he spoke. "John and Grace, you both have accepted that you are the parents of Johnny Blackthorne. You both have accepted that his birth was not planned by either of you. You both have accepted that he is the result of a relationship that both of you ended at the end of your last year in college. Since that time neither of you has made contact with the other until now. The boy does not know who his father is; although of late he has made inquiries. We are here to discuss the likelihood of a meeting between the boy and his father. Both of you have stated that you believe this would be best for the boy."

Marshal breathed in a bit as he thought of the next words. "We are also here to discuss the responsibilities of both parents. Let's keep in mind that we are looking for what is best for the boy; for parents this means love, truth, sacrifice, and responsibility. The best-case scenario, although not required, would be reconciliation between the two of you. I am not a lawyer. I am not a pastor. However, I have helped children, although a bit older than Johnny, reunite with either one or both of their parents.

Marshal slid back into the couch. "Do you both agree to these things?"

John and Grace softly answered, "Yes."

Marshal concluded, "Then the door is open for either of you to speak."

John broke the brief silence that followed Marshal's words, "Grace, I owe you an apology. I was wrong all those years ago. I treated you wrongly. I was selfish and immature. My intentions at the start of our relationship were noble; but I let my greed and selfish goals control me. I did things to you, which I ought not to have done. I treated you poorly. I was wrong, and I am sorry."

Relieved and placid emotions flushed through Grace. She heard from John words that she wanted to hear for so long that she began to accept that she would never hear them. She knew it was her turn to speak. "John, I accept your apology and I owe you an apology. I should have informed you when I learned that I was pregnant. I was wrong in keeping the knowledge of your son away from you. You should have been involved in decisions made

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concerning our son. I should have given you a chance to be in his life. I let fear and selfishness control me. In this, I treated you poorly. I was wrong, and I am sorry.”

Relieved and placid emotions flushed through John. He heard from Grace words that he doubted he would hear. “I accept your apology, Grace,” was all that he could say.

When Marshal was sure that both were finished apologizing he spoke up. “Now that both have acknowledged errors made in the past and apologized, and their apologies have been accepted, let them remain in the past. They should not be brought up again between the two of you or to other people. The present and the future should not be built on mistakes and errors of the past when they are admitted to and forgiven. Let’s look and plan for a future based on reconciliation, wisdom, love, and truth.”

John and Grace both started to speak and then stopped so as to not interrupt the other. John motioned with his hand to Grace for her to speak first. She began, “John let’s start with financial matters. As you already know my parents left me with enough money to support myself and Johnny for the rest of our lives. Also, my employer pays quite well. From that viewpoint one could conclude that money isn’t an issue here. However, since Johnny is your son, I believe you should contribute financially to Johnny’s upbringing, to his well being. Financial responsibility and one’s attitude toward financial matters is an important issue.” Grace knew John’s main weakness was selfish reckless accumulation of wealth. She knew this weakness had driven them apart many years ago and had now driven him to invest unwisely in Jay Hawthorne and Mary Nightingale’s investment scheme. She knew that such vices would not be good for little Johnny to learn.

Grace did not like to see anyone lose money to such vultures as Jay Hawthorne and Mary Nightingale. Yet, her obligations to the continued secrecy of the government’s investigation would not allow her to give the findings directly to John. Indirectly, through her next words, Grace hoped to motivate John to pull his money out of the scheme. This act of charity was more for John’s sake than for little Johnny’s financial well being. Her next words were also personally risky. Although the next words she spoke jeopardized the outcome of this meeting, Grace knew that they were perhaps the most important words to be spoken today. “John, I am willing to share with you my income, holdings, and investments if you are willing to share with me your income, holdings, and investments. With this information we can work out a plan that will be best for Johnny, not only in the present, but also in his future, through and beyond college.”

John knew that money would come up, and he suspected that it would be the first matter that Grace would want to address. He knew this was not because she needed the money. Rather, wealth was the reason that he acted badly toward her in college and the reason they had broken up. So, prior to this meeting, John had struggled with himself about what to do and say. John had also sought advice from Marshal and then separately he asked a lawyer’s advice as well. Marshal’s advice was the opposite of the lawyer’s. The lawyer wanted to be in complete control of all conversations and disclosures. The lawyer had said it was best not to disclose anything unless Grace’s lawyer requested it.

Marshal had advised John, “All conversations between you and Grace should be conducted honestly and face-to-face. Of course, a mediator would need to be present during exchanges, at least for a time.”

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“John,” Marshal continued, “Through open direct dialogue, trust would develop that could bring complete reconciliation. Complete reconciliation is best for all involved.”

“Of course,” Marshal added, “this type of dialogue would involve personal risks. Yet, the rewards easily outweigh the risks.” John considered Marshal’s advice and believed it to be the better of the two. He had decided to follow Marshal’s words of wisdom. So far his decision seemed to be right.

John knew that the next words he spoke could jeopardize the outcome of the meeting. He knew that they were perhaps the most important words spoken today. So he responded to Grace on common grounds. “Grace, I am willing to participate in our son’s financial future. I too believe that we should put together a financial plan for our son. I too believe that we need to be open about our financial situations so that we can ensure the best plan.” The last statement wasn’t easy for John to say.

Then John continued by acknowledging the errors of the past despite what Marshal had said earlier. To him the fact of the past, if repeated by either of them, could jeopardize the present and the future. So he added, “Because of its importance, we both knew that the subject of money would come up. So I have given it considerable thought. I remembered that several years ago you abruptly broke off our relationship because of my improper conduct. My conduct was due to greed and jealousy. Now, if I were in your shoes back then, I may have done the same thing you did; break it off. However, things are different now. So if either of us believes that the other is acting incorrectly a dialogue on the subject needs to be established before anything is broken off; a dialogue just like we are doing now. If after the dialogue nothing can be agreed on, then I still believe that something needs to be done before our three way arrangement is broken off. By three way I mean between you, me, and our son.”

John knew that he had just taken a tough stance. He repeated his acknowledgement of his past errors, “I made bad decisions about our relationship in college. But I believe I am past that.”

Then he acknowledged her strength, “You were always wiser when it came to financial matters. So I am open to your suggestions about my finances, if you are open to my suggestions about your finances. Understand that I believe that being open doesn’t mean we will always agree with the other’s suggestions.”

John concluded with, “Perhaps we could agree to set up a fund for our son. Then once or twice a year we can discuss our mutual contribution to it. We could start making arrangements for it after my next set of away-games ends, which will be in seven days. If you agree to all this, then I would like to discuss a visitation schedule.”

John didn’t want to give up control of his finances, nor did he want to reveal his finances to Grace. He was afraid of losing something. Before this meeting John thought about what that something was. He concluded that this something was control of his money more than the money itself. “The money is important,” he said to himself, “But I cannot, nor will I give up control of it. Control is more important than the object itself. If I lose money and it is my fault, I can live with that. But if I lose money because I gave control to someone else, even if they are better in financial matters than me, well, I could never forgive them. I’ll cooperate with Grace up to control of my money, only because I want my son to know who his father is and I want us to get to know each other.”

Of Seeds

In response to John's request, Grace stated, "I agree with you about the meeting next week and the plan for a fund, as long as we agree here and now that in order for money to be removed and added to the fund, both must agree to the transaction. Also, everyday living expenses can be pulled from this fund. It should not just be an emergency or an educational fund."

"Accepted," John replied, though in truth, the thought of what he had just agreed to frightened him. Responsibility was not easy; and yet it was needed, just as Marshal had advised.

Grace moved onto the subject of visitation rights as John requested, "Good. I'm ready to move onto visitation rights. John, I believe that our son should have equal access to both of us on a one-to-one basis. I also believe that it would be best for the three of us to have time together. In the beginning it should be among friends and in a public area; such as a mall, a restaurant, a park, or the zoo. Then if things go well between us, perhaps the three of us could get together by ourselves."

John replied, "My thoughts are on the same line. I agree that what you just said is best for our son."

John was growing impatient. He wanted to meet his son. Yet, there was one more thing he believed needed to be brought up. It was a touchy subject, "Something should be made clear, Grace. Perhaps you might know that I just started seeing someone. This must be addressed. I don't know where the relationship with my new girlfriend will go; perhaps nowhere, perhaps it will develop into something more. Still, when Johnny is with me, she may be with me too. I need to know if you're OK with this."

Grace was about to speak but John raised up his hand and put its palm before Grace, "Please I am not finished. I want to point out that I did, on some level love you when we first started to go out. I do not have those same feelings now." Deep inside John knew that he did still have feelings for Grace. However, he could not address them inwardly, let alone externally.

John lowered his hand as he continued, "So when the three of us are together, please understand that I will not be considering us a family in the traditional sense. We will be a different sort of family; joined more by circumstances than love. That's all I wanted to say. I'm finished."

John had always loved and respected Grace more deeply than he had ever acknowledged to himself and to her. His selfishness and greed kept him from loving her unconditionally and sacrificially. The lack of these two elements had always prevented him from truly loving every girl that he had ever gone out with, including Giselle and Mary. In the last few months John had slowly and painfully come to the realization that if he were ever to really love anyone he would need to overcome these immature impulses.

John's words "I will not be considering us a family" panged Grace. She had not expected that. From the time that they broke up to this very day she knew that she loved John. When they had broken up she had told herself that she would get over him. This never happened. Now it seemed to her that John was saying, "It will never happen."

Of Seeds

When Grace had first learned that she was pregnant, she did not know what to do. She considered an abortion. Yet, the thought of taking her child's life stirred up more emotions than she could address and process. So she sought advice from a few counselors.

Grace was advised by some of the counselors to seek John's opinion. However, she never talked to John about it, even though she knew it was not right. One day while talking with a counselor at a Christian pregnancy center, Grace allowed Jesus into her heart. This gave her the courage, comfort, and love needed to allow her son to be born. This was a decision that she never regretted.

During continuing counseling sessions the Christian counselors advised Grace to tell John about her pregnancy. Again Grace did not, mostly because she was having so much trouble seeing the three of them as a family. She could not see them as a family because she was having so much trouble forgiving John and believing that he would change. She knew that for them to be a good family, John needed to change. She had convinced herself that only a miracle could change John; and thus only a miracle could turn the three of them into a family that would survive their entire lives.

And here now, years later, Grace surprised herself by being hurt because John had said "I will not be considering us a family." "Why?" she wondered. "Could it be?" She stopped and refocused her thoughts to something that she thought she saw in John's eyes. "Does he still love me?" Grace was not sure if she believed what John had just said. "Stay focused. At this time these two things do not matter. Right now we are discussing our son."

"Understood," was all that Grace told John. "Well, I see no reason that Johnny shouldn't be introduced to his father. Do you Marshal?"

"No," Marshal told Grace.

"Let me get him."

John sat back. Soon a little replica of himself would walk through the door with his mother in hand. She would hopefully introduce them; this would relieve some pressure from John. "Then what would happen?" John questioned himself as he had been doing for days now.

John's hands became sweaty, his mouth turned dry, and a knot formed in his stomach. He felt like he would throw up. John wanted to say something to Marshal who was still in the room. He looked up to speak, but nothing came out. Noticing John's anxiety Marshal spoke up, "Relax John. It'll be alright. He'll accept you and love you." John wasn't so sure.

At that moment Grace and Johnny entered the room. Uhura was right behind them. After entering the room a few steps Grace got down on one knee along side of her son. "Johnny, I want to introduce you to someone."

"What does in'duce mean mommy?" He interjected.

"It means I want you to meet someone for the first time," she explained.

"OK."

Of Seeds

Grace pulled the boy close to her and pointed in the direction of John. John put on the best smile considering his turning stomach, spinning head, and sweaty palms. "Here it comes," he said to himself.

"See that man over there?"

"Yes," the boy replied to his mother.

"That man is your father."

A pause pursued; no sound; no motion; no emotion. The birds stopped. The breeze stopped. John's heart stopped. Grace's heart stopped. Little Johnny looked like a statue. All this took place in the longest second of their existence.

Like a Jack-out-of-the-box the boy sprang forward and ran for John. He jumped up into the John's chair, threw his arms around John, and tightened hard around his neck. To John, his son's grip was as strong as a pro wrestler in prime condition.

"I've been looking for you everywhere Daddy. And you were here all along," was all the boy said.

Grace had stood when her son ran for John. Now her knees grew weak. She started to go down. Uhura grabbed a chair and slid it under Grace. Grace felt as if the weight of a thousand years was taken off her very soul. She felt blessed. She felt happy. A tear of joy made its way down her cheek. If she were to live it all over again, she would never have kept the father out of her boy's life.

"I've been looking for you too," John replied as he reached around the boy. He began to stroke the boy's hair. "I'm so glad we found each other." John looked towards Marshal who wore the greatest joy that could ever be seen on a face. "The rewards easily outweigh the risks," John repeated Marshal's words.

Chapter 15

Why Little Girls Leave Home

June 1, Friday early evening

On the way home Uhura relived the scene that she had just witnessed. She had participated in several reunions between parents and children. Yet none went as beautifully as this one. The joy and satisfaction that she felt went beyond understanding.

She thanked God for answering her and Marshal's prayers. "The peacemaker is blessed as much as those who experience the peace." Then she added, "Although the path to peace is often harder on the peacemaker than it is on those who receive its benefits." Uhura had begun thinking about her grandmother's pain in raising a rebellious young girl. She thanked God for her grandmother and decided to visit her tomorrow and tell her the same. "She'll be delighted to learn of what just took place. She too will thank God and bless his name." Uhura smiled, "Then she'll make me all kinds of good food."

Of Seeds

When Uhura pulled into the driveway she saw Giselle's car. "Speaking of the pain of peace making," she said out-loud. "Who'd a thought that the peacemaker verse applied to making peace with a friend and her dead mother and absent father."

Before Uhura got out of the car she decided to stop in on her friend. She said a quick prayer for wisdom and love and exited the car as she said out-loud, "Never know what I'm going to get into with that girl. I suppose its God's way of teaching and reminding me what I was like toward him and g'ma."

Uhura knocked on the back door to Giselle's apartment while asking, "Girl you home? Wanna let me in?"

No one responded, so Uhura threw in a humorous incentive, "I'm looking for someone to eat out with. I've asked everyone else, but they all said no. Guess that leaves you. Are you hungry?"

Foot steps approached and the door opened half way. Giselle raised her right arm and grasped the door as high as she could. She placed her left hand on her left hip which was higher than the right. She supported all her weight on her right leg. Her left knee was bent slightly. She pointed her left toes to the floor and rested her left heel against her right ankle. Her toe and finger nails were painted red.

Giselle wore a slightly loose red dress and red strap shoes that exposed her toes. The dress ended just above her knees and contained slits that went halfway up each thigh. The dress started at the beginning of her cleavage. Two thin straps went over her shoulders and crossed on her back before reattaching to the dress. Her long blond hair covered the left strap as it draped over her shoulder.

Giselle's face wore a commanding and provocative smile. Widening her eyes as she emphasized "I" Giselle exclaimed, "I have other plans."

"Well, lookie you! All gussied up!" Uhura smiled and exclaimed. "Seems you do have other plans. Looking like that I'd guess I should expect you telling me tomorrow that you're engaged. After all what man could resist that," Uhura giggled as she stretched out both palms.

Giselle released her grip from the door and planted both feet on the door. "I'm gonna fishing with bait that'll bring a big one in," Giselle said as she gestured Uhura to come in.

"Looking like that you'll bring a whole school in," Uhura corrected as they made their way into the living room. Pelapee sang a happy tune as they sat on the couch.

"As Marshal says, 'who you ropin' for?'" Uhura asked.

"Bob, of course," Giselle answered. "He happens to be part owner of several dry cleaning stores."

"Thought he worked with you?"

"He does. But he's also the silent partner in some businesses, as it turns out." Giselle added with some pride, "And he's after me!"

Of Seeds

“Young, tall, dark, handsome, and rich; just up your alley.” Then Uhura smiled and added, “Poor soul doesn’t know what he’s getting into.” Giselle purposely forced a laugh as Uhura asked, “Do you think he’s the one?”

Giselle turned the tables by asking, “Do you think Marshal’s the one? After all you two have been dating forever.” She drew out and emphasized “forever”.

“Oh, he’s the one. I just need to teach him that,” Uhura laughed. She knew he loved her, and she knew that he knew she loved him. She knew that it was only a matter of time until Marshal proposed to her. She just didn’t know when. At times the wait was more than she could endure.

“Better dress like this then,” Giselle responded. “That’s all the teachin’ any man needs.”

“You know me.”

“Ya, and I know him too. He already knows he’s the one. He’s just looking for the right time to ask you to marry him. Would you mind living in Big Sky Country?”

“Sure. It’ll remind me of home.”

Giselle saw this as an opportunity to ask Uhura about her youth. “Tell me about it.”

“You already know most of it,”

“True, but you left the most important parts out.”

Uhura briefly thought about it. She didn’t know why she didn’t tell her friend everything about her childhood. Perhaps, it was fear of rejection. Perhaps, it was so hard for her to recall it all. Then an inner voice said, “It will be a good opportunity to help her. It would be a good time to glorify God.”

Considering this suggestion Uhura answered, “Alright, I’ll tell you the full story, on one condition.”

“Shoot.”

“You can’t tell anyone.”

“Why?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

“Anyone? Not even Marshal knows?”

“He’ll know soon enough. That’s between me and him.”

“Alright. Agreed. Now what’s so hush, hush.”

Of Seeds

Uhura collected her thoughts and then began. "Well, as you know, my grandmother raised me in Atlanta. Although she knew everything about my parents she didn't tell me anything about them. 'For your own good,' she would tell me. As far as I was concerned it wasn't. As you know I rebelled, hung out with the wrong crowd, did things that nearly killed me."

"You've always said, 'It nearly killed me,' and you're serious. How did it 'nearly kill you'?" Giselle asked.

"We'll turns out one of the teenage boys I started to hang out with got involved in drug sellin' for a gang. He tried to get me to join the gang. I refused. I wanted to hurt my grandmother, but I knew better than gettin' hooked up with the devil's trade. My resistance led to me being shot. They felt I knew too much."

"So that's how you ended up in the hospital."

"Yes, but not very long. They were amateurs; they were too afraid to really kill anyone, besides I think the boy actually loved me on some level. He wanted me 'reformed'. He didn't want me dead. They were amateur status up until the shooting. Then the police were watchin' them," Uhura sighed when she relived those years. Then she concluded her thought, "The boy eventually got himself killed a few months later. My guess was that he botched a job and paid the price."

"Poor girl," Giselle consoled. "Did you love him?"

"No, not really. He was sort of geeky. I never thought of him as a bad kid; just one that was forced down the wrong path because of peer pressure. He was too nice to me to be a thug. And," Uhura drew out the word "and", "I saw him as a means to scare my grandmother. She was too smart for that though. She liked the boy and often tried to help him. I was told that while I was in the hospital, she visited him. I was told that she talked to him just after he was shot. Later I learned that she even lead him to the truth. What a saint she was! Never afraid of anything; not even gang members." Uhura thought about that and then mentioned, "Of course compared to where she grew up, Atlanta gangs were not much to be afraid of."

"What can be worse than American gangs? Where'd she grow up? Was it where your parents lived?" Giselle asked. She remembered what she overheard from Jaybird; Uhura's father had tracked Jaybird's illegal African diamond smuggling scheme to the source. The African diamonds were being somehow collected by rebels and channeled to Jaybird in Indiana through France.

"War is worse than gangs," Uhura answered.

Giselle tried to act surprised. She already knew that some kind of conflict was involved. After she overheard Jaybird's conversation with that Nightingale chick, Giselle conducted a little investigation. She learned that most of Africa's diamonds were in Botswana which is in the southern part of the Africa continent. When Uhura was born, the entire southern part of the African continent was involved in many conflicts. Giselle concluded that most likely Uhura's parents, grandparents, and the rest of her family were involved in one or more of these wars.

"And my father was involved," she told herself.

Of Seeds

“So where did your grandmother grow up?” Giselle had asked Uhura.

“South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Angola, or Rhodesia aka Zambia, today called Zimbabwe; pick one and you’d probably be right.” Just in case Giselle didn’t know where those countries were Uhura added, “They’re all in the southern part of the African continent.”

“So your grandmother and you are from Africa,” Giselle reiterated.

Uhura continued her explanation, “My grandmother couldn’t tell you for sure what country she was in because she was always on the move trying to avoid the fighting. My grandmother grew up during the wars and lost all of her children except my father, who was her youngest. When he was born she was living in Botswana near the Angola border. My mother was from Botswana too, as far as I can tell. I was born just across the South Africa border. That made it easier for me to come to America.”

“How so?” Giselle asked. Uhura was telling her all she wanted to know.

“That’s not easy to answer. I believe that in his youth my father was in the South West Africa People’s Organization. What I am sure of is that he was hired for a private investigation for the government and the De Beers. Which government it was I couldn’t tell you for sure. Most likely it was the Botswana government. The investigation had something to do with the African diamond trade. Diamonds were discovered in South Africa in 1867 and in Botswana in 1967. Ever since then many lives were lost in Africa because of diamonds. I told Marshal that if he ever proposes to me he should never give me diamonds.”

“Neither will I,” Giselle volunteered as a sign of support for her friend and mentor.

“Did he say he’s going to propose to you too? I won’t stand for it. My husband’s only having one wife and that’s final,” Uhura stated and then laughed. This broke some of the tension she was feeling. Giselle laughed with her.

After they stopped laughing Giselle asked, “How did your father’s investigation make it easier for you to come to America?”

“Because he agreed to help them only if they made a way for my mother and me to come to America. You see, my mother was pregnant with me. They accepted and told her to move to South Africa with my grandmother. He was not allowed to move with them. I was born in South Africa and then went to America with my grandmother. My mother died just after I was born.”

“Did she die in childbirth?” Giselle asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“How did you come to find all this out?” Giselle asked.

“After I was shot in Atlanta my grandmother decided that it was time for me to learn about my past and my parents. Upon my release from the hospital, she took me to Africa. I visited my father’s and mother’s grave.” Uhura became emotional. A tear slide down her cheek. She could not speak for a while.

Giselle hugged Uhura. She felt guilty for bringing this remembered pain back to her friend. After a few minutes and with Uhura still in her arms Giselle asked, "How was your father able to negotiate with them? I thought that they just conscripted any men they could find on the streets."

The two pulled apart as Uhura answered, "My father was conscripted into the South West Africa People's Organization. Apparently, he became good at what he did. This was an embarrassment and shame to my grandmother. And I am ashamed of it. Even though a child hasn't anything to do with their parent's actions before they are born, they still can become ashamed of them. We shouldn't be ashamed, but we are. The sins of the parents are passed onto their children."

"I hear you," Giselle quietly answered, reflecting upon just who her father really was. Then Giselle realized that she had said something that she shouldn't have. "Had I given away that I now know something that I am not telling Uhura?" she asked herself.

Uhura looked a bit surprised and relieved at Giselle's comment. She told herself, "This is working. Giselle's going down the path to forgiveness. Recognition and acceptance is a step in the right direction."

Then Uhura told Giselle, "But there is escape from the bondage of this and all sin. That escape is Jesus."

In order to redirect Uhura to continue her narrative Giselle asked, "Did you find your father?"

"While, in Africa I discovered that my father was killed by someone in America. My father's employers had hired him to track a flow of illegal diamonds out of Africa, through France, and into America. He discovered who it was and was killed for it." Sadness fell over both of them; Uhura because both of her parents were dead, Giselle because she wished her father joined her dead mother. They embraced.

"Ding, Dong," the doorbell rang stopping Pelapee from singing a song. Giselle regained her composure, got up, looked at herself in the entrance mirror, reached for the cool door handle, and opened the front door. Bob stood outside. When he saw Giselle his eyes nearly fell out. Uhura excused herself, left the apartment, and visited her grandmother. Giselle and Bob went to an expensive restaurant.

Chapter 16

A Kernel Falls

July 8, Sunday early evening

Every outside and inside table at The Dusty Trail was full of patrons. Outside the entrance, under a row of what looked like five covered wagons, well dressed people waited for a table to open. Many of the patrons were dressed like cowboys and cowgirls; hats, long legged jeans, button down horizontally striped shirts and blouses, and/or long flower covered dresses. Some men wore black suits and top hats.

Of Seeds

If a person didn't own one of these western outfits, they could buy one at a shop called Dry Goods which was located adjacent to The Dusty Trail. The Dusty Trail and the Dry Good were part of a mock late eighteen century one street town. The red bricked street paralleled the Maumee River and was inaccessible to modern day traffic.

Some of the shops down on the same side of the street as The Dusty Trail and Dry Goods were called Glass Ware, Gold and Silver Shop, Sweet Stuff, Wax & Candles, Tobacco & Tattoos, The Creamery, the Town Inn, and All Leather. The mock town also included a bank, a stable, and a park. In the center of the park was a small chapel. The neatly trimmed grass and trees of the park parted the end of the red bricked street which then looped around the park. The park stretched from the Maumee River to a modern parking lot. The parking lot was behind all the shops.

The other end of the red bricked street was split by a town square with neatly trimmed grass. The street looped the town square. The town square stretched from the Maumee River to a parking lot. In the middle of the town square was a tall building containing Greek columns. It looked like a courthouse and could be rented for special occasions. In front of the court house was a large fountain. The fountain was surrounded by cherry trees and benches. All kinds of birds sat in the cherry trees singing songs. Beyond this town square were condos and lofts with red tiled roofs and stucco walls.

Adjacent to the town square docks protruded into the Maumee River. Several Great Lake boats were moored on the docks. Once every two weeks a paddle boat would embark from one of the docks on a Great Lakes Gambling Excursion.

Many patrons of The Dusty Trail made table arrangements in advance; but arrived early enough to ride on a stage coach, a covered wagon, a carriage, or a buggy. The stage coach station was located on the other side of the street of the Dusty Trail. The early eighteen century traveling machines started from the stage coach station and headed down the street toward the park, looped around the park, headed back down the street but in the opposite direction toward the court house, looped around the court house, and then headed back down the street until they reached the stage coach station again. The rider could pay for one to five looped trips.

The only other building on the same side of the street as the stage coach station was a train station. A pair of train tracks lay behind the train station and the stage coach station. The train tracks were a few feet from the bank of the Maumee River and traveled down the river for several miles before they veered into the city. Once every weekend evening a dinner train would leave the station and arrive back at the station several hours later. Every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evening a fake bank robbery, shoot out, or a cattle drive was acted out on the street before the train left the station.

Inside the Dusty Trail waitresses and busboys dressed in western garb bustled about. A band located on a stage that was half recessed into the wall played country and western music from by-gone days. In between music sets a comedy act, short play, or a silent screen movie would entertain the patrons of the Dusty Trail. In front of the stage many danced on a wooden floor. Every few songs the band would call a square dance.

Of Seeds

The room with the stage also included a balcony with many tables. At one of the balcony tables sat John Kirk, Grace Blackthorne, little Johnny Blackthorne, Marshal McCoy, and Uhura Lincoln.

Uhura, dressed in a long black dress with white lace that would have been fitting for the early nineteenth hundreds, was stating, "I'm glad that things have been going well with you three." She was speaking about the budding family relationship between John, little Johnny, and Grace. This was the first time the three of them went to a public event, as John and Grace had agreed to do several months ago. Uhura was wearing a new hair style. This time it was a late eighteen century style. Uhura looked like she just stepped out of a time machine.

"Me too," added Marshal with a smile on his face. He was dressed in his usual leather boots, blue jeans and plaid shirt. He had worn a black wool Stetson hat to this event, but had taken it off when he entered the establishment.

"My daddy plays baseball. I watch him from my window. Sometimes my mommy brings me inside the ball field. He pitches. No one can hit them. He shows me how to play. I play baseball like my daddy," little Johnny proudly spoke up. He was wearing a Mudhen's baseball cap, which he never took off, blue jeans, and a plaid shirt. Everyone smiled.

Marshal excused himself from the table, taking his hat with him. Those remaining at the table enjoyed the music coming from the band, The Jerky Turkeys. When they finished singing a country and western version of "When the Red Red Robin Comes Bob Bob Bobbin' Along" the lead singer announced, "Before we go on a break we'd like to ask everyone to clear the dance floor."

The clearing of the floor took a few minutes. Then the lead singer continued, "Thank ya' all. Now, every once in a while The Dusty Trail likes to honor the person or persons they feel are the best dressed. To be considered a contestant the winner has to be dressed as if they were in the late eighteen or early nineteenth hundreds." A murmur fell over the room as he continued, "The winner or winners receive a \$100 gift certificate to be spent at any shop in this little village we like to call, Bird Creek Junction. Added to this gift the patron won't have to pay for his or her meal. Today there is a winner." The excitement in the crowd grew; everyone dressed accordingly hoped that they were the winner.

The lead singer pulled a sleight of hand trick and seemingly drew a card out of nowhere. "And the winner is," He stopped to let a long pause increase the excitement in the room. The drummer was sounding a drum roll. The lead singer opened the envelope, paused again, and then announced, "The winner is," another long pause and then he stated, "Uhura Lincoln."

"Clash," the drummer hit the cymbals. Everyone clapped as they looked around the room to get a glimpse of the winner.

After a few seconds Uhura stood up. Someone down below exclaimed, "She's up there in the balcony!"

"Tell Marshal I'm going to kill him for buying this dress. And he insisted on me wearing it tonight. Now look what happened. Where is that man anyway?" Uhura said to John, smiling in between phrases. Uhura didn't like to be the center of attention.

Of Seeds

“Ah, come on. You look great. Now go down and collect your prize. Isn't \$100 worth it?” John answered.

“No.”

“Miss, could you come down here to receive your prize and show everyone your fine attire?” the lead singer asked.

Uhura elegantly made her way down a beautiful wooden balcony which steps were covered with red carpeting. The steps ended near the back of the dance floor. The long black dress that Uhura was wearing fluttered with each step. Uhura was dressed in past garb, yet she looked and walked like a modern day model. As she made her way across the dance floor people clapped and a few men whistled. Uhura was embarrassed. She kept smiling as she comforted herself by repeating in her mind, “That man's going to get it.”

“Doesn't she deserve it?” This statement by the bass guitarist raised the level of cheering.

The lead singer continued, “Calm down men, I understand she's already taken.” This drew some “Ahs” and “Boos”.

“Madam, your prize is coming through that door,” stated the lead singer as he gestured to a large opened double door that was to the right of the stage. Once cued Marshal entered on a beautiful Arabian stallion. Marshal paraded the horse around the edges of the dance floor and then side stepped the horse till it was beside Uhura. She suspected what was about to happen. She felt weak in the knees; yet found enough strength to stand straight.

Marshal dismounted, stood before Uhura, reached in his pocket, pulled out a small black box, and then dropped to one knee. He opened the black box and asked, “Uhura Lincoln you would make me the happiest man in the world if you would be my wife. Will you marry me?”

Uhura shook her head as she said, “Yes.” She wiped a tear from her eye as Marshal stood up. They embraced and the crowd cheered.

A man brought a beautiful black mare into the room through the same opening that Marshal had used. The lead singer stated, “Well, all that is left now is for the two to ride into the sunset.” Some in the crowd laughed while others continued to clap.

Marshal helped Uhura onto the mare's side saddle, grabbed her horse's reins, and remounted his horse. The two of them slowly rode out the door as the base guitarist added, “The chapel is just down the road. We'll have someone fetch the parson and send him your way. Next to the chapel is The Town Inn where I'm sure you can find an open room for the night.” The crowd laughed.

Grace, her son, and John made their way down the stairs. “You knew?” Grace asked John. She was dressed in a nineteen hundred black dress similar to Uhura's.

“Yes. Why else would I bring a camcorder?” John was dressed in blue jeans and a plaid shirt similar to Marshal's.

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John, Grace, and Johnny Jr. made their way toward the front door of The Dusty Trail. On the way Grace noticed that Mary Nightingale and Jay Hawthorne were seated at a corner table. She knew that there was only one reason the two of them would be willing to be seen in public together. She made an excuse to be alone as they approached the main door, "John, take the boy outside. I'll join you in a minute. I want to freshen up."

Grace entered the women's restroom sitting area, took a seat, pulled a cell phone from a small purse that she was carrying, and called her superior. "Where are you?"

"Sittin' on a bench outside the train station. I've been tailing Jaybird. Something's up. His apartment is empty and so is hers. Are they inside together?"

"Yes; in a booth in the back corner. They've finished eating. I'm sure that they'll be leaving the area soon, probably tonight or tomorrow morning."

"I had someone check the airlines, bus lines, and train station. Neither bought tickets. They must be drivin' out of town."

"Then we better bust them tonight. We don't want to lose them. Are the two officers in the area?" When two women entered the sitting room, Grace lowered her voice.

"One's watchin' the back door of The Dusty Trail. The other's in a squad car in the parking lot near Jaybird's car."

"Good. Request back up. Tell the officers to arrest them in the parking lot before they enter his car. We can watch from a distance. I'll make excuses to keep my friends in the street until the two of them leave. That way I can see them exit The Dusty Trail. My boy's staying at his father's house tonight. So, I can join you at the police station later."

"Sound's like a plan. Good work. Your hard work's gonna pay off."

Grace closed her phone, left the women's waiting room, left the restaurant, and made her way through the crowd that was waiting for a table outside The Dusty Trail. Grace's boots clacked on the wooden sidewalk that paralleled either side of the street. She spotted John and Johnny in the middle of the street. The boy and his father were not far from the bench where Grace's superior was seated. Her partner was dressed in black pants, a black button down shirt, and a black ranger's hat.

Grace entered the street and joined John and her son. Together they waited for Marshal and Uhura. John spoke up, "Sure is hot out here. I hope they're comin' soon." Within a few minutes the newly engaged couple rode their horses down the street toward them. The few people that were in the street parted to make way for the newly engaged couple. A few in the crowd outside The Dusty Trail had witnessed the proposal and were now revealing it to those around them.

Marshal and Uhura arrived at the place where the three were awaiting them and dismounted. John shook Marshal's hand and Grace hugged Uhura as they shared congratulations and thanks. At just that time Jaybird and Mary exited The Dusty Trail and began making their way through the crowd. Jaybird's eyes caught Marshal's when he stepped into the street. John followed Marshal's sudden stare and found Jaybird at the other end of it. It was then that John

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noticed Mary standing along side Jaybird. He was still dating Mary and so wondered why she was with Jaybird. He could not fathom how she knew that old man enough to go on a date with him.

Jaybird turned to look at Mary who was staring back at John. Jaybird stated, "We better go over there and say our congratulations. Don't worry about giving a reason why we're together. It'll be just one more unanswered question for John to figure out when he learns that you left town."

When Jaybird arrived at the area where Marshal and Uhura stood, he shook Marshal's hand, "Congratulations. I wish you both the best of luck."

Mary hugged Uhura even though she did not know her that well. "Congratulations. You're such a lucky woman to lasso a man like that; and what a sweet way to propose. Did you know?"

Uhura's face had a radiance and smile that had not left it since Marshal entered the dance floor riding a horse. She answered, "Oh I knew he would propose one day. But I didn't know it would be today. And I never suspected that it would be in this way. We'll be telling our grandchildren about this someday and they won't believe us."

Giselle Fowler and Bob Newman were making their way down the boardwalk that led to The Dusty Trail at about the time that Jaybird and Mary were making their way out to John, Grace, little Johnny, Marshal, and Uhura. The couple had exited the Gold and Silver Shop and was heading for the dinner train. They had reservations for a meal on wheels. The train was parked at the train station and blowing steam into the air as it waited for its passengers to arrive.

Giselle was wearing a hobby horse aurora blouse with matching scarf, black show pants, and leather boots. Bob was in blue jeans, a Rough Rider western shirt, a straw hat, and boots.

The horses that Marshal and Uhura had ridden down the street were between Giselle and Bob and the newly engaged couple. The horses captured Bob's eye. "Look at them beautiful horses. The male's an Arab; breeder too."

Giselle looked at the horses only for a moment for she noticed that her father, Jaybird was walking with Mary toward the horses. Disgust filled her heart as she wondered what they were up to. Before she could speculate the mare moved enough to reveal that Jay and Mary were headed for Grace Blackthorne. Grace was standing on one side of John Kirk and Grace's son was standing on the other side of John. John was holding the boy's hand. Hate joined disgust as Giselle's face flushed.

Giselle was surprised to see her father reaching out his hand to shake the hand of a man standing next to Little Johnny. At first she could not see who this man was because the horses blocked her view; but eventually the mare moved enough for her to see that the man next to Little Johnny was Marshal McCoy. What surprised her even more was that Mary went to hug a woman who was standing behind Marshal. Giselle knew that this woman had to be Uhura; but wondered why Uhura would touch that bitch let alone hug her. Giselle considered, "If Marshal and Uhura only knew what those two had done to them; they would push them away, not hug them. Marshal would surely deck my father; maybe even beat him to a pulp. And if Marshal

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knew what my father had done to Uhura and her family he'd deck the bitch too." After some consideration Giselle concluded, "He'd probably kill both of them and they'd deserve it." The thought pleased Giselle. A crooked smile formed on her face.

As Giselle mulled over draconian thoughts, Bob noticed that something was agitating her, "You alright? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Giselle answered. Bob's question helped Giselle consider a course of actions. She wondered if it would be best for Bob to know. "Would he would agree with me?" she thought to herself. Then she said out-loud, "Everything's wrong. They don't have a clue."

"What are you talking about? Who?" When Bob realized the subject of Giselle's stares he added, "What's wrong? What don't they know? Are you talking about your old boyfriend?" Bob asked jealously.

Bob's continued questions convinced Giselle that everyone should know just who these people really were. "Come with me and I'll show you who's a hypocrite." Giselle stepped off the boardwalk and entered the street with determination in her step.

Bob quickly followed Giselle asking, "Who's a hypocrite?"

When Giselle arrived at the unsuspecting group there was enough rage and hate in Giselle to destroy an empire. If it weren't for public opinion and lack of a gun, Giselle would have killed her father, Mary, Grace, and perhaps even John. Instead, she hoped to release something that would cause as much damage as death, disgrace.

"You people think you're so high and almighty!" Giselle began in a loud voice. Some in the crowd had been looking at the newly engaged couple before Giselle began. More joined them when Giselle began to shout.

Giselle continued, "You think you're specially appointed by God. You think you're so God damn righteous. You think you're protected by God. You think you're so right and everyone else is damned." By now the entire crowd awaiting a table on the one side of the street and the entire crowd awaiting the dinner train on the other side of the street took notice of what was happening in the middle of the street. Most thought the daily street act was beginning. Grace's boss paid keen attention to what was unfolding. He was the only one in the crowd that knew this was no act.

Giselle continued her speech, "Well let me reveal to you just who you really are. Let the whole world know just how pathetic you holy rollers are." Giselle motioned to the crowd on either side of the street.

Grace began to worry about what John's old girlfriend was saying. The US government had enough evidence to convict Jay Hawthorne and Mary Nightingale of racketeering, money laundering, and smuggling diamonds across international borders. Added to that, the US government had almost enough evidence to convict Jay of murdering a Botswana man almost twenty years ago. Yet not having enough evidence of the murder did not bother the US government. They had decided to not charge Mr. Hawthorne for the murder because the Botswana government would most assuredly ask for his release to their country. If that were to happen, the US knew that Jay Hawthorne would most likely find freedom. The US

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government would not allow this, so they decided that they would not release information about the murder. Considering they were about to take Jay and Mary into custody, Grace offered a suggestion, "Perhaps this just isn't the place and time for revelations." Her request went unanswered.

Uhura was confused and alarmed. She tried to say, "Girl what's wrong with you?" but all she got out was "Girl" for Giselle snapped back at Grace, "Let me start with you, you lusty hussy."

The harshness behind Giselle's words startled everyone, including the horses. The horses tromped on the street bricks and made it hard for Marshal to keep hold of them. The crowds on the boardwalks were not startled. They all thought her harsh words were part of the act; a rather non-family oriented one too. Some in the crowd mentioned to those next to them, "I'm going to complain to the management about the language," as they left. Others wondered out loud, "If it's all an act, why did the woman receive the 100 bucks?"

Giselle continued yelling to anyone in the crowd that would listen to her. She pointed to Grace as she claimed, "Don't believe she's so goody-two-shoes. She had this kid with this man out of wedlock. In fact, they still aren't married and here they are together. And she slept with half the men at the university a few years back." Giselle had no evidence of the last statement and the truth was that Giselle had slept with a few men while she was in college. Why then did she claim that Grace slept with half the men at the university? She said it for the same reasons all people exaggerate and throw false accusations at each other. Giselle was so determined to have people side with her and to rationalize her actions that she would say anything as long as it disgraced her enemy.

John tried to stop Giselle, but she continued shouting, this time directing her hate and finger towards her father, "This guy is currently the elder of a church. He's an upstanding man of the community; a retired doctor. That's what ya' all think. Boy he's duped ya' all. He's never been a doctor."

"In his youth he rustled cattle," Giselle pointed toward Marshal as she continued, "and shot this man's father." Her reproving finger returned to her father, "Then he smuggled diamonds from Africa into the US," Giselle pointed toward Uhura, "and shot this woman's father." Then Giselle's disapproving finger scanned the crowd, moving quickly back and forth, "Now he's swindling your hard earned cash with this bitch," pointing to Mary, "in a stock option scheme. There's no diamond field. And now, this very night," Giselle opened both her arms with their palms facing each other. Her hands were pointing in the direction of Mary and her father as her testimony came to a grand finale, "they're leaving town with your money."

Giselle stopped her ranting to let her words sink in. She believed that now everyone would hate those she exposed as much as she did. To her slowly growing surprise, this did not happen. Instead, Giselle witnessed a result she did not expect.

When Giselle had turned her ravings toward Jaybird and Mary, Mary became nervous and scared. Animal instinct took over. When animals are cornered they become keenly alert and attack with extreme viciousness. In the same way a protective instinct consumed Mary. She reached in her purse, slid her fingers around a small gun, and became keenly aware of her surroundings. Mary's vision went peripheral as she kept watch for any movement out of the ordinary, movement which threatened.

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When Giselle continued to reveal the US government's case, Grace's supervisor, who was still seated in front of the train station, stood up. Behind him the train wheezed and hissed as it waited to pull out of the station. He noticed Mary reach into her purse to take hold of something. He suspected it to be a gun. So he slowly brought the radio in his hand to his mouth. "We have a situation, suspect is armed."

Mary's keen senses picked up on the motion in front of the train. The silence after Giselle finished speaking lasted only a few seconds. Yet to humans it seemed like minutes. Mary's words and action broke the silence. She pulled out her gun, pointed it at Little Johnny and stated, "No one move or the boy gets it. I'm walking out of here with the boy. I won't hurt him if I can get away unharmed." Everyone in the street became motionless. The crowds on the boardwalks scuffled about. They were fully convinced that this was the day's street show.

Marshal was standing across from Little Johnny as Giselle spoke. The reins of the horses behind him were tightly held in his hands. After Mary threatened the life of Little Johnny, Marshal's heart overrode his instinct of self preservation. He stepped in between Little Johnny and Mary's gun. Mary had not expected a selfless act of bravery. She did not know what to do.

Giselle was in a near state of shock. She could not believe what she had unleashed. When Mary pulled her gun out, Giselle stared at the shining barrel. When Mary threatened Little Johnny's life she followed the gun's aim to little Johnny. Time was passing very slowly for Giselle. To her it seemed that Marshal moved very slowly as he got in between Little Johnny and Mary. Giselle slowly looked up to catch the determination in Marshal's eyes.

Because Giselle was positioned in between Marshal and the horses, she noticed her father moving toward the horses. Jaybird was taking actions that made her believe he was going to mount the stallion. In a calm daze Giselle beckoned, "Father, what are you doing?" Marshal, Mary, Grace, and Grace's superior looked in the direction of Jaybird. Uhura turned to look at Giselle for she could not believe that she had heard Giselle call Jaybird father.

John Sr. was the only one looking at Mary. His fixation was on the gun. He reached in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. With the precision and speed that only baseball pitchers have John threw the cell phone at the gun in Mary's hand. His intent was to knock it to the ground. John released it. The phone spun. With great speed it hurdled through the air precisely on course. It hit Mary's fingers in the exact spot that John had targeted. The effect John intended was obtained. Mary dropped the gun, her fingers in pain; but not before she pulled the trigger.

"Clap." The bullet spun as it escaped from the gun barrel and flew in the direction of Marshal's chest. Upon impact the bullet penetrated first his shirt and then his skin; neither of which slowed it down. However, the item that it hit next, a rib, did reduce the bullet's velocity. The rib also changed the bullet's direction. Now it was headed directly for the blood vessels between Marshal's heart and lungs. The bullet ripped through several blood vessels. Then it punctured the left lung. The bullet stopped when it hit a rib in his back. Blood from Marshal's veins flooded into the lung and out the entry wound. No amount of CPR or blood transfusions would help Marshal now. The only way Marshal would survive was to be rushed to surgery. Blood filled Marshal's plaid shirt as he fell to the street. His large body slammed onto the hard bricks and began to stain them crimson.

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Reactions to the gun shot were quick. Grace launched toward Mary and quickly brought Mary facedown into the street. Grace thrust her knee into Mary's back and pulled Mary's arms back. Grace began to read Mary her Miranda rights as she waited for one of the police officers to deliver handcuffs.

When Marshal fell, the stallion bucked causing Marshal to release the reins. Jaybird caught the reins and quickly mounted the stallion. He yanked the reins to the left. He and the horse jolted down the street. Mary's superior ran for the mare, mounted it, and began a pursuit of Jaybird. "Halt in the name of the law," he shouted. The mare could not match the stallion's speed. Jaybird was on the back side of the court house before Mary's superior reached the street divide.

As soon as John saw his cell reach its target he lunged toward his son, swept the boy into his arms, and ran for the cover of the train. The boy gazed over his father's shoulder, witnessing Marshal's fall and blood pouring onto the street. This image would haunt little Johnny's dreams for the rest of his long life.

Uhura was behind Marshal when she realized that her fiancée had been shot. His body had fallen beneath her feet. Uhura's knees weakened and she collapsed. Her body was draped over Marshal's body. Uhura's dress began to soak up some of Marshal's blood. She wept, but no one could hear it because of the train hisses, the horses racing away, and Grace reading Mary her rights.

Giselle believed that Marshal and her life long friend and mentor had been shot. Unable to come to terms with all that was happening, Giselle ran away from the scene. She headed in the opposite direction that the horses had taken. As she ran she felt the glares of the crowd that was standing on either side of the street. She looked for escape from their condemnation, a condemnation that was only her imagination for the crowd still thought that the events that they had just witnessed were only an act. Giselle headed for the small chapel in the middle of the park, flung open the double hinged doors of the empty chapel, ran up the aisle, up the two stairs that marked the beginning of the stage, stumbled, fell to the floor, and knocked over the altar on the stage. A wood cross that was about a foot high was atop the altar. When Giselle knocked over the altar the cross fell forward and landed next to Giselle. Giselle did not even notice. She sobbed bitterly, begging God for forgiveness.

Chapter 17

The Meaning of a Parable

July 9, Monday late morning

A bird's eye view revealed a man sitting in an open air street side restaurant. Short trees planted among glass top tables cast shade on the lone light brown-haired man. His brown eyes were staring into the distance. He was deep in thought. Years of experience had taught the bird overhead that this man was not a candidate to provide lunch. The table before the man was empty. So the bird flew to another restaurant.

John was asking himself the same questions over and over again. "How could someone I knew so well turn suddenly into such a hateful person? How could someone go to church every week, shake hands with people with one hand while stealing their money with the other?"

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How can someone become an elder and yet not do Christian things; maybe not even be a Christian? Why do the good and innocent die? Why does evil win? Why would God allow this to happen? What will Uhura do now? Why did my son have to see someone be shot and die? Why didn't Grace tell me? Where is God?"

John could not find answers to these questions so he cried out in his mind. He whispered aloud, "Why God? Why?"

John had come to the restaurant to get a cup of coffee and perhaps a bite to eat before he picked up Uhura. They were going to go to the airport to meet Marshal's mother and brother and comfort them in her grief. John did not know how to comfort someone, especially when he needed comfort himself.

"John, I'm so glad to see you here," Pastor J.C. stated as he stepped up from the street onto the sidewalk. "Looks like you need a friend. May I join you?"

John answered the pastor, "I had a friend Pastor Jose. Now he's gone. Please sit down." John motioned to the seat next to him.

"Yes, losing Marshal is a great loss to us all. I considered Marshal a friend too. I always admired how he gave so much to those young men. Once I asked him why he chose to serve Christ in that ministry. Marshal answered, 'Young men will eventually make terribly bad decisions. At that time it's important for them to have someone who can listen to them and help them through it.' I think Marshal was speaking from a personal experience. He once told me..." Pastor J.C. was going to talk about Marshal's father, but stopped. Instead Pastor J.C. could see that John was troubled. So he asked, "What's bothering you John?"

"I have so many unanswered questions Pastor."

"Please call me Jose. What questions do you have?"

"Jose, why is it?" John paused as he searched for the right words to say. "It's clear now that Jay, Mary, and Giselle aren't Christians. Jay and Mary were going to church to get people's money. And Giselle hates everyone who goes to church. I don't even know why she goes to church. Believe me I know her. Why does God allow such people in his church? Why does he allow them to prey on good people? Why does he allow them to even live?"

"John, those are tough questions. People have struggled with such questions ever since Cain killed Abel. Before I address them I want to point out that we cannot always be sure just who is a believer and who is not a believer. Only God knows those he has chosen as his own. Also, it is true that everyone that has been born, is being born, and will ever be born, are born unbelievers. We are all born imperfect; 'born in Adam' Apostle Paul calls it. Yet, those who will become God's children will eventually, at some time in their life, come to believe in him and his son Jesus. Apostle Paul calls these transformed persons 'born in Christ.' The transformation does not happen over night. Sure, eventually we confess our sins and truly ask God to forgive us and ask him to lead our lives. Yet, the steps proceeding that moment are many. Some people are transformed as youths, others in mid-life, and still others as old people on their death beds. The slow steps to transformation can be seen in my life and your life. Think about all that happened before you accepted that Jesus is God's one and only hope for you. Perhaps Jay, Mary, and Giselle are still on the way to their transforming moment.

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Sure their actions give little indication of that. But look at Apostle Paul. He persecuted and killed Christians in the name of God and country before he was transformed. After he was transformed none of the believers believed that he was transformed and so would not meet with him; except one, Barnabas. And because of Barnabas, Paul was eventually accepted as a transformed believer, a man born in Christ. So it might be with Jay, Mary, and Giselle. Don't give up on them and God."

"I understand what you're saying, but Jay is dead Jose. The police found him hiding in the chapel at Bird Creek Junction and shot him. I doubt he was transformed before he died."

"Perhaps not,' Pastor J.C. answered and then continued by answering another question that was on John's mind, "So then we wonder, 'why does God allow unbelievers to belong to the same congregation as believers, and allow them to be an elder, or even a pastor for them?' It may surprise you to know that there are many who go to many churches and are respectable leaders in the church and yet do not believe. God knows this and allows it. For example, Jesus always knew that Judas would never believe and that Judas would eventually betray him. Still Jesus not only allowed him to travel with them, but he also appointed him an apostle."

"Who would allow such a stupid thing to happen? I know Jesus wasn't stupid, still I don't get it. Why did Jesus keep a key link to his crucifixion and pain in place?" John asked in frustration.

"God knows everything that will happen, and thus is never surprised nor hindered by anything. Jesus taught several parables so that we too will understand before such things happen; and thus we too should never be surprised nor disheartened when they do happen."

Jose explained his point by pulling a small Bible out of his pocket and opening it to Matthew 13 and began reading, "One such parable goes like this, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

'An enemy did this,' he replied.

The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

John asked, "So the field is the church and it's filled with weeds?"

"No, the field is the world, and the church is microcosm of the world. The world and the church are made up of those who will never be transformed, those who will someday be transformed, and those who already are transformed. And the sad but true fact is that the 'weeds' referred to in this parable are dandelion which when young look like wheat. When the dandelion grows their roots intertwine with the wheat's roots, and they soak up much of the water and nutrition. Because of the intertwined roots, if you pull up the dandelion you'll also pull up most of the wheat. So believer's lives are very much entangled with unbeliever's lives and they don't know it. The

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darnel seeds are everything and everyone that causes sin both inside and outside a person. The darnel seeds and the darnel plants will one day be destroyed by God, not by man.”

John asked, “Are you sure that’s the meaning of the parable? I find it hard to believe that God would allow believers and unbelievers to get so close.” John was thinking of his own life.

“He does. Sometimes it’s even true that a person is wheat, while the spouse is darnel. The same can be said of two friends,” Jose replied.

Jose continued, “That’s not the only parable that Jesus taught about this subject. Jesus also taught this parable.” Pastor J.C. looked at his Bible and began reading from Matthew 13 again, ‘The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.’”

Jose continued by explaining this parable. “God planted a seed a long time ago, and it has been growing, and growing, and growing; now the transformed are all over the world. They are the seeds on the mustard plant that God planted. The birds are not part of the tree. They were not from the seed of God. They come to the tree for shade and shelter and to eat the seeds on the big plant.”

“Why would God allow his seeds to be eaten? Why does God allow the good to die, even at the hand of someone so mean?” John asked thinking of his friend’s Marshal’s death.

“Do you remember the message I gave several weeks ago concerning Jesus’ parable of the kernel of wheat?” Jose asked as he leaned back in his chair.

John was embarrassed. He too leaned back in his chair. Then he combed his hair back and answered, “Well, to tell you the truth, I remember you beginning the message; but I became distracted and did not listen to most of it. What does it have to do with Marshal’s death?”

Pastor Jose proceeded to retell his message. By the end John understood and accepted God’s plan of death and rebirth, though it was hard to believe. John looked at his watch and stated, “Pastor Jose thanks for explaining this. I don’t fully understand it all, but what I do understand I accept. It’s getting late. I need to pick up Uhura and bring her to airport. We’re meeting Marshal’s mother and brother there.”

“Yes, Uhura told me. I’m meeting with them later today. Please tell them I’m sorry for not being at the airport; and that I have opened up my entire afternoon to be with them if they so choose.”

John stood up. Jose stood up too, but did not leave the table. He stated, “John there’s one more thing I want to tell you. Believers still sin and that makes it even harder for us to recognize who is transformed and is not transformed. We shouldn’t go around trying to figure out who is a believer and who is not. Instead, we should follow the most repeated words in the Bible. Love God and love your neighbor.”

“How do I love God and my neighbor?”

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“This is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ died on the tree so we could be transformed,” Jose answered.

“That’s a rather theoretical answer pastor.”

“The Holy Spirit will lead you to practical application, if you allow him to transform you.”

Chapter 18

Seedlings

July 11, Tuesday afternoon

A line of vehicles slowly and quietly moved down narrow drives as they weaved their way to a tent. The drives’ traces followed no logic. They lay in-between tall green trees, short trimmed bushes, statues of forgotten people, a shallow lake, and carved stones.

Flowers were planted along side, a top of, and in front of many of the carved stones. Some flowers were real; others were plastic; most were in vases.

Birds flew from one tree to another. Squirrels scurried from trunk to trunk. A group of small wild rabbits nibbled at lush green grass beneath one of the trees. A group of gold fish hovered motionless in the lake.

The first vehicle, a long pitch black limousine, drove just beyond the tent and stopped. An orange light on its top flashed. Two large men in black pin striped suits stepped out of the limo and moved to the back of their vehicle. The second vehicle, a short black limo stopped a full car’s length behind the first. The third vehicle, a full length white van stopped inches behind the second. Six men dressed in black pin striped suits filed out of the white van and made their way to the first limo. One of the two men from the first vehicle opened the back door of his vehicle. He and his partner pulled a beautifully trimmed wood casket out of the limo and passed it to the other six men.

The eight men carried the casket underneath the tent. The tent covered fifty seats that were facing a rectangular hole in the ground. An aluminum table straddled the hole. The table was completely shrouded with flowers. Other items were either on or leaning against the table; a baseball bat, a leather glove, a saddle, a Stetson hat, and a pair of leather boots. When the men placed the casket on the aluminum table a strong breeze shook the tent and ruffled the trees. The wind causing the birds to take flight, the squirrels to race down the trunks, the rabbits to disappear in a hole, and the gold fish to vanish to the bottom of the lake.

After waiting for all the vehicles to come to a stop, the three occupants of the second limo opened the doors of the car, stepped out of the vehicle, walked under the tent, and took seats in the front row. When they were seated the rest of the car doors opened. Many well dressed relatives, friends, acquaintances, well wishers, and fans made their way to the tent. When all the seats were filled people began standing outside the tent. Thirty minutes passed from the time that the casket was placed on the aluminum table till the last person stood near the tent.

Pastor J.C. watched the last person arrive at the tent. He was standing alongside of the casket. He looked at the people in the front row; Mrs. McCoy, Marshal’s brother, John Kirk,

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Uhura Lincoln, the head coach of the Mudhen's, a few elders from Lake Side Church, and few other people he did not know. The few that he did not know he assumed were relatives from out west.

"Today we are sad," began his brief sermon. "Why? Should we be? We are taught by our Lord that if we believe in him, when our physical body ceases to function, our spirit separates from the body and our spirits are escorted by angels to the presence of the eternal God. We then join those who are God's children; those that had departed this world before us. And yet we, when our family members and friends leave this world, we are sad."

Pastor J.C. added, "I am sad. This morning I woke up sad and asked myself, why am I sad? I know that Marshal is in a better place. So why am I sad?"

Pastor J.C. paused for a moment to gain composure. He had the attention of all those around the casket. He continued, "We see in the Bible that when Lazarus departed this world Jesus was saddened to tears. Why? Was it because Lazarus was dead? No. He was saddened when he saw that those he loved were saddened to tears by Lazarus' death. With hopes to cheer them up, Jesus said to them, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'"

Pastor J.C. moved closer to the casket and placed his hand on it as he stated, "I believe these words of Jesus. I believe this eternal fate for Marshal. Yet, I am no different than Lazarus' family. Even though I hear these words of comfort I still am sad at Marshal's death. Do I disappoint Jesus? Is this a sign that I am weak in faith? Is this perhaps an indication that somewhere in my soul I have doubt concerning the resurrection?"

Outside the tent the birds returned to the trees, the rabbits returned to the grass, and the gold fish returned to the surface of the water. "No. I am sad because of another reason. Let me explain the source of my sadness by telling you an event that took place between Marshal and me."

Pastor J.C. moved away from the casket and clasped his hands behind his back as he began, "I first meet Marshal several years ago when he moved to town. He had just been signed onto the team. It was the first Sunday of the season and he came to my church. A strong friendship between Marshal and me quickly followed and lasted all season. At the end of the season Marshal was not called up to the Tigers. So he went home. I drove him to the airport. He departed and I was sad. Why was I sad? I was sad because I knew I would not see him again for quite some time, or ever again if he signed onto another team. I was sad because I knew that I would not see my friend for at least eight months. I had grown used to seeing Marshal around the church. I enjoyed his little funny stories. But when his plane took off, I knew that I would not see him nor hear his funny stories for quite some time. I knew that when I walked into the church, Marshal would not be there. So I was sad." He paused for a moment as he raised his hands.

At the same time Johnny Jr. whispered, "Mommy, I've got to go potty."

"Can you wait a little bit?" his mother asked. Johnny nodded yes.

Of Seeds

Pastor J.C. was raising his hands up slowly as he continued, "When a friend dies and leaves this world we should not be sad because he or she ceases to exist. That would be wrong thinking, for everyone lives eternally. And if that person believes in Jesus, truly believes in Jesus, then his or her spirit is with God eternally. Still it is not wrong to be sad when they depart this world as long as we are only sad because we miss that person."

Pastor J.C. placed his hand on the casket again, "Marshal is not dead and he is not here in this casket. He is alive. He has taken a trip that he will not come back from. We will not see him in this world any more. But we will see him again, if we too truly believe in Jesus as Marshal does. So we are sad because we will miss him. That is why I am sad, because I miss my friend. Yet, I have hope in the fact that I will see Marshal again. You to, if you truly believe in Jesus, will see Marshal again."

Pastor J.C. concluded, "Let's have a moment of silence to remember Marshal. And then spend some time sharing with each other stories concerning Marshal."

On the other side of the cemetery a lone couple sat in a building that housed a crematorium and several hundred vaults. They sat on a stone bench that faced one of four tall walls. Three of the four walls were full of little square doors. One of the little square doors had a new engraving on it; Jay Hawthorne. There were no dates on the little door. The fourth wall was made of glass. In the center of the glass wall was a glass door. The seated couple had their backs to the glass door.

"I don't know why I'm here," Giselle said to Bob. Bob did not reply. "I don't know why you're here," Giselle said to Bob.

"I'm here because I love you," Bob replied.

Giselle turned and looked at Bob speculatively. Bob turned and looked in her hazel eyes and smiled. "You've never said that before. How can you love me? You were there. You saw what I did. Did I have to get someone killed for you to say I love you?"

"I was also with you in the chapel. Don't you remember?"

"I remember crying on the floor. I was so sorry for what I had done. I remember asking God for forgiveness. I remember a soft voice saying I forgive you. I remember something touching my back. I remember yelling, screaming, a fight, and a gun shot. I saw my father fall to the floor. That's all I remember. I don't remember you being there."

"I'm the one who touched your back. When your father came into the chapel he came from behind the sanctuary. He was surprised to see us there. I don't think he expected anyone to be there. We got into a fight. During the fight he grabbed a cross that was lying on the floor and started swinging it at us. When the policeman arrived he ordered him to drop it, but Jay wouldn't. He shot him and Jay died. You passed out. Remember?"

Giselle thought for a moment. "I remember." She thought some more and then asked, "So you followed me to the chapel, even after I said all those things, things that got Marshal and my father killed. Why?"

"Giselle, you did not kill them. Mary killed Marshal and the policeman shot Jay."

“Yeah? But the words I said led to their deaths. So I’m to blame.”

“No one blames you for their deaths. The police don’t. I don’t.”

Giselle studied Bob’s eyes. She had always been a good judge of people’s honesty. Bob was being honest. “You didn’t answer my question. Why did you follow me to the chapel?”

“At the time I didn’t think about it. I just did it. But when I saw you on the floor of the chapel and later when I held you in my arms in the chapel I knew why. It’s because I love you.”

“You love me? You forgive me? How?”

“Giselle, love is more than an emotion. Love is also an action. Yet, emotions and actions alone do not describe love. It’s hard for me to understand love. The best definition I’ve found is this, ‘This is how we know what love is, Christ died for us.’ and ‘Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.’ I can not fully explain it, but I do know that my love for you is a love like this.”

“You’re the only one.”

“No I’m not. Look out the windows.” Giselle turned around and saw Uhura walking thru the glass door. Next to her was Pastor J.C. Behind them were John Kirk, Grace, and Johnny Jr. Behind them were Mrs. Marshal and Marshal’s brother.

“Hello, Giselle,” Pastor J.C. stated.

“What are you all doing here?” Giselle asked.

“We’re here to support you. Why else?” Uhura stated as she embraced Giselle.

“Mommy, I’ve got to go to the potty. That’s why I’m here,” Johnny Jr. exclaimed.

Of Seeds

Character Descriptions

(name) - age

John Kirk – 24

Giselle Fowler – 23

Uhura Lincoln - 23

Marshal McCoy – 30 (10)

Mary Nightingale - 20

Grace Blackthorne – 24

Jay Hawthorne (aka Jaybird) – 55 (35)

Mr. & Mrs. Gallus – 40s

Bob Newman - 23

Jose Comentarista – 50

little Johnny - toddler

John Kirk – (Slavic) tall, slender, light brown hair, brown eyes (page 1)

Giselle Fowler – (English) long shiny blond hair, long legs, slightly overweight body, hazel eyes, rosy cheeks, small chin, deep cleavage (page 19)

Uhura Lincoln – (African) beautiful chocolate colored woman, big brown eyes, hairstyle often changes, looks like Mary Wilson (page 27)

Marshal McCoy – (Irish) tall muscular man, blond hair, blue eyes that stand out and pierce the soul, slightly crooked curved-up nose that sat in the middle his square face and just over an always present smile, approachable, easy to warm up to, silent, tells a good story when prompted (page 6)

Mary Nightingale – (Dutch) thin perfectly curved body, blue green eyes that sit perfectly in a pale clear face, puffy rosy cheeks that perk up when she smiles, a little nose dances on her face as she talks, full of life, full of energy. (page 3)

Grace Blackthorne – (Welch) wealthy, parents in late thirties when she was born (page 11), pretty, nice (page 12), constantly works out and keeps in shape, always neatly dressed, red haired, green eyed, large chest, full hips (page 41)

Jay Hawthorne – (German) dark black hair, little bit of a pot belly (page 21-22)

Mr. & Mrs. Gallus – (Chinese) owns area businesses including a dry cleaner, has a family

Bob Newman - bright young attractive man (page 5) silent partner in area business above

Jose Comentarista – (Hispanic)

little Johnny – toddler, looks like a Kirk

two policeman – (African-American)

two paramedics – (European & Indian)