

## **THE WAY OF ESCAPE**

**by D. L. Hamilton**

“God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

—*1 Corinthians 10:13 (RSV)*

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## Chapter 1

The terse little email from out of the blue made Lisa shiver. Then it made her furious. Then it made her laugh scornfully.

The shiver came from its author. After nearly two years of being unable to even get in touch with him—enough time for Clay and her to put him completely out of their minds—Ronnie the Rat had rematerialized.

The anger came from the email's demands. This creature, so loathsome that he had never even bothered to meet his own daughter, not only was denying Clay's desire to adopt Terri but now wanted joint-custody of her. He did not even know enough about her to spell her name correctly. "Terry" Stubbs he called her. How dare he give her his vile last name?

The laughter came from the email's threat. "I have advised my attorney to begin legal proceedings. You will be hearing from him within the next two days." His attorney? How on earth could a freeloader like Ronnie ever afford an attorney? What a joke. And, legal proceedings? From a deadbeat who had

ditched Lisa before Terri was born and never contributed one cent to the girl's support? *He better not try getting into any legal showdown*, Lisa thought as she shook her head. Same old huckster. *He must want something; money no doubt. Well, he's not getting anything from me, and not just because we don't have anything to give.*

That thought brought a tightness to the pit of her stomach. If he *had* somehow wheedled a lawyer into initiating some kind of civil action against her it would cost money to fight it. Money she and Clay did not have. Oh, they survived okay on their earnings but it was quite literally paycheck-to-paycheck. Every time they managed to get the credit card balance paid off there would be an expensive car repair or the furnace would go on the fritz or something. Clay had characterized it as feeling like they were living on a giant Monopoly board. If they could just make it all the way around to "Go" one time without landing on something, they could maybe get ahead. So far they could not seem to even get past the first railroad. What would this turn into? New York Avenue? Marvin Gardens? Park Place with a hotel?

One thing was certain; Clay would fight tooth and nail even if it bankrupted them. For a man who had never had any experience with children until he met Lisa and Terri, Clay's dedication as daddy to Terri and little Greg could not have been more absolute. Nor could the love lavished on little Greg—his and Lisa's child—and upon Terri who was not his child, have been more equal. Within the first year of their marriage Clay had sought to adopt Terri. But Ronnie, her biological father, initially had been uncooperative for no apparent reason beyond sheer spite. As Clay and Lisa's funds available for legal help in the proceedings had befallen yet another Monopoly-board setback, Ronnie had disappeared. Abandoned apartment, disconnected phone, no forwarding address—he had simply dropped off the map. Eventually the desire to enjoy their

precious family had caused Clay and Lisa to put the whole issue on the shelf to be dealt with another time. And indeed, since that decision, their family life had been happy, tight finances notwithstanding. Now the Evil One had reemerged from the Pit.

Lisa knew the question was inappropriate but could not help asking God, “Why?” Why would He bring this burden upon their family? We don’t want much, she reasoned, just to be left alone to love our family and serve You, Lord. After all, she and Clay were doing their dead-level best to serve Him wholeheartedly. Clay had grown tremendously in his walk with Christ and that combined with his natural abilities and love for teaching had made him an incredible asset to the church. Did not that entitle them to a little peace? Shaking her head she opened a miniature peanut butter cup as she stared out the kitchen window. No, that is not the way God works. No *quid pro quo*. She knew that God did not pay a person in blessings based on hours worked on His behalf. If He did, the Apostle Paul’s story about God denying his request to remove the “messenger of Satan” that plagued his health would have been very different. If anyone had a right to point to his track record for Christ and feel entitled it was Paul. But God’s answer was that the “thorn in the flesh” would remain and that Paul would simply have to rely on Him more. She watched a blue jay land on the weathered wood fence of their duplex’s tiny back yard and sniffed a short laugh. “*Messenger of Satan.*” “*Thorn in the flesh.*” *Now those are good terms to describe Ronnie if there ever were any.* She had secretly hoped his disappearance had meant one of his seedy “business” associates had gotten wise to him and bumped him off. Getting mixed-up with him was truly the greatest regret of her life.

Suddenly her thoughts brought her up short. Not only was wishing him dead very un-Christlike, there had indeed been good come from their relationship,

even as awful as it had been: Terri. Lazy, lying creep though he was, because of him she had her beautiful, precious daughter. Even if he never did another good thing in his life—which Lisa was sure would be the case—she could not totally regret her involvement with him. To do so would be to regret her wonderful child, which she would never do.

She reread the copy of the email she had printed off. She ate another peanut butter cup and then bowed her head. “Lord, we’re going to need Your help with this. I don’t know what this jerk wants but—” She stopped her prayer. “I’m sorry Lord. I know better than to come to You with an attitude like that.” She was silent for a long moment trying to think of what to pray. Finally she got up and put the printed email on the corner of the counter and went in to get dressed for work. She could not let herself think about it any longer for the present. She and Clay would discuss it tonight when her shift ended.

## **Chapter 2**

Greg had never imagined anything like this. Their rehearsals had never quite prepared him for the real thing.

Although Chauncette rasped her voice rock-style there was evidence she had a pretty fair singing voice underneath. Not that Greg Taylor noticed in the least. He was positively mesmerized. Standing behind and just to the left of her, playing rhythm guitar, it was all he could do to keep from actually drooling. She tossed her head to the beat of the music letting her long, tightly scrunched, reddish blonde hair alternately hide, then reveal her breathtakingly gorgeous face. The blouse above her bare midriff was of the absolute thinnest material possible. Her low-waisted pants were so tight they looked as if they'd been spray-painted on. There was little left to the imagination, and it was that little that was having the desired effect on the audience. At least the male members of the audience. Her gyrations, mannerisms, even her facial expressions—from pouty, to pleading, to conceited—all seemed as if she could read their thoughts. It was as if she had some sixth sense of exactly what would drive them into the greatest frenzy. But her energy and excitement were contagious even for the females in the audience so that the whole crowd was on fire.

To Greg the performance itself was a blur. He was vaguely aware that they had done an encore, something that had never happened before. After they

were done he went backstage and found Cinco gathering up some of the equipment.

Cinco and he had been friends since junior high and had started the band together in high school. Cinco had acquired the strange moniker on his fifth birthday from his toddler brother, Felipe. Little Felipe heard everyone in their Hispanic family referring to his older brother as “cinco” and did the same. That became Felipe’s name for him and it stuck. Since high school the band, Peasant Danger, had experienced significant turnover except Greg and Cinco, the charter members. Each time, though, it had gotten progressively better. Stix and Jerry, the drummer and bass player respectively, were excellent musicians and though Cody was just so-so on keyboards, their sound was the best it had ever been. Peasant Danger had gradually become more in demand. Until Chancette Dupree came along. From the day of her arrival the band’s popularity had begun to skyrocket.

“Man, that was something,” said Cinco. “Did you hear that crowd? By next weekend they won’t be able to pack everyone in here. That was really something.”

“She was really something,” said Greg. “What a find. I knew during practice she had talent, but whoo-ee, I’ve never seen anybody work a crowd like that. I was ready to throw money at her feet myself!”

Cinco grinned. “Yeah, man, it’s dangerous to play electric guitar while you’re drooling. I was afraid I was going to short myself out. I gotta get going. Hey, Chaucette. You were fantastic.”

As Cinco was leaving Greg looked off toward the backstage exit door and saw Chaucette sitting by herself on a tall stool. She was puffing a cigarette and drinking straight bourbon out of a glass sized for a mixed cocktail. Without letting his mind examine why, he strolled over to her.

“Waiting for someone?” he asked.

She blew smoke toward the ceiling. “I just think it’s best to wait a while after a performance before going out front. The natives can sometimes be restless.”

He laughed lightly. “Yeah, I’d say they’re pretty worked-up. You’re incredible,” he gushed. She reached over and crushed out her cigarette, her face saying that she had heard it all before. “I don’t just mean your magnetism,” he added trying to sound as sincere as he could. “I mean your abilities. You’re extremely talented.” Although she truly was, for him to pretend it was as significant to him as her “magnetism” was pretty close to a lie. He half expected her to laugh at him.

To his surprise she fixed her hypnotic turquoise eyes on him as if seeing him for the first time. “Thank you,” she said. “From you I consider that quite a compliment.”

His heart started racing. He was unsure where this conversation was heading, but he was not about to turn it around now. “Well, it’s no idle flattery,” he said, still half-lying. “Musically you’ve got it all. And the way you can just own an audience. Wow.” He shook his head as if words were not adequate. “What a great decision it was to bring you on board. We never had an audience mesmerized like that.”

Chauncette seemed moved by his raves. She slowly slipped off the stool and set her glass on it. Nearly as tall as him, she fixed her gorgeous eyes on his from less than six inches away then tilted her pretty head slightly as if trying to solve a puzzle. Without warning she kissed him. It was a long kiss with soft eager lips. Her perfume was pleasing but her mouth tasted of smoke and alcohol. It should have repulsed him. It would have repulsed him, except that it created a forbidden-fruit mystique about her. Instead of recoiling he took her in his arms

and felt his heart pounding frantically at the back of his throat. As he held her he was aware again of the thin, soft fabric of her clothes and nearly felt faint. Two voices were trying to out-shout each other in his brain. One argued that he should not be reacting like a schoolboy stealing his first kiss. The other insisted she was everything wrong for him and that he should run, not walk, for the nearest exit. Before he could reflect on either she pulled slowly away.

“You’re different somehow, Greggy.”

“Oh?” he said, embarrassed that he was having trouble swallowing and catching his breath. “How so?” He tried unsuccessfully to be cool.

She smiled knowingly. “You’re going to be a challenge.”

“W-what do you mean by that?”

She raised her chin and narrowed her eyes. “I think you know.” Then she smiled seductively. “But I never lose.”

He furrowed his brow in confusion but before he could speak further Cody walked up.

“There you are Chaunce’, great job tonight, mmm.” Whatever else Cody would have said was muffled as he kissed her neck, her chin, her lips, and the other side of her neck. He was all over her. She offered no resistance, instead throwing her arms around his neck. For an instant it appeared they might not wait until they got somewhere alone. Then he wrapped an arm around her and started to escort her toward the door. Instead she deftly spun away and grabbed Greg’s arm. “Hey,” Cody said with surprise, “I thought we were gonna go party.” Greg stood dumbfounded.

“Greggy and I have some other plans,” she said, nuzzling Greg’s cheek. “Don’t we?”

“Yeah,” lied Greg. “Sorry Cody, we already had this lined up,”

Chauncette turned to Cody with a see-I-told-you look. “Maybe next time,” she said brightly to the obviously irritated Cody, who just shook his head and stormed out.

“So what exactly are these plans we have?” asked Greg.

“Don’t you have any imagination? Surely you can think of something.”

It dawned on Greg that any of the things he could imagine—or that she would like—were the kinds of things that set off flashing warning lights and sirens in his mind. Before he could ponder it further, his brain was derailed. She once again wrapped her arms around his neck and thrilled him with a long, hungry kiss with lips that seemed to become liquid. When it ended she let her mouth linger, tantalizingly, less than an inch from his. But when he went for more she smiled and turned away slightly so that he kissed her satin-soft cheek, jaw, and neck. She gave a brief, sexy laugh from deep in her throat.

“Mmm-hmm, down boy,” she said as she gently leaned away. “There’ll be plenty of time for more.” She looked deeply into his eyes. “You fascinate me. You’re different. Special. Oh yeah, there will definitely be time for more.” With a sultry smile she released him, turned and walked slowly back over to the stool she had been sitting at earlier. She downed the rest of the drink, then picked up her purse and slung it over her shoulder. Very casually she put her arm through his.

“Where are we going?” he asked, not unaware that he was letting her lead him around like a lap dog.

“You’re taking me home. If it’s okay, I mean. Unless you had something more important to do.”

“Oh—no, no. I can’t think of anything more important.”

She gave a little self-satisfied grin and took him to his car. During the ride to her apartment his mind was racing. Inside him was a clash of eager expectation

and dread that was reacting like vinegar and baking soda. He knew that no good thing could come of his going into her apartment with her. Yet he also knew he could not refuse. Not merely because she was so irresistibly desirable, though that was no minor detail. He also could not bear to think about being subjected to her ridicule if he declined. She knew who she was. She knew she was the woman of every guy's dreams. That was part of what drove men crazy over her. She was a gorgeous, talented, flagrantly conceited little tease that any real man would feel compelled to conquer. Greg was convinced that to refuse her advances would be to deny his very manhood. Besides, his baser natural instincts welcomed her advances. When first introduced, he had deluded himself into the possibility that getting acquainted with her might open an evangelistic door. Now he refused to think about Chauncette in any spiritual context. Or about anything spiritual at all. He did not want to confront God. He was in that denial mode where one ridiculously kids oneself that if he avoids thinking about the Lord, the Lord will be unaware of what's going on.

He pulled up in front of her apartment building. She immediately got out of the car and then leaned back in.

“Oh, I'd invite you up but my roommate, Jennifer, is cramming for her exams. She goes ballistic if I have people over during finals; blames me for weeks if she doesn't do well.”

“Maybe we can do something together later in the week, then.” Greg's voice sounded to him as if it were coming from somebody else.

She grinned at him for an uncomfortably long time before saying, “I'd like that, Greggy. Thanks for the ride.” She shut the door on his “good night” and tossed the long, tight curls from her forehead before strutting up the apartment stairs. Greg stared after her until her disappearance behind the main apartment doors revived him from his trance.



### **Chapter 3**

“What’s going on, Greg?” asked Lisa between Sunday school and worship the next morning.

“Going on? Why do you ask?”

“You seem pretty distracted. You okay?”

Greg shook his head and shrugged, faking a smile. He loved his sister dearly but she could be so exasperating sometimes. Woman’s intuition was one thing, but did she have to practically read his mind? He was indeed distracted. Less so by thoughts of Chauncette as by thoughts about his thoughts of Chauncette. He had let himself get very vulnerable to her wiles and was certain that, if she wanted to, she would have no hesitation at leading him into immorality. She was primarily a tease but he had no doubt she did not always stop at teasing. Somehow he had managed to dodge a bullet the night before. No, that was not quite accurate. Dodging required purposeful effort and he had made no effort whatsoever. The bullet simply missed. Maybe the Spirit had somehow protected him or maybe it was just dumb luck. But what was really weighing on him was this question: what would he have done if her roommate had not been there studying? What would he have done if Chauncette had invited him in? He knew; he would have accepted. And then what would he expect to have happened? For the two of them to play a game of checkers? No, somehow or another things would have started heating up. Then what? Would he, like Joseph

in the Old Testament, have escaped out of her clutches leaving his shirt in her hands if necessary? If his desire would have been to escape, why would he go in with her in the first place? It was like playing Russian roulette. No good thing could result; the most positive possible outcome would be the thrill of what almost happened. He knew he was dancing on the edge of a precipice. Yet if the opportunity arose again he feared he would head straight for the edge. This, despite knowing that whatever might result from him spending time with Chauncette would not square with his commitment to Christ. Indeed, God would want him to keep away from her. But she was so infuriatingly desirable she could dissolve his resolve at her whim. The worst part was that this was not love and he knew it. If one wanted to be genteel, it could be called infatuation but in reality it had a far coarser name. Now here he was at the “Christian’s refueling station” on Sunday morning not at all convinced he would have the ability to resist the devil and flee this particular temptation. If he was filled with doubt here, how would he deal with it the rest of the week?

The internal battle had made him unusually quiet and Lisa had picked up on it instantly.

“I’m fine, Sis.” He tried to think of some sort of ailment or preoccupation he could blame it on but could not come up with anything spur of the moment so he left it at that. He could tell she did not believe him for a second and he was grateful that he spotted Nadine across the foyer. “Hey, Nadine,” he called with a wave. She waited for him while he hurried over to see her as if he had something important to say. He was hoping like crazy he could come up with something by the time he caught up with her.

“Hi,” he said brightly. “Staley’s gave you another Sunday morning off? That’s like three in a row isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” answered the tall, slender young woman. “Tom’s pretty good about that anymore, unless some of the other waitresses are out and he just can’t.”

“Where are you sitting?” he asked as they entered the worship center. Her smile was slightly inquisitive but she declined to ask him why he suddenly wanted to sit with her.

“Oh, I don’t know. Usual place I guess; this section over here, three rows back.”

“Mind if I sit with you?”

“Not at all. Are you on the worship team that’s playing today?”

“Nope. I’ve got this morning off.” They sat and small-talked, with Greg truly grateful for the distraction from his personal spiritual warfare.

During the service Lester Dinwiddie, Jr., a tall, handsome beanpole in his late twenties with a rich baritone voice, sang a song he had written about the importance of putting the Lord first. His gentle, folksy vocal and acoustic guitar belied the haymaker impact of the song. It helped immensely in strengthening Greg’s resolve but doubts still haunted the back of his mind.

At the end of the worship service a young family was introduced to the congregation. The husband and wife, Jim and LeAnn Sprague, had given their lives to Jesus earlier in the week as a result of some one-on-one teaching by Clay and Lisa. Though they had taught Jim and LeAnn the gospel and brought them to Christ, they had not really known them all that long. The minister, Dave Creighton, had set up the Bible study between the two couples because of their similarities in age, including that their five-year-old daughter’s age was between Clay and Lisa’s two: Terri age six and little Greg age three.

When the service was over the Sprague’s were greeted in the church foyer by members of the congregation. Clay introduced Greg and Nadine to the couple and their daughter, Misty. There was not the slightest question that Misty was a

daddy's-girl as she climbed and hugged on Jim the whole time they talked. The feeling was clearly mutual; Jim doted on his little girl. The group was invited to Clay and Lisa's for dinner with Nadine declining due to a prior commitment. Dave Creighton came over.

“Jim, LeAnn, sorry to interrupt but is it okay if I borrow these folks for just a quick minute? I need to run something regarding VBS by them. You'll be okay?”

“Sure,” said Jim and the group left them in the foyer and headed to one of the offices in the adjacent hallway.

A moment later Les, the man who had sung during the service, stepped up to greet the new family.

“Real glad y'all decided to come to the Lord,” said Les. He had a big grin and a thick backwoods drawl. “Lester Dinwiddie,” he said as if answering a question. He stuck out his hand and the Sprague's smiled and greeted him. “I been noticing y'all been attending lately. Sorry I ain't introduced myself till now.”

“Oh that's all right,” said Jim. “Clay says there are a lot of new people at the church lately; it must be difficult to remember whom you've met and whom you haven't.”

“Yup,” Lester said ruefully. “Well, and then I've always had me some problems with my memory. See, my Ma told me wunst that when I was borned I had me a case of the yella jonders. I reckon that's what caused it. But, I just do the best I can and leave the rest to—”

He suddenly stopped and gasped wide-eyed, the huge grin returning to replace the face of lament. The Sprague's turned to see what he was reacting to. It was their little girl. “Is that your little 'un?” They both nodded uncertainly. He

bent over slightly toward her. “Little lady, I believe you might just be the purdiest little gal I ain’t never seen.”

They smiled broadly and nodded. “Misty,” said LeAnn. “Say hello to—Mr. Dinwiddie is it?”

“Aw, just call me Les,” he pled with deepest sincerity. “Is it okay if I give her a little present?” LeAnn half-smiled and half-shrugged. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny necklace pendent, a silver cross. “Now, see this here?” he said to Misty. “I found this in the parking-lot down to Wal-Mart’s the other day and cleaned it up. I been a-wondering who I could give it to and when I seen you I just knowed you was the perfect one. Y’all just get a little chain for it and you’ll have a right purdy necklace.” He looked at LeAnn. “If it’s okay.” She nodded. Misty smiled and took it. Lester leaned back with a satisfied look. “Just remember, don’t go leaving it lay outside or it’s liable to get all rustic.”

Lisa and Clay came hurrying over. “Sorry to abandon you,” said Lisa. “I see you’ve met Lester.”

Les gasped again. “Oh, I’m real sorry,” he said earnestly to the Sprague’s. “Here I been a-menopausin’ all y’all’s time and not lettin’ nobody else talk at ya.”

Everyone winced and Clay was the least successful at suppressing a laugh. “I think you mean ‘monopolizing,’” said Clay.

A look of confusion swept over Les and his voice became meek. “Ain’t that what I said?”

Lisa turned to the Sprague’s. “Ready to go?” They nodded. She looked back at Les. “You’re coming too, right? For Sunday dinner?”

“Oh, yes ma’am.” He looked at the Sprague’s. “A team of wahl horses couldn’t keep me from missing one of Lisa Osborne’s home-cooked meals. See, I’m a bachelor and I only get a decent meal wunst a week—whenever the Osborne’s take pity on me and have me over.”

Clay grinned wryly at the Sprague's. "Yeah, it's a dirty job but somebody has to do it. It being a free meal doesn't hurt either, right?"

Les grinned and squinted at Clay. "All's I want to know is why did a wonderful woman like Lisa marry herself up with the likes of you?"

"Oh, that's easy," retorted Clay. "She heard you were moving into the area and married the first other man she could find."

Les whooped and pounded Clay on the back laughing. "That's a good 'un," he gasped.

Lisa rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Honestly, those two," she said to LeAnn. "They go on like this all the time."

LeAnn smiled warmly. "It's good to have friends like that."

"Good," said Clay, "but not easy. Especially for an ex-English teacher."

"I know," said Les to the Sprague's gravely. "I been trying to learn him how to speak proper but he just won't listen." He squinted and elbowed Clay.

"I might be willing to listen, but first I need to know: What language is it exactly that you speak? It is certainly not English."

"I reckon it's what's knowed as Hillbilly. But I don't think you can really learn it. It mostly just comes from one generation inbreedin' it into the next."

Clay shook his head. "I think you mean—oh, never mind. Let's go eat."

With that they headed to their cars.

The dinner went well and Greg genuinely liked Jim. As for LeAnn, he was convinced there was not a person on earth who would not like her. Never had he met anyone so upbeat and excited about life. While coming to the Lord was certainly cause for joy, he was convinced—and Clay and Lisa later confirmed—that her effervescent optimism was already built-in to her personality. Greg felt sure that Jesus had great plans for these two new members of His body. He could not help mentally contrasting LeAnn's sparkling attitude with Chauncette's cool

cynicism and it only added to his uneasiness about his relationship with her. After dinner, watching the two couples and the way their kids loved them made Greg yearn to start a family of his own. *All in God's timing*, he thought. *But I need to remain faithful to Him if I expect His leading in my life.* It was a needed reminder that further bolstered his resolve to fight the good fight of faith. Yet rather than deciding to have nothing more to do with Chauncette he instead came up with an idea to take a middle ground. Suppose he tried to establish a normal, cautious dating relationship with her? If, over time, it grew into something more, so be it. If she wanted to start out at full speed, he would regard that as a sign he should bail out. It sounded like a reasonable approach on the surface. Beneath the surface was anybody's guess; he would not venture there.

"Les, we really enjoyed your song this morning," said Jim to the general agreement of all. "Are you a professional musician?"

Les laughed lightly. "Naw, I just write and perform for the Lord. Greg here is the musician. Plays with an up-n-comin' band named Pheasant Danger. It's been a while since I got to hear 'em but I hear tell they're really something."

Greg smiled. "That's *Peasant Danger*. And, speaking of, I've got to take my car in Tuesday. Cinco can give me a ride to practice but any chance you could pick me up, Les?"

"Sure thing." Les looked at Jim. "I'm a website designer by trade; got my own business. I kinda set my own hours so I'm able to help folks with stuff like this." He turned back to Greg. "If I get there at seven will that be in time to hear some of y'all's practice?"

"Yeah, that'll work. We usually go till about 7:30 on Tuesdays."

## **Chapter 4**

It was Monday; Lisa would work the three-to-eleven shift at Staley's. This worked out well since Clay would be off at five and they would only have to pay for a couple of hours of child care. Clay had dropped Terri off at school. Lisa shook her head at the thought of her little Terri already a first-grader. She spent the rest of the morning cleaning and straightening as best she could with little Greg either underfoot or, even more disconcerting, out of eyesight getting into the kind of mischief only a three-year-old can. She didn't mind. She loved her little family so deeply that she literally thanked God every day for the happiness and contentment she felt. After so much strife in her past, initially from her parents and later from her own stupidity, she almost felt like a living version of Cinderella now filling the details of the "...they lived happily ever after" part. Of course, the girl in the fairy tale had married a wealthy prince where Clay was barely making ends meet. But he was Prince Charming to her nevertheless. He would come home tonight and fix the kids a good meal—his bachelor days had turned him into a pretty fair cook. Then, he would time it so that during Lisa's meal break at the restaurant he would bring the kids by so Terri could spend some time with her mommy. Tom, the manager would always have a little special treat for the kids. Then he would take them back home and, tired or not, he would find fun things for them to do until their bedtimes, then take up with whatever chores still needed doing. With kids these ages there was always something. When Lisa got home

she would be exhausted but he would stay up with her till midnight or after so she could wind down. Then they would go to bed and he would let her know that she was more than a mom, more than a waitress, she was a woman deeply loved by her husband.

Right now it was not quite one o'clock. Lisa was putting things away from her and little Greg's lunch when the doorbell rang. She looked through the peephole and saw a gray-haired man in a dark suit with a briefcase. She sighed. *Not another salesman*, she thought. She opened the door as much as the chain would allow.

"Yes?" she said unenthusiastically.

"Mrs. Osborne? Lisa Osborne?" The man's voice was grainy and his severe comb-over was blowing off to the side in the light breeze. He was smiling insincerely, apparently trying to put her at ease but instead only confirming her suspicions that he was up to something.

"Yes, I'm Lisa Osborne," she said cautiously. She noticed that his shirt collar, lapels, tie, shoes, and even his leather briefcase all showed significant signs of wear.

"I'm Charles Kragen of Kragen and Associates." He held out an unstamped letter. "I am to deliver this to you." She took the envelope as he held it partway through the door opening. "And if you have any questions, here is my card. Thank you and have a pleasant day." She took the card reluctantly and the instant she did so he turned on his heel and left.

The envelope contained a single letter printed without much attention to alignment on buff-colored letterhead paper from "Kragen and Associates, attorneys at law." It read:

Dear Ms. Osborn:

Our client, Mr. Ronald Stubbs, is seeking to avail himself of his legal rights as natural father of the minor Terry Stubbs, currently under your care. We are prepared to pursue Mr. Stubbs' rights to their fullest extent, up to and including legal action seeking joint custody of his daughter, regardless of expense.

However it is Mr. Stubbs' stated preference that litigation be avoided. He also is aware of the desire by your husband, Mr. Clayton Osborne, to pursue adoption proceedings of said minor. Therefore, Mr. Stubbs stands willing to consider certain reparations for past denial of his custodial and visitation rights in lieu of further legal action. To discuss the terms and content of these reparations, Mr. Stubbs has graciously agreed to meet with you at my office on Friday, May 6, at 2:00 p.m. Mr. Stubbs has also agreed to provide signed consent to Mr. Osborne's adoption efforts immediately upon the successful conclusion of these discussions. Failure to appear on your part or to deal in good faith will result in the immediate initiation of the legal proceedings described above.

Sincerely,

Charles A. Kragen, LL.B.

The letter did not frighten Lisa as it was intended to do. Much to her surprise, it did not anger her. Not even the outrageous comment about "past denial of his...visitation rights." Instead she felt drained. Like a person who wishes an all-day headache would just go away and let her be. The letter was such a blatant attempt to extort money from Clay and her it was almost comical. She looked at the business card. So, Ronnie actually did have an attorney? Funny, she thought, that the address on the card did not match the letterhead.

Her thoughts were interrupted by silence. That is, her mothering instincts became aware of too much silence from the bedroom where little Greg had been playing. She tossed the letter and card aside and headed toward the back. She found him sound asleep crossways on the bed still holding a large toy car. She swung his legs around, covered him with a light blanket, and kissed his forehead.

A sudden resolve filled her and she marched over to their tiny computer desk. Even given that computers became obsolete by the time one got to the end of the checkout line to buy them, theirs was truly ancient. Still, it would do word processing for Clay's Sunday School class, email, and provide slow-but-tolerable web access. She found Ronnie's email and clicked "Reply."

"Ronnie," she wrote. "Your shyster lawyer friend just came by with your lame attempt to extort money from us. I would advise you against opening Pandora's Box. When it comes to money I'm quite sure the law would favor child support from you rather than so-called reparations from me. I also doubt that any father in history has been more disdainful of his own daughter than you have. In all of that little girl's life you have never shown her even the tiniest shred of kindness or concern. But you could, just by allowing Clay to adopt her. Then you can disappear again, forever if you wish. We will eventually tell her who her biological father is. She will need to know that. But since you choose not to meet her, so be it. Could you not step out of character and do this one decent thing for her? Just this once? Then leave us alone and go hustle someone else."

She purposely hit Send without reading over what she had written, fearing her conscience would convince her to soften its tone.

## **Chapter 5**

At Monday afternoon's practice session Chauncette paid no more attention to Greg than she had in the previous few weeks since her arrival on the scene. She had written a new song and they worked on it for almost the entire time. Cody monopolized every second that she was not otherwise occupied but when the session ended she managed to vanish without Greg or Cody having any clue where she had gone. No mean feat given that she had no car of her own. He could have interpreted this aloofness on her part as ample evidence that this was a relationship he should not pursue. However, this answer was not at all satisfying to him. He was still determined to try out his idea. There was a fear, though, of being humiliated if the delectable Ms. Dupree considered being asked out on the kind of date Greg would arrange laughably lame. She was definitely not the church picnic type.

Because of other commitments by some band members, Mondays were short practice days. They knocked off at five-thirty and on his way home he drove by her place, which was out of his way, hoping he might have a chance to talk to her privately. That way if she treated him like a nerd no one else would know. Unfortunately the windows were dark indicating no one was there. He wondered if he should just forget the whole thing. On the other hand, she had given every indication she considered him more than just some nerd—even that she fully expected them to spend more time together. As he headed for home he decided he

was out of his league. He had always had trouble understanding women and this woman was the least fathomable of any he had ever met. *Time for a female perspective*, he thought, and headed for Staley's.

“Hey, Nadine! Wait up.” Greg trotted over to her as she was starting to get into her car. It had been a busy shift at Staley's with the patrons too demanding and the tips too small. As she usually did at the end of a tough day waiting tables, Nadine dreamed of the day when she'd have enough money ahead to open a little country crafts store. It, no doubt, would mean exhausting days, too. But then she would be wearing herself out doing something she loved, not just to pay the next round of bills.

“What's got you in such an uproar, Greg?”

“Nadine, I need your advice.”

“Again? You know, I'm going to have to start charging you a consultation fee.”

“Anything. Name your price.”

She grinned and slowly shook her head. In the years she had known Greg, he had turned to her as his advisor and confidante. He did not always take her advice, but he regularly sought it.

“Well, considering how tired I am, I doubt anything I'd have to say would be worth much. Come to think of it, why do you always ask me for advice about life? I'm not exactly a pillar of success. A woman well into her twenties slinging hash for a living with absolutely no love life isn't exactly a sterling résumé, you know.”

“Nadine, you are the wisest woman—check that—the wisest person I know. One of these days it's all going to come together for you. That

combination of intuition, common sense and spirituality will all click for you. It has to.”

She blew out her cheeks. “Okay, okay put away the syrup bottle.” She leaned heavily against the car. “What’s up?”

Greg looked intently at her for a moment. “You really are tired, aren’t you? Look, I don’t want to be a pain. Why don’t you go on home and relax for a bit. Y’know, put on some grubbies and put your feet up. I’ll come by later after you’ve had a chance to unwind a little. Would that be okay?”

In truth, she would not get that casual if Greg was coming and she could not really relax when he was around. She also could not refuse to let him come over.

“Sounds fine. What time? You want dinner?”

“I can’t let you cook for me too.”

She laughed. “Since when?”

He laughed, too. “Tell you what. I’ll bring pizza—or is Italian not a good idea after serving it all day?”

“No problem. Seven-thirty?”

“See ya then.” He headed off across the parking lot toward his car and called back over his shoulder. “You’re an angel, Nadine.”

“Okay, so what’s the latest trauma in your life, Mr. Taylor?” asked Nadine as Greg chomped the pointed one-third off a slice of pizza. “The doctor is now in.”

He laughed. “Well doc, I met this girl.”

She rolled her eyes. “I might have guessed it would be something like that.”

“It’s our newest band member—our lead singer, Chauncette.”

“Interesting name.”

“Yeah, Chauncette Dupree. Must be French or something. Here’s a picture someone took of her at our last gig—it’s not the greatest picture but I think you can get an idea of how she looks.”

Nadine looked at the shapely supermodel in the picture and laid it quietly on the table. Greg continued on.

“Anyway she is absolute dynamite. I mean, as you can see she is drop-dead gorgeous and man can she sing. And not just sing, but truly own an audience. Our first performances with her have taken-off like wildfire. Cinco’s negotiating a big-money gig for us at the Center and we’re going to be putting a video together for some recording execs. Notice I said video. Hearing her perform is great, but seeing her perform is out of this world. Peasant Danger is getting ready to skyrocket and it’s all because of her.”

Nadine did not want another slice of pizza but picked one up anyway. “This doesn’t sound like a problem needing any of my advice.”

“Well, hang on. The thing is, she’s—well, sophisticated I guess you’d say. I mean she gives the impression she knows her way around. You know, she’s, she’s—”

“Worldly?” deadpanned Nadine.

“Nah, it’s not that exactly,” he said defensively, but a voice in the back of his head admitted that it probably was the appropriate word. “It’s just that she knows about life—who she is and what she wants.”

Nadine laid the crust from her last piece on her paper plate and looked at Greg. “Okay, she’s beautiful, talented and has it all together. Why, exactly, is that a problem?”

“In itself it’s not a problem. It’s just that I think I’m falling for her.”

She picked up the crust and tore a couple of pieces off it without eating them. “I guess I still don’t see the problem.”

“It’s just that, well, I think she might be too, um, sophisticated for me. Y’know what I mean? Too high-class. I just don’t want to be humiliated by thinking I’m someone she would, y’know, go-for and then have her laugh at me or something. Do you know what I’m saying?”

“Yeah. You think she’s too good for you. Now you listen here, Gregory Taylor, if you want to start a relationship with this woman you march right up to her and do it. If she turns you down she’s an idiot and it’s her loss, not yours.”

Greg sat upright, somewhat stunned then said slowly, “Wow. Thanks Nadine. That was a very kind thing to say about me.”

“Well my next words are not going to be so kind. Don’t you ever let me hear you say you’re not good enough for someone again. Got it? If you do I’ll crown you one.”

He laughed. “Okay, okay, calm down. I got it. I’ll go ahead and ask her out.” His mind was trying to preview such an event and not having much success. Chauncette was too unpredictable, too enigmatic for anything to be that simple. He felt certain that an ordinary, “Wanna go to the movies with me?” would not get a normal response from her. But, however he did it he would indeed take Nadine’s advice and ask Chauncette out. Somehow.

Greg was torn whether to bring up the next issue, knowing what Nadine’s answer would be. But he needed to talk it through with someone, and Nadine was the best someone he knew of.

“There’s something else,” he said. “She’s not a Christian. In fact, if I had to guess, I’d say she’s probably antagonistic to the whole idea. I mean, I don’t really know that, but I suspect it to be the case.”

Nadine sat back and crossed her arms. There was a long silence. At length Greg spoke up.

“Well, aren’t you going to say something?”

“What do you expect me to say?” asked Nadine.

Greg looked at the floor. “That getting involved with her is a really bad idea. That I run the risk of her diluting and eventually withering-away my commitment to Jesus.”

“Sounds like you’re giving yourself advice. Are you going to take it?”

Greg sighed in frustration. “I guess in my head I know it’s really risky—but when I’m around her it’s like my head gets overruled by my heart.”

“Or at least by some part of your anatomy,” said Nadine dryly as she looked at the picture again.

Greg seemed not to catch the comment. “But I keep thinking that I might be the one to reach her, y’know, for the Lord. I think she has a lot of problems in her life; or at least has had in the past. She could really use some help.”

“Hmm,” said Nadine. “I thought a minute ago you said she had it all together.”

Greg looked at Nadine in frustration. “I just meant that she seems pretty sure of herself, and of what she wants for her career, that sort of thing. But underneath, I somehow get the impression that she’s not truly happy. It’s like she plays with her life but doesn’t really live it. She keeps everyone at arms length while pretending to let them get close to her. Then just when you think you’re about to discover the real Chauncette she sort of runs away and puts on a different disguise.”

Nadine furrowed her brows at him. “Greg, she sounds kind of spooky. Are you sure you want to get involved with her?”

“It’s not as bad as I’m making it sound. It’s kind of hard to explain. In a lot of ways she’s really likeable; it’s just that I can never feel quite at ease around her. I always wonder if she’s just stringing me along. I mean, she can pretty much have her pick of any guy she wants. That’s why I wanted your advice about asking her out—whether she would just laugh me off.”

“Well, obviously never having met her I can’t really say. And since I don’t play those kinds of games with people, I quite honestly don’t understand anyone who does. Of course, here I am not exactly setting the dating world on fire while her dance card is overflowing, so maybe I ought to be getting advice from her. Anyway, all I can tell you is that if she won’t open up to you or if you can’t be yourself with her, that’s not a relationship I’d recommend. Sooner or later one of you is going to reveal the real you, and the other might not like what they see. Either that, or you never reveal yourselves; that might be even worse.”

“So, you’d say just be myself, let her know what I really feel and let whatever happens happen, huh?”

“Yeah, and expect nothing less from her.”

Greg exhaled loudly and leaned back in the chair with a look of relief. “Nadine you’re a life-saver. I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. At least now I feel like I have a workable plan, y’know? You’re the best, the absolute best. As always, you have provided a rational common-sense solution with the feminine perspective. What would I do without you?”

“Yeah, I’m a regular ‘Dear Abby.’” She stood up and began collecting the leftover pizza.

“Hey, I rented a video,” said Greg brightly. “I don’t know if you’ve seen it but—”

“Not tonight, thanks,” she said quickly. “I’m really beat, y’know? It was a long day.”

“Oh, sure, I understand. Need some wind-down time, huh? No problem. Maybe next time; and you know me, there’ll undoubtedly be a next time. Gotta come for my counseling sessions.”

She smiled thinly and opened the door. “Good night, Greg. And good luck with Chauncette.”

“Night, Deeny, and thanks.”

## **Chapter 6**

When Greg arrived at Tuesday's practice with Cinco, Cody had Chauncette in a corner from which she escaped.

"Hi guys," she said in her throatiest, sultriest voice. She wrapped herself around Greg's arm and walked him to the rehearsal stage. It was clear to Greg that she was using him to show Cody he had not succeeded in staking a claim on her. What was not so clear was whether she would have done exactly the same thing if Greg's and Cody's roles were reversed. Cody glared holes in Greg but the issue was short-lived since it was time to get started.

They were just polishing-up one of their more familiar songs when Les arrived. As Chauncette weaved her magic he stood so slack jawed she had to suppress a laugh. The rehearsal ended with the completion of the song and Greg trotted down to where Les was standing.

"Land-a-livin'," gushed a wide-eyed Les. "That there is one fine lady."

The slightest hint of jealousy flitted through Greg's mind. "Yeah, she's really talented."

"Bee-yoo-tiful voice," said Les sincerely.

Chauncette noticed the two of them ogling her and sauntered over to Les.

"Who have we here?" she asked him.

“Lester Dinwiddie, ma’am,” said Les. He shook his head slowly in disbelief. “Ma’am, I believe y’all are the most credible performer I ain’t never seen.”

She raised her eyebrows and looked at Greg. “He’s kidding, right? I mean, this is like a joke or something? Nobody’s really this much of a yokel.”

Greg grinned. “No, it’s no joke. Les is the real deal. Or, as we like to say, Les is more.”

“So let me get this straight,” she said to Greg. “You two are buddies?”

“We’re, um, friends, sure,” Greg said meekly. “Les, this is Chauncette Dupree.”

“My pleasure, Chon-sit,” struggled Les.

Chauncette rolled her eyes. “Wull, Goober, ahm plumb pleased to meet you,” she said. “Or is it y’all?”

“Any way you want to say it, ma’am,” said Les good-naturedly.

“Les,” said Greg, “I’ll be right out, okay?”

“Sure thing.” Les headed out to his car.

She looked at Greg as if he were crazy. “Where on earth did you dig up that hillbilly hayseed? What’d he say his name was? Lester Dimwit?”

Greg laughed lightly but felt uncomfortable that there was more bite than humor in her voice. “Oh, Les is okay. He talks like a hick but he’s actually a pretty bright guy; runs his own computer company.” Greg laughed lightly. “Still has the first nickel he ever earned but if anybody needs something done he’s the kind that jumps in and does it without even being asked.

“But that’s not what I wanted to—”

Before he could finish Cody swarmed-in on them and threw his arm around Chauncette.

“Hey, sexy, how about we go have a drink?” said Cody.

She deftly pirouetted away from him and wagged her finger. “Ah-ah-ah; touchy-feely by invitation only. Besides, I see my roommate’s here to pick me up. Gotta run. Later, guys.” She waved and left with a brown-haired girl of about twenty.

Cody glared at Greg who, with great effort, barely managed to suppress a smirk. True, Greg did not get to ask her out like he wanted but seeing Cody get rebuffed was worth the price of admission.

He joined Les in his car. “Sorry Chauncette was a little abrupt in there. She can be a bit snooty.”

“Aw, I didn’t mind none,” said Les as he pulled onto the street. “She was just having some fun ‘cause of my accent. Tell you what, she can laugh at me ever time I see her if she wants.”

Greg recoiled a bit at Les’s naiveté. “Well, if you do see her again you might want to work on getting her name right. It’s ‘shawn-SETT’ not ‘CHON-sit.’ People can be funny about their names.” As he said it he realized she had dubbed Les “Goober” right to his face.

“Chon-SITT,” tried Les. “That it?”

Greg cleared his throat. “Better,” he said quietly.

“Mmm-mmm,” said Les half to himself. “That there is one fine lady.”

## Chapter 7

“Can I help you?” asked the pony-tailed coed behind the counter.

Ronnie Stubbs looked at his handful of change and back up at the menu behind her. “Yeah, just a cheeseburger.”

“Anything to drink with that?”

He looked back down at his hand. “Um, nah, just water.”

“Here or to go?”

“Go.”

“A dollar and eight cents,” she said plopping a small empty drink cup in front of him. He dug through the change and gave her four quarters and a dime shoving the remainder into his pocket. She handed him two cents and turned in time to grab the meager sandwich just sliding down the stainless steel bin. She dropped it into a tiny bag and handed it across the counter toward him. A hand snatched the bag away as Ronnie reached for it.

“Ronnie,” said calm male voice. “You ought to pay more attention to nutrition.” He recognized the Jersey accent immediately. “You can’t live on this kind of stuff.”

“Eddie,” said Ronnie nervously. The swarthy man’s dapper dark suit and, indeed, his refined bearing did not fit the surroundings. “What brings you clear out here?”

Eddie Petrokis examined Ronnie in silence for several seconds then moistened his lips with his tongue. He spoke slowly and quietly. “How about I take you to dinner? A nice meal in a nice place; not this,” he said lifting the fast-food bag. “Come on, my car’s outside.” He led Ronnie toward the door and shoved the bag into the “Thank You” trash door. Ronnie lit a cigarette as he exited.

Even in the fading light the golden Mercedes—so out of place—was easy to spot. Two huge, bald men were in the front. Though the driver was white and the passenger black, Ronnie thought they looked amazingly similar.

Eddie moistened his lips. “Let me introduce you to two of my business associates. Ronnie Stubbs, this is Mr. Wexler and Mr. Abdul.” They were both as elegantly dressed as their boss. The expressionless passenger shifted only his eyes to Ronnie for a second or two then continued to stare straight ahead. The driver actually turned toward him slightly and the faintest hint of a smirk came and quickly left his face.

Eddie looked directly into Ronnie’s eyes and spoke in his calm, deliberate manner. “I call them business associates but that is not entirely accurate. They are actually my friends. You see, Ronnie, friends are those who watch out for and protect each other. They are trustworthy and never let you down. These gentlemen are like that. I’m there when they need me and I can always count on them. That’s the way I like to deal with people. That’s how people should treat each other, don’t you agree.”

Ronnie nodded slightly as Eddie opened the back door for him, gesturing that he would not allow smoking in his car. Ronnie immediately dropped and stomped his cigarette. As Eddie went around to the other side the driver jumped out and opened the door for him. “Rue de Paris, Mr. Wexler,” said Eddie. Ronnie relaxed a bit. It sounded like they were actually headed for a restaurant

instead of the Bay and some cement overshoes. They rode in silence for a while. Then, staring out his window, Eddie moistened his lips and spoke.

“Is your cell phone broken, Ronnie?”

Ronnie did not want to answer.

“Hmm? Is it, Mr. Stubbs?”

Ronnie cleared his throat. “I—I been having trouble keeping it charged.”

“Oh? May I see it?”

Ronnie gulped. “Sure.” He fumbled to the point of embarrassment getting it out of his pocket then finally handed it to Eddie. Eddie dialed a number and Abdul suddenly procured an earpiece from his coat pocket and inserted it. He spoke a single syllable which Ronnie could not quite catch.

“Just testing Mr. Stubbs’s phone,” said Eddie.

Abdul responded with another syllable and removed the earpiece as Eddie terminated the call. He then pressed a few buttons while looking at the phone’s display.

“I see where you received my four calls but no messages are waiting. That tells me you heard my messages, Ronnie. Why didn’t you respond?”

“It needed charging and I just got it to work,” lied Ronnie. “I just got your messages a short time ago. I was going to call you back right after I got something to eat.”

Eddie moistened his lips. “Ronnie, I deal with people on the basis of trust. A person such as yourself comes to me with a need, often an urgent need. I provide them monetary assistance with nothing more than a handshake. You did not have to fill out any forms; I ran no credit checks on you, am I right?”

No answer.

“Am I right, Ronnie?” The tone in Eddie’s voice demanded a response.

“Yes, sir,” said Ronnie as if in the principal’s office.

“Sure, that’s right. I did not even ask the details of what the money was for. Instead, in good faith, I entered into a simple business transaction at the risk of my own resources. And all I asked in return was that you live up to your promise. Do you remember your promise, Ronnie?”

“Yes.”

“And what was that promise? Maybe you misunderstood the terms of our agreement, although they are always so simple there is no need to write them down. Tell me how you remember our agreement, Ronnie.”

Perspiration was beading on Ronnie’s forehead and, although he hadn’t eaten all day the knots in his stomach had killed his appetite. “I borrowed \$5,000 and was to repay you \$10,000 by May first.”

“That’s right,” said Eddie in tones used for a first-grader. He moistened his lips before continuing. “So, Ronnie, today is May the fourth. Mr. Wexler and Mr. Abdul called you several times on May the second, again on May the third, and the three of us took time out of our busy schedules to hunt for and locate you today. I do not consider that good faith on your part, Ronnie.”

Ronnie gulped. “Look, Eddie, I’m not trying to welsh on what I owe you, honest. I just need some time. See, the deal I had going—a-a-and, I mean it was going great, I came this close—anyway, that deal fell through. B-but I’m working a new angle and it could pay-off as soon as tomorrow, for the whole ten thou’, every penny. I’d give you back all that I had left of the original amount as earnest money but I don’t have any of it—I used it all. Th-that’s why I was buying dinner with change from the sofa cushion. I’m down to my last few cents, literally. I-I mean, I know better than to cross you, Eddie. I just need a little more time. Like I say, maybe as little as one more day, only, if you could give me one more month, just—just in case it takes these people a while to get the money together...”

Eddie turned his palms up and looked incredulous. “Ronnie. *Ronnie*. I understand. I mean, I am not an unreasonable man; I know that things do not always go as planned. I’m not some brute who takes delight in causing pain to others.” Ronnie thought he saw the slight smirk return to Wexler’s face. Eddie moistened his lips. “All you had to do was call me and explain your situation. Of course I’ll grant you another month extension.” He laughed, “I mean, even the IRS does that, right?” Everyone in the car laughed and Ronnie could not stop tears of relief from forming in his eyes.

“Now,” said Eddie, “let’s go have a nice dinner, shall we?”

The dinner was delicious and even more so given Ronnie’s hunger but it was not as relaxed as he had hoped for when they had arrived. The two “business associates” ate in brooding silence giving monosyllabic responses to any attempts Ronnie made to talk with them. His attempt to engage in casual, friendly conversation with Eddie was stilted the way it is when everyone else knows bad news you have not heard yet. The tension was not helping Ronnie’s digestion. It worsened when he pulled out an after-dinner cigarette and started to go outside to smoke it. One look from Eddie and he sat back down and put it back in the pack.

When the waiter came with the check Eddie set it aside for a moment and looked at Abdul and Wexler, though he spoke to Ronnie.

“Ronnie, I am expecting another guest in a few minutes. My associates will take you back to your car.”

Red alarms went off inside Ronnie’s head. “Um, you needn’t bother, Eddie. I’ve already been enough trouble. I’ll just walk back to my apartment, it’s not far. I’ll have a friend take me to my car tomorrow.”

Eddie moistened his lips. “Ronnie, it upsets me when people refuse my generosity. After buying you this fine dinner I cannot imagine that you would insult me.”

Wexler and Abdul stood and buttoned their coats.

“P-please Mr. Petrokis,” begged Ronnie. “I’ll make good I swear I will.”

Eddie looked nervously around the room. His glare at Ronnie shut him up immediately. He averted his eyes to the candle in the middle of the table, his speech barely audible. “You are making a scene. Do not embarrass me.” He held up one finger and stared a hole through Ronnie. “You will go with these gentlemen to retrieve your car and not say another word.” He returned his gaze to the candle and moistened his lips. Then he took a sip from his water glass. With Abdul in the lead and Wexler gently guiding Ronnie’s arm, the three left the restaurant and entered the golden Mercedes.

In the back of Ronnie’s mind was the faint hope that he was overreacting—that they really would take him back to the fast food joint to get his car. *If so*, he reasoned, *I’ll personally call Eddie and apologize for embarrassing him and thank him again for being so understanding*. Unfortunately they had not gone far when the car took a different route. Ronnie’s breathing became short and he felt sick to his stomach. They were going to work him over. He quietly tried the door handle and the lock, thinking to dive out while the car was moving, but they were under child-protection control from the front. Same with the window. His hands shook and he felt like crying. Then he took on a new perspective. It was not likely they would shoot him. Eddie could not stay under the radar scope of the law if he went around killing every client that was three days late on a payment. Ronnie had always prided himself on being a pretty good fighter so if it was just fists he might show these lummoxes a thing or two—if nothing else he could probably outrun them. He wished like crazy he had quit smoking.

The car pulled into a large empty parking lot for a sprawling Silicon Valley office building. They drove to the farthest corner where the lot lights were least effective. They parked across the corner diagonally. Abdul got out and

opened the trunk as Ronnie's heart raced. Wexler turned around and spoke to Ronnie.

"Mr. Petrokis wants to be sure you understand the gravity of failing to honor your agreements with him."

"But I'm gonna make it—"

"Can it!" Wexler interrupted. "You can argue and plead till your blue but you're talking to the wrong people. We can only do what we've been told. Now shut up and listen and you just might survive this."

"Mr. Abdul has a very heavy, very large metal wrecking bar that will easily break bones and joints. I, on the other hand, will use something that will merely reinforce Mr. Petrokis's message to you. Now, if you try to run or if you resist, I will yield to Mr. Abdul who, by the way, runs the 40 in 4.7 seconds. The choice is yours. Oh, and yelling for help won't do any good but you're welcome to try."

With that Wexler exited the car and also went back to the trunk. There was a split second when Ronnie considered diving over the seat and going out the driver's side door. But one last look around revealed Abdul minus his jacket, tie, and shirt standing by Ronnie's rear door. He was indeed holding a formidable steel wrecking bar. The trunk lid closed and Wexler, also stripped to the waist traded places with Abdul. The two giants looked even larger without their suits and clearly spent every spare moment in the gym. Wexler was holding the proverbial rubber hose. He reached in and released the lock on Ronnie's door and then opened it like a valet. Abdul was stationed at the rear of the car, blocking any exit that way. The corner of the parking lot was bounded by an eight foot chain-link fence with an equally tall hedge hiding the interior from view. Wexler, standing holding the car door, effectively blocked any escape attempt around the front of the car. Ronnie saw the only possibility would be to scramble over the

top of the car itself where Mr. Abdul would surely nab him before he got ten feet away. Ronnie groaned in resignation and climbed out of the car.

Less than ten minutes later the Mercedes drove off with two fastidiously dressed occupants while Ronnie writhed and moaned, face down in the oily grit of the parking lot.

## **Chapter 8**

The whole band was on a high at how well things were going. Chauncette was a tremendous drawing card for live performances, but they all believed their sound was more than good enough for recording—if they could get a major distributor interested. And their large, enthusiastic audiences could make that happen. It was a can't-miss two-pronged attack: a breathtakingly sexy lead singer for live tours and top-notch rock music. They were confident that they had all the makings of a promoter's dream.

As if her other attributes were not enough, Chauncette wrote many of their songs which, naturally, fit her means of expression perfectly. The guys greeted each new song with enthusiasm, too, especially Greg—and Cody. Greg had been trying for days, ever since his talk with Nadine, to get just a couple of minutes alone with Chauncette but the ubiquitous Cody did not permit it. Instead, Greg found himself returning the favor by making it a threesome every time he saw Cody hovering around her. This attempted one-upsmanship did little to endear Cody and him to each other, though Chauncette seemed to relish being in the middle.

From a competition standpoint, Cody clearly had the upper hand. His parents were loaded and he grew up the proverbial spoiled rich kid. That is, if one could call still sponging off your parents growing up. They had just bought him a brand new SUV with every conceivable option and kept his wallet full under the

guise that he needed to focus on his music. Cody was average at best as a musician but his folks' money guaranteed he'd be with the band for the long haul. They were the ones orchestrating—and footing the bill—for the upcoming Peasant Danger video. Besides his wealth, Cody had another advantage in that he and Chauncette appeared to be kindred spirits. Each had an exceptionally large ego and seemed content with the pleasure of the moment. The difference being, to Greg, that in Chauncette's case the conceit was warranted. It fascinated Greg how a guy who thought himself hot stuff was nauseating while a beautiful woman who did so became even more alluring. No doubt Chauncette would not be put off by Cody's inflated ego; she would know she was superior to him anyway.

But Greg knew that if there was a likely candidate for odd man out it was unquestionably him. He barely scraped by, wasn't into raucous partying and bars, and was looking for a long-term relationship; none of which could be said of her. Still, he would not entertain the possibility of giving up on her, not even for a second. He and Cody would continue to duel for her affections and leave the choice to her. However, it was driving him crazy not to be able to get her alone.

His chance finally came quite unexpectedly when he decided to get to a rehearsal early and re-string his guitar. To his surprise he arrived to find Chauncette also there early—alone.

She was working on lyrics for the second verse of her latest song. There was a half-empty beer bottle setting beside her.

“Hi, Chauncette,” said Greg as his brain struggled to find a way to get a conversation going.

She looked up and stared at him for an uncomfortably long moment then gave a sly grin. “Hi there, Greggy.”

“I'm not disturbing you, am I? Wouldn't want to disrupt those fabulous creative juices of yours.” He gave a nervous little laugh.

“No problem.” She smiled as if she knew something he didn’t, then began writing on her pad again.

Much as he had hoped she might help keep the conversation rolling it did not seem to be happening. He stood next to her for another uncomfortable moment feeling like a fourth grader trying to get enough nerve to give a classmate a valentine. She finally looked up at him and raised her perfect eyebrows expectantly.

It suddenly occurred to Greg that he had focused so much on trying to orchestrate an opportunity to ask her out, he had never stopped to decide where “out” was. Time to stop thinking so much and just go for it, he decided. “Know what? You’re gorgeous. How about letting me take you to dinner? Someplace fairly nice, y’know, where they serve prime rib or lobster or something?”

“Tonight?”

Greg had not expected anything that quick. “W-Well, sure, if you’d like provided I can get reservations and all.”

She grinned and for the first time since he had known her she seemed to lose that I-know-something-you-don’t-know persona and react genuinely. “I’d like that, Greg.”

Greg exhaled noisily. “Great. Where? I mean, what kind of food do you like?”

“Oh, I’m not too picky. But Italian is my favorite. I absolutely love the shrimp Alfredo at Staley’s. Of course, that’s not exactly upscale.”

Greg was thrilled to hear that she did not look down on a place that catered to ordinary people. “That would be great. Staley’s it is. I’ll pick you up at seven, okay? You want to take in a movie or anything?”

The sly look came back to her face. “No. We can just spend some time together, don’t you think? I’m sure we’ll find something to do.”

Greg laughed, a bit too loudly. “Absolutely. I’ll be by at seven then.”

She smiled and went back to her writing. Dismissed, Greg walked away and put the new strings on his guitar.

Greg picked Chauncette up at her place. Except for performances when she wore outfits designed to stir up the audience, he had never seen her in anything but tee shirt and jeans. Staley’s not being an elite establishment she had not dressed-up exactly. Nonetheless the form-fitting little sun-dress she wore left Greg breathless. He was certain that Eve herself—God’s own design—could not possibly have been more beautiful. When they arrived he hoped they would be seated in Nadine’s section but he did not even see her. When the drink orders were taken she asked for a gin and tonic while he ordered a mineral water.

“Mineral water? Gregg, are you a teetotaler?”

Although he was always a bit uneasy around Chauncette, fearing he would say something stupid and have her write him off as a dork, this did not intimidate him. He had been down this road dozens of times and had gotten used to it.

“Yep, that’s right. Dyed-in-the-wool.”

She gave a little smirk then narrowed her eyes at him. “Okay, I’ll bite. Why don’t you drink?”

Greg had long ago decided that trying to explain his abstinence from alcohol in terms of his faith served only to create confusion. Being a negative “I don’t” type of thing it served to reinforce non-Christians’ misperception of Christianity as just a bunch of restrictive rules rather than a magnificent relationship with God. So, rather than cast Christianity in a bad light he took a more practical approach to it. If in the process the discussion came around to his being a Christian he would certainly not shy away from confessing it.

“The better question is, why should I?” he said.

Chauncette shifted in her seat. “What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. What benefit would it be to me to drink alcohol?”

She gave a sort of incredulous chuckle and then stopped short. She had never heard it put that way before and, quite honestly, was having difficulty coming up with an answer. Finally she said, “I’d say it would loosen you up a little, Greggy. You seem to be wound pretty tight most of the time.”

He laughed. “If Cinco or anybody else who knows me heard you say that they’d think it was hilarious. I frustrate the daylight out of most people because I’m too laid-back. My sister Lisa tells me that if I heard the world was going to end at noon tomorrow I’d probably stay in bed till 11:30. The truth is I’m only keyed-up when I’m around you.”

Again she got that sly smile. “Me? Now why would that be?”

Their waitress arrived with the drinks and asked if they were ready to order, which they did. Chauncette seemed to have forgotten the question but Greg had not. He hoped it might open the door for him to relax around her.

“You asked me why I’m nervous around you. Can I be totally open and honest with you? Is that okay? I mean, first date and all?”

“Sure,” she said guardedly.

“I’d really much rather just be myself; let it all hang out as they used to say. But I can’t escape the feeling that if I did or said the wrong thing, committed a *faux pas* of some sort, you would just write me off as a nerd or something and that’d be it.”

“Oh, my. You are intimidated, aren’t you?”

“I guess that’s the word for it. But I’m hoping if we get to know each other a little better we can drop the masks and just be ourselves.”

“Mask?” She sounded a little miffed. “What makes you think I’m wearing a mask?”

He swallowed noisily. “Nothing particularly about you,” he lied. “Everybody wears them when they’re first getting acquainted. It’s natural; probably even pretty smart. You want to know you can trust someone before you open yourself up to them, right?”

She stared through him for a long moment while she took a drink. “You’re an interesting fellow, Greg Taylor.” She smiled and he returned it, wondering as always what was going on in her head.

“Chauncette,” said Greg carefully. “I would really like to get to know you well enough to get a handle on who you really are. Right now you’re just this magnificently talented and beautiful singer, sort of almost too terrific to be true. I’d like for us to go beneath the surface a little and—”

A tall figure approaching their table caught Greg’s attention.

“Hey, Les. What brings you here?”

“I uz just here talking about a website design with a client. Then I looked over and seen you two a-settin’ here and figured I’d stop and say ‘hey.’” He looked at Chauncette. “Y’all ever eat here before, Chon-SITT? Their food ain’t real fancy but it’s real good.”

“Wull, hey, Goober. Let me guess, you’d recommend the chit’lins and cornpone, right?”

He laughed gently. “Actually I’m partial to the veal parma-jonna myself. Anyway, I don’t want to interfere with y’all’s evening. I ‘spect I’ll come see y’all’s performance on Saturday night. Greg tells me you’re writing most of the music. I’m looking forward to hearing it.”

Greg interjected, “You know, Chauncette, Les is a bit of a songwriter himself.”

“Let me guess,” she retorted. “Bluegrass?”

“No ma’am,” said Les. “Mostly Contemporary Christian.”

“Oh,” came a clipped response from Chauncette. “Doesn’t sound like we’ll be collaborating on anything. Excuse me, I need to find the ladies room. I’ll be right back, Greg.”

Les watched Chauncette walk across the restaurant. He blew out his cheeks. “I gotta ask girls out more.”

“You kidding?” said Greg. “That’d mean you’d have to spend a few bucks—unless you took the girl to the Rescue Mission. I understand the food’s free there.”

“Great idea,” said Les dryly. “Or I could have her bring a sack lunch. Well, anyway I’ll leave y’all alone now. I just gotta say, though, that there is one fine lady.”

Les left and a minute later Chauncette returned. Greg noticed that every guy in the place watched her till she sat down.

“Your buddy gone?” she asked.

“Sorry about the interruption.”

“He puts that aw-shucks act on pretty heavy, don’t you think?”

Greg smiled. “Les is many things but disingenuous is not one of them. What you see with him is 100% genuine Les Dinwiddie.”

“Oh, so no mask, huh? He’s the exception?”

Greg thought for a moment. “No. He’s wearing one. Outwardly he merely admires you; inwardly he is awestruck with you just like every other guy who meets you.”

She smiled slyly. “You included?”

“Me especially.”

She looked down at her drink. His eyes drifted off across the room where he spotted Nadine.

“Oh, there,” he said. “That’s another friend of mine I’d like you to meet.” He waved at her and caught her attention then beckoned her. She shrugged and shook her head while pointing at her watch, the message being she was too inundated at the moment. Greg nodded and waved her off indicating he understood, even though he did not. Although she was busy she could surely take two minutes to drop over and say hello, could she not? He shrugged it off.

“Humph, guess she’s too busy right now. Maybe if it calms down after a bit. I don’t know if you can see her from where you’re sitting. Her name’s Nadine. She’s a nice gal—my sister’s best friend. Speaking of, do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Nope.”

There was a lengthy pause. “O-kay,” said Greg. “Guess family isn’t a favorite topic, huh?”

“That would be correct,” she said with finality.

“Gotcha. Not a problem. Still, you’re a bit of a woman of mystery. I don’t think any of us know much about your background; where you’re from and all. You from around here originally?”

“No. L.A. I moved up here after I graduated from high school.”

“Ah, SoCal, huh? Their loss is our gain, that’s for certain. Let’s see, I’ll bet you were the homecoming queen, the prom queen, a head cheerleader, and voted girl most likely to become a supermodel. Am I right?”

“Humph, not hardly. I wasn’t exactly a part of the in-crowd in high school.” Greg detected that there was a lot below the surface of those words. He decided not to do any probing.

“Well,” he said quietly, “wait till you become a household name with Peasant Danger. There’ll be a thousand people say you were their best friend growing up.”

She looked at him intently with a sincerity he had never seen from her. The mask had come off. “Greg, do you think that could really happen? Me—us—becoming that famous?”

“Us, maybe; you, definitely. You see, the difference is that once enough people see and hear you perform you’ll be a sensation no matter who your backup band is. Without you, we’re just another rock group. Fact is, if a recording deal comes through I’m going to recommend we change the group’s name to Chauncette Dupree and Peasant Danger—give you top billing.” Greg knew he was laying it on pretty thick but it was all true and he was delighting to see the excitement in her eyes.

Their food came and Chauncette had truly come to life. She talked on and on about the songs she was writing, arrangements, even ideas she had for videos for some of them. As they got into the car to leave the restaurant, Greg wondered what would come next.

“Well,” he said, “this is that time where you were sure we would find something to do. So what do you think? A sunset stroll? A moonlight drive? A bowl of chips and a video at my place?”

“How about my place?” she said.

“Sure,” he said, too obviously trying to be casual. Greg’s imagination began to take off again along with his nerves. He was back in intimidation mode again and anyone could see it a mile off. Chauncette looked over at him and immediately put the mask back on. He caught the very subtle shake of her head and the look that said *here we go again*. He was blowing it. He was starting to behave like a stallion around a mare in heat.

*Relax, he told himself. Stop drooling over her looks and try to get her talking again. Try to make the rest of the evening enjoyable for her without making her think you’re going to pounce on her any minute.* It was good advice

but he could not be sure that he would be able to follow it or, even if he could, that the damage had not already been done.

They went up to her apartment and found her roommate, the brown-haired girl who had picked up Chauncette a few days earlier, eating Chee-tos in front of the TV.

“Jen, this is Greg. Greg, this is Jennifer, the next Frank Lloyd Wright.”

“Oh, wow, studying to be an architect, huh?”

Jennifer scarcely moved. “At least he knows who Wright was,” she muttered. She leaned her head around towards him without actually bothering to look at him. “Thrilled to meet you,” she said dryly and leaned toward the screen indicating she did not want any further disturbance.

Chauncette gave a half-shrug and said, “Come on in the kitchen.”

He sat down at the table while she pulled two cans of beer out of the fridge. “You want—oh, that’s right, I forgot.” She put one back, opened the other for herself and lit up a cigarette. Greg squirmed uncomfortably.

“So,” she said exhaling a long stream of smoke, “how about you? Are you from here originally?”

“No, Sacramento. My folks still live up there. I moved down here in the middle of my senior year of high school.”

“In the middle? Why?”

He gave a short laugh. “Mostly to keep them from strangling me, I think. They had certain plans for me and I just wanted to get away. I turned 18 during the semester break and moved-in with a cousin of mine down here and finished school. I actually graduated. My parents weren’t too keen on my cousin for doing that but he has since moved back east so they’ve had to hate him from afar. Of course, they’ve gotten pretty good at that.” He caught himself. “Actually, that’s not really fair. They’ve changed tremendously over the past couple of years. I

think for the first time they're really happy. I just wish it could have happened sooner, when Lisa and I were growing up. Life would have been a whole lot better." He looked up at Chauncette and shook his head. "Parents. You know what I mean?"

A cold wind blew across her features. She crushed out her half-smoked cigarette. "Yeah. Look, Greg, I'm really tired. I hope you won't mind too much if..."

"Oh, no, no, it's—fine." He gave a little self-conscious laugh as he looked down at his watch which read scarcely 9:00.

She picked up on it immediately. "Oh, hey, no. It's nothing about you. I—here." She took his hand and smiled warmly. She gestured with her forehead that they should go outside. She led him by the hand down the steps to his car.

"Listen, Greg, I really had a good time tonight. I mean that. Please don't think I'm giving you the brush-off or anything. It's nothing like that." She looked deep into his eyes and put her arms around his neck. "Actually, I think you're a pretty special guy." They kissed a long, heart-pounding kiss and this time when he went for seconds she was more than accommodating.

"So if I ask you out again you'll say yes?" said Greg when they broke for air.

She backed away and that old Scarlett O'Hara look returned to her countenance. "If? You mean when, don't you?"

"Well, sure, of course," he said like a marionette whose string had been pulled.

"I'm counting on it; in fact, I insist."

"No problem there," he said to her back as she walked toward the building. "Where would you like to go?" He wondered if he should follow her.

She glanced at him over her shoulder as she continued walking. “Good night, Gregg. See you at practice.”

## **Chapter 9**

Wednesday had been breakfast shift for Lisa and that night she was discussing the letter from Charles A. Kragen with Clay after the kids had been put to bed. The doorbell rang and it was Les.

“Hey, what brings you here?” asked Clay with a grin. “It’s too late for supper.”

Les entered and feigned a wounded look. “I know that. But it ain’t too late for dessert is it?”

Lisa laughed. “I think there’s still some peach cobbler left. Coffee too, I assume?”

“It’s like she could read my mind,” said Les.

“Now there’s a frightening thought,” quipped Clay.

“Actually, I had dinner over at Stanley’s with a client and guess who I bumped into.”

“A waitress with a tray full of food? And it’s Staley’s.”

Les ignored him. “Greg and Chon-SITT DU-ree.”

“Who?” said Lisa as she sat a plate of cobbler in front of him.

“Chauncette,” said Clay as he brought coffee for everyone. “She’s the new sensation with Peasant Danger I’ve heard Greg mention.”

“He hasn’t mentioned her to me, at least not that I remember,” said Lisa. “And certainly not in any dating sense; I’d have remembered that.”

“So y’all don’t know if they’re serious-like or nothing, huh?” said Les. “Man, that there is one fine lady. You ever see her?”

“No,” said Clay. “We haven’t caught one of their performances in several months.”

“I’d heard they were doing really well but I hadn’t heard that she was the reason,” said Lisa. “Really a knockout, huh?”

“Hoo-wee, that’s a fact.” Les shoveled an overtaxed forkful of cobbler into his mouth.

Lisa and Clay chuckled. “Sounds like you’re trying to find out if she’s spoken-for or if you can pursue her,” said Lisa.

“Nawp,” said Les. “She and I don’t move in the same circles, as they say. I was more interested in what y’all thought about Greg getting involved with a gal like that.”

Now he really had their attention. “A girl like what?” said Lisa.

Les cleared his throat. “Well, she ain’t exactly the sweet, innocent, take-home-to-meet-ma-and-pa type.”

“No? What type is she?” There was concern in Lisa’s voice.

Les shook his head as he chewed another mouthful and rinsed it down with coffee. “I’d say she’s more the lead-a-guy-around-by-the-nose, tease-but-don’t-please type. She’s one of them gals that uses guys and then th’ows ‘em on the refuge heap. Y’know, all conceited and mysterious and never give a straight answer. Bad news.”

“Sounds like you know her pretty well,” said Clay.

“Nah. I only met her twicet but I reckon it don’t take no genius to figure her kind out.”

Lisa looked over at Clay. “I guess maybe I better have a talk with Greg.”

Clay gave her a precautionary look. “Now Lisa, Greg is grown man—”

“I know but she’s not even a Christian, right Les?”

“I’d say definitely not.”

Greg took Lisa’s hand. “Neither was I, and Greg didn’t interfere when we started dating.”

“But Les has a knack for sizing people up very quickly and accurately,” countered Lisa.

“I know. But nobody wants to hear someone giving advice on whom they should date. Besides, there’s no indication they’re on the brink of engagement is there?”

“No,” said Les. “I don’t mean to start no panic or nothing. Just thought y’all already knew about her, that’s all. Tell you what though, that there is one fine lady.”

“Sounds like you’re using the term lady pretty loosely, Les,” said Lisa.

“Yeah. Maybe so, but them’s just the words that come to mind whenever I see her.”

“Speaking of your knack for sizing-up people,” said Lisa. “What do you know about this character?” She handed him the letter from Kragen.

“Humph. Charles Kragen? Know all about him. He was in the papers some years back. Sleazy ambulance chaser that finally tripped hisself up and got disrobed.”

“You mean disbarred?” said Clay.

“Yeah, well, anyhow after that he disappeared for a while then showed back up writing official-sounding scare letters for people at thirty-five bucks a pop. He ain’t had a real case or been in courtroom for better’n four or five years now. See that address on his card? That’s one of them old-timey little second-floor offices above them pawnshops and payday loan places down in the poor

section. He's probably still trying to use up his supply of letter paper with his old address on it."

"Well, we're not going to know what his office is like," said Clay. "We're not going."

"Clay," said Lisa. "I know that's what we talked about but I've just been thinking. Maybe we should go. It would give us a chance to confront that rat over the need to sign the adoption papers. Who knows? Maybe a couple of hundred dollars would get us what we want and get rid of him for good. I can't believe it would take much. He always was a small-time operator."

## Chapter 10

Greg arrived at practice with several mix-and-match date scenarios in mind. He would suggest various options until he hit on one she really seemed enthusiastic about. All of them contained a period of time where they could spend some more time getting to know one another. He felt this was an absolute necessity if he was ever going to solve this enigmatic woman whose entire persona changed with every passing breeze. Finding the opportunity to ask her out would once again be a challenge but, emboldened by his first success—if that’s what it had been—he was less concerned about it. Fortune seemed to be smiling on him when Cinco told him that Cody and Stix had gotten tied-up in traffic so the session would be starting about a half-hour late. While trying not to appear too eager, Greg immediately found Chauncette. She was sitting on a stool composing as usual, using a large speaker as a table. As he approached her from behind she was pouring a small amount of Seven-Up into a tumbler a third of the way full of bourbon. He hesitated as she took a sizable drink waiting until she had put it down to walk up to her.

“Hi,” he said brightly.

“Oh, hi Greg,” she said somewhat absently. He pulled up a stool next to her.

“Okay so I’ve got several choices for you,” he said.

“Choices?”

“For where we’re going out next.”

She nodded slowly, then put down her pencil and turned to face him. “Look, Greg, you said that we all wear masks and in my case it’s true. I’m going to do something I’ve never done for a man before and reveal what’s behind my mask. You seem to be a nice guy—pretty naïve but nice enough that I feel like I ought to be straight with you.” She took a big swig of her drink as if bolstering her courage.

“See, I have a burning distrust of men in general. To me all men, and I mean *all*, have only one interest when it comes to women: conquest. They want to conquer her emotionally and physically. In some men physically means by brutality; in all men it means sexually. If she’ll give him what he wants directly, he’ll take it. If she won’t, he’ll pretend, he’ll lie, he’ll say or do anything to deceive her into giving-in to him. If none of that works and he’s not the brutal type, he’ll dump her and look for another conquest.” She took another long drink.

“Whoa,” Greg said with a grimace. “You must have gotten involved with a pretty rough group somewhere in your past.”

She gave a quick cynical laugh. “That’s an understatement, although probably not in the context you’re thinking.”

“Oh?”

She looked off toward the wall behind Greg, clearly preparing herself to reveal something long hidden. “My dad was a beast. He beat my mother up every time he got drunk; and he got drunk a lot. I remember him slapping me across the room on several occasions but most of the time I was little enough to hide and stay out of his way. I was only five when, in a drunken stupor, he wrapped our car around a tree. It was fatal and fortunately neither of us was with him. I say fortunately but in some ways I’m not so sure. It couldn’t have been six months later my mom brought Barry home. He was sweet as sugar for a couple of months

until they got married. Immediately he turned out to be just like my dad. Well, actually worse. He didn't need to be drunk. He'd beat my mother for any reason or no reason at all. As I got older and it wasn't so easy to hide in a corner anymore he beat me, too. A few times I tried to defend my mom and it's a wonder I don't have a fractured skull. The really pathetic thing is that she told me to butt-out, too, and not just for my protection. In her sick, twisted way she was his enabler. I watched in horror as time after time she literally crawled around his feet apologizing for being alive."

Chauncette paused to wipe the tears off her cheeks and take another drink. Greg felt he ought to say something but for the life of him could not think what.

She continued. "It used to make me physically ill to see her humiliate herself that way. He'd either laugh at her, beat her some more, or drag her off to the bedroom and use her. As soon as I was old enough to stay with friends I'd try to spend as much time at their homes as I could; always walking a tightrope that I might be away too long or too late and get brutalized when I got home. Finally, the day before my twelfth birthday he ran off with a younger woman. It was the greatest present I ever got. For over two wonderful years mom and I had an almost normal life. We were dirt poor but at least there was peace and no more living in fear. Then she hooked up with Mike. They dated occasionally for a few weeks and then she brought him home. What a creep. You know how some guys just undress you with their eyes? I guess that's not something a guy would know."

"No, I know what you mean," said Greg. "My sister Lisa has talked about that before. It's a factor of woman's intuition, I think."

"Well at fourteen I was quite mature and looked closer to eighteen. One look at me and all of the sudden he was gaga over my mom. Within two weeks he had moved in with us. He didn't waste any time either. Time and again he

‘accidentally’ walked in on me when I was dressing or in the shower. The locks didn’t work so I used to pile things in front of the door to give me enough time to shout him away before he could get in. I had blinds and curtains over my bedroom window. One night as I was getting ready for bed I noticed that the curtains were parted slightly and rolled back so they would stay, and the blind was up a couple of inches. I didn’t remember them being that way before so I can’t be sure how long they had been like that. I hurried over to shut them and heard footsteps running away. A minute later that disgusting peeping Tom came in the front door. For several months he spent all his time trying to scheme some way of getting me alone and I spent all my time avoiding him. Finally a few weeks before my fifteenth birthday he announced to my mom and me that he was going to do something special for my birthday. He had rented a cabin with money we didn’t have so he could take me on a camping trip—just the two of us—for some father-daughter type ‘bonding.’ It was for the good of us as a family, he said. That was enough. I told my mom that I wouldn’t go even if she came along and absolutely wouldn’t go with him alone. For once she made a rational decision. She arranged for me to go live with my best friend’s family immediately. I lived there till I finished high school and moved up here. Less than a year later my mom was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer and Mike took off. She only lasted a couple of months. The day she died I vowed I would never get down and crawl on my knees for anybody. And when it comes to men, *I’m* going to be the conqueror.”

She looked Greg in the eyes. “So, consider yourself warned.”

Greg, genuinely moved, spoke slowly. “You must have amazing resilience to have held on to your sanity. I can’t even begin to imagine what that must have been like. I know this is what you would expect me to say but I have to say it anyway: Not all guys are like those animals. Personally I cannot fathom a

man striking any woman much less his own wife. And I'm not on a testosterone-induced prowl. If that's all I wanted there are plenty of places around town where I could be accommodated. I'll tell you what I'm after. I'm after a woman with whom I can enter a lifelong relationship of love, trust, and respect."

Chauncette rolled her eyes. "Oh, *please*. Mr. Clean himself. Wouldn't knock the fuzz off a dandelion; never had an unchaste thought. Tell me, did you write the Boy Scout pledge, too? You're going to sit there and tell me you have no desire to conquer me, *physically*? That the creeps that ruined my childhood were just a rare set of amazingly bad coincidences because most men are pure and noble like you are? Give me a break."

Greg fully understood her hostility. Who could blame her? And some of her points were difficult to counter. Being as breathtakingly desirable as she was, nearly every guy she encountered really did have an ulterior motive lurking somewhere in his heart. Greg swallowed noisily as he realized that included him. Regardless of all that, though, Greg was convinced that, with the exception of Lisa at her lowest point, Chauncette needed to know the love of Jesus more than anyone he had ever met.

"Look," he said. "I'm not trying to convince you that most men are pillars of virtue. We're all flawed. So are all women. But there are people—men included—that really understand what love is. When someone loves another person it's not about conquest. It's about wanting what's best for that person even more than for yourself. That's what Jesus taught and, being a Christian, that's what I believe."

"Oh brother," groaned Chauncette. "I might have known. A holy roller. I thought there was something weird about you. So now here comes the pitch, right?"

“Chauncette, this isn’t about me pitching anything. You’ve never known a father’s love, only pain, rejection, fear, and abuse. But you do have a Father’s love—an unconditional love that is pure and total. In your heavenly Father’s eyes you are infinitely valuable; so much so that He eagerly awaits the day you come to His open arms. But unlike your other so-called fathers, He won’t force you to do anything; not even to come to Him. It is totally your choice whether to accept His incredible love or to ignore it.”

“Okay, choir boy, answer me this. If this God of yours is so loving and all powerful, where was He when my mom and I were being beaten senseless? I tried the religion thing. When I was ten I started going to Sunday school with one of my friends. I thought maybe God could end the nightmare that was my life. They taught me to pray. So I did. I prayed over and over that God would get rid of Barry so he wouldn’t hurt my mom and me anymore. But He didn’t lift a finger to help us. So I concluded that either He wouldn’t, meaning He wasn’t so loving after all; or he couldn’t, because He didn’t exist. Either way I was wasting my breath.”

“I thought you said that when you were eleven He did get rid of Barry.”

This brought Chauncette up short. Then she became furious. “Well then He sure took His own sweet time. It should never have happened to begin with. Why would God do that to us?” Tears of hurt and anger filled her eyes. “I was only a little girl. Why would He have punished me like that?”

Greg, on the verge of tears himself, spoke very quietly. “Chauncette, you of course have every right to be upset about what happened to you and your mom. But God didn’t do that to you. Evil, godless men did that. It was the absence of God’s love in your home that allowed that to happen. Look, my upbringing was nowhere near as bad as yours. But it wasn’t any picnic either. My parents were supposedly Christians. Unfortunately their understanding of Christianity was

horribly distorted. They were strict, cold, and hyper-critical of us kids over everything. And that wasn't just my dad but my mom as well. I had it bad enough but my sister Lisa had it even worse. When she rebelled and ran off they effectively disowned her. When she got pregnant out of wedlock, they wouldn't see or even acknowledge their granddaughter for three years. I miraculously happened to find what real Christianity was all about—forgiveness, love, peace, and a wonderful relationship with God the Father Himself through Jesus His Son. Then Lisa found the Lord when she was at the very brink of suicide and her life has been one of joy and thankfulness ever since. A couple of years ago my parents finally found the true faith and have tried to make up for lost time by showering us and their grandkids with love. I can honestly say my relationship with them is everything I could want. I wish it could have come sooner but I'm certainly glad for this second chance. See, God is the God of second chances—of starting over. He can give you a brand new start.”

She got a sardonic grin and slowly shook her head. “Humph. So here's a new twist on the male conquest thing. Conquer Chauncette for Jesus. Well, that ain't gonna happen, choir boy.”

“I know”

The statement surprised her. “Oh, so I'm too much of a challenge even for Him, huh?”

“No, definitely not. It's just that nobody can ‘conquer’ someone for Jesus. You have to come to Him on your own. No one can force, coerce, or manipulate you into giving your life to the Lord. No one can and He won't. He wants you to accept His love, His forgiveness, and His grace of your own free will. Anyone who doesn't come to Him wholeheartedly hasn't come to Him at all regardless of any external appearances. Jesus won't conquer you but if you give Him your heart of your own free will, He'll be the best friend you could ever have.”

She stared at Greg for a long moment, thinking hard about what he had just said. Suddenly her face changed as if her mind were coming back from a place she was afraid to venture. She picked up her drink. “You go ahead and have your hallelujah meetings and drink your milk-and-honey cocktails. I’ll pass, Bible-boy. And keep all that Jesus-talk away from me.” She downed the rest of the drink and stormed off.

He made a concerted effort to blend into the scenery for the practice session that followed, not even horning-in when Cody blatantly flirted with Chauncette. He thought it best not to add any fuel to her fires of irritation with him. He was actually surprised that she didn’t openly criticize him for his faith.

Just before she left she walked up to him and said with something akin to embarrassment, “Can I trust you not to repeat what I told you to anyone?”

“Of course, Chauncette. You have my word it will go no farther.” As she turned to leave he added, “Thanks for trusting me enough to be so open.”

She smirked and shook her head as if to say she could not believe she had been stupid enough to do so.

As he drove home his mind was a muddle. He needed someone to talk it out with. That meant either Nadine or Lisa and Clay. Clay and he were more than brothers-in-law; they had become close friends. Clay was sharp but of course could not present the female perspective. Lisa was great to talk to, and her love for her brother was undeniable. But she was a fixer—always able to come up with a sound practical solution. That’s what made her so exasperating sometimes. He hated her being right when her advice was for him to endure a lot of hassle and embarrassment to solve some situation. Nadine on the other hand was more of a listener who helped him reach his own conclusions. That made her come across as far less judgmental. He headed for Staley’s.

## Chapter 11

“So, anyway Nadine, I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone the details but like I said, she had a really rough childhood. Yet my telling her about Jesus basically accomplished nothing except to give her fuel to ridicule me. I just don’t know what to do next.”

Nadine plopped her head back on her sofa and stared at the ceiling. She looked tired. After a long pause she shrugged and said, “Some people just aren’t ready to receive the gospel. Remember the parable of the sower? The seed that fell along the pathway?”

Greg waited expectantly for her to say more. Once it was clear she was through he cleared his throat. “Well, yeah, I know that. But she has endured so much and so obviously needs the Lord. I mean, she’s such a lovely young woman. I just know that she can be beautiful inside, too. Y’know what I’m saying?”

Nadine closed her eyes and took a long, weary breath. Her face was the definition of discouragement. “Yeah. No. I don’t know. I guess I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Nadine, you’re my advisor, my confidante. I just want you to help me figure out a way reach her—to understand what she’s really feeling. You’re a woman, you know these things.”

“Humph. So you noticed I’m a woman, huh? And she’s a ‘lovely’ woman, right?”

Greg furrowed his brow in confusion and sort of half-nodded.

Nadine exhaled a quick, sardonic laugh then slowly shook her head. She could hold it in no longer. Her chin began quivering as a big tear rolled down her face.

“Nadine?” said Greg softly. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry. I’m just sick and tired of being everyone’s confidante, trying to read everyone else’s feelings.” She began crying outright. “What about my feelings?”

“What do you mean? Nadine, you’re important to me. You’re one of the best friends I’ve got. And you’re so caring and levelheaded. I’ve come to rely on you.”

She jumped to her feet. “Well go rely on somebody else. Just leave me alone.” She walked over and faced the wall, her back to him. She pulled out a Kleenex and cried softly into it.

Greg walked over to her, dumbfounded. “I don’t understand why you’re so upset. I’ve never seen you like this. Did I say something wrong?”

“Greg, just please leave,” she said sternly, continuing to snifle.

“Well, all right, if you want me to,” he said with noticeable irritation. “But first just tell me why on earth you’re so upset.” He watched her as she turned her face upward toward the ceiling, tears still streaming from her closed eyes. “Nadine, I’m not leaving until you tell me, so you might as well—”

She whirled around and screamed at him, “Because I’m in love with you, you thick-headed oaf!” His open-mouthed countenance exactly matched her description of him as he watched her fling herself onto the overstuffed platform rocker and weep aloud.

“You—you what?”

Her shoulders sagged as she looked up at the ceiling. “I love you,” she whined. After several attempts to get her crying under control enough to speak she added, “And it really hurts.”

He stared off into space and spoke slowly, pausing between each word. “I had no idea, Nadine. It’s just so sudden. When? I mean, how long—” He shrugged the rest of the question.

“Oh, not long,” she said angrily wiping her eyes. “Only about six years!”

“Six years? Nadine, why didn’t you—I mean, you never—” He looked at her and smiled. “Well, that’s nothing to be so upset about,” he said softly. As he walked over to her a light of understanding came into his eyes. “Oh. Oh my goodness. Here I’ve been telling you all about how beautiful Chauncette is and how crazy I am about her. No wonder you’re upset.”

Nadine clenched her fists and said through gritted teeth, “Greg, please go. Now.”

“Nadine, I’m so sorry. I never would have, you know, said all that to you if I’d had any idea it would hurt you. You believe me, don’t you?”

She began to cry again in earnest. “Greg, I’ve been humiliated enough for one night. For the last time, will you please have the decency to leave me in peace?”

He looked at the floor in shame. “Okay. I’m just really sorry. I’ll make it up to you somehow. You really are one of my best friends, you know.” He headed for the door. “Maybe when we’ve had a chance to talk this out—”

“Greg, I don’t want to be your advisor anymore. Go talk to Lisa. Let her help you with ‘the woman’s perspective.’”

“Nadine.”

She got up and hurried into the back part of the house. Still stunned, he left and quietly closed the door behind him. *This is getting weirder by the minute*, he thought. *Guess I better try Lisa and Clay.*

\* \* \*

Lisa was at the dining table pouring a Diet Coke while Greg and Clay sat on the sofa in the living room.

“She said she had been in love with me for six years. Six years! Can you imagine? I mean, did you know about her feelings for me, Clay?”

Clay turned down the corners of his mouth. “No. Never would have guessed.”

Lisa rolled her eyes and slowly shook her head. She started to speak but Greg spoke first.

“This has been one of the most confusing days of my life. I don’t know what to do now. I don’t know what to say to Chauncette or how to try to fix my relationship with her. Or even if I should try to fix it. As for Nadine, she was really upset. She acted like she never wanted to see me again. I just don’t know what to do. You got any ideas, Clay? What would you do?”

“Boy, this is a tough one. I haven’t got a clue.”

Lisa rolled her eyes so hard they actually closed. “Clayton Osborne that is the first insightful thing I’ve heard out of either one of you since this conversation started.”

Clay’s eyebrows shot up in surprise as Lisa got up and walked over to the two of them. “Sweetheart,” she said to Clay, “you know that I love and honor you with my whole heart. But do me a favor and just sit right there on the sofa and keep quiet.” Clay folded his arms and sat back, a smirk on his face. Lisa was taking control of the situation and when she got this way there was no denying

her. There was also invariably a solution to a problem by the time she was done. He was more than happy to sit back and watch. She was marvelous.

Then she pointed to Greg with one hand and to a chair at the dining table with the other. “You, come over here and sit down.”

“Now what have I done?” He looked questioningly at Clay who merely shrugged in reply.

As he sat at the dining table, Lisa got a pad and pencil from next to the phone and sat opposite him at the table.

“All right. We’re going to get some things settled once and for all. Okay?”

Greg squinted suspiciously at her. “Okay.”

“Good. Now, describe to me your ideal woman. Not anyone you actually know or anything, just describe the perfect woman for you.”

“You mean like she’s about 5’5” tall with blue eyes—”

The look of disgust on Lisa’s face cut him short. “Gregory Allen Taylor, don’t make me come over there.”

“Wha-ut? You told me to describe my ideal woman.”

She closed her eyes as if trying to control her temper. “Greg, I swear I’m going to clobber you with something. Try to use at least a few brain cells and focus here for a minute. I’m not asking you what she would look like; I’m asking you what kind of person your ideal woman would be.”

“Okay, okay, lighten up. I just didn’t understand. You mean like, she’d be intelligent, industrious, that kind of thing, right?”

“Yes,” she said as if speaking to a child, “very good,”

“All right. But, you know what? This might sound really shallow, but she would have to be attractive. I don’t mean a beauty queen—maybe even nobody else would think she was—but I’d have to think she was. Know what I mean?”

Lisa smiled gently and wrote on the pad. “That’s actually very astute, Greg, and very honest. We just might be getting somewhere without my having to strangle you. Now go on.”

He counted points out on his fingers as he spoke. “Okay, let’s see. Like I said before, she’d be intelligent and hard working. Plus she’d have a real good sense of humor. And she’d be kind—really care about people, y’know? Especially me. I mean, she’d be affectionate, tenderhearted and sensitive. But still be her own person. I guess what I’m saying is she’d be independent enough to get by on her own, but would love me so much she wouldn’t want to. She would be gentle and, at the same time, strong. A positive, optimistic person who looks for the good in life. She would also be a godly woman whose heart is fully committed to Jesus—the kind of woman that would actually help me grow as a Christian. She’d be someone I’m compatible with—you know we’d have similar attitudes about things. I’m not saying we’d think exactly alike, but have more in common than different, especially in the real basics of life. Um, I don’t know, I guess that’s about it.”

Lisa finished listing the attributes he had outlined. “Greg, that was excellent. Now, we need to ask a couple of questions. Who, that you know, does this sound like?” She read off the list again.

When she looked up, Clay had joined them at the table and said, “I think it sounds like you, sweetheart.”

She smiled slyly. “Okay, you are officially on my good side. You are welcome at the table.”

She looked back at Greg. “From what I’ve heard, I’ll tell you who this does *not* describe, Greg. Chauncette. Am I right?”

“Humph.” He grinned in resignation and slowly nodded. “You are exactly right, Sis.”

“I’ll tell you someone else it sounds like,” said Clay. “It sounds a whole lot like Nadine.”

Greg looked down at his hands as Lisa subtly nodded her approval at Clay.

Greg blew out his cheeks. “I gotta go,” he said in somewhat of a daze. “This day has been too much for me. I don’t think my fried brain can handle any more. I’m going straight to bed and I might not get up for a week. ‘Night, guys, and thanks. I think.”

Greg was almost true to his word. He slept very late and got up feeling like he had a hangover. His head spun with questions he not only could not answer, he could scarcely muster the energy to think about. Yet he could not put them aside. What was he going to do now? How much of his feelings for Chauncette were just hormones? Was she really that wrong for him? Would she be hostile to him from now on? Was there any way for him to reach her for the Lord? Strangely, he felt very differently about her. He could not seem to generate those earlier fantasies of holding her in the moonlight. Now his thoughts of her always came back to finding some way to overcome her hostility toward God. And then there was Lisa’s list. Of course he had known from the start that Chauncette was not the Proverbs 31 woman every Christian man should seek. But was Nadine? Thoughts of her occupied his beleaguered brain more than anything else. Certainly she was godly—pretty near a model Christian as far as he could tell. And there was no question that they were compatible. But romance? That was another question. Was she attractive? Desirable? What if it were her in his arms in the moonlight? He tried to envision the scene in his mind and was surprised at what he saw. He looked at the clock. Nearly noon. *I think I need to eat out*, he decided and headed for the shower.

Staley’s was busy as usual. Nick Jackson was hosting. “Hey, Nick, how ya doin’?” asked Greg.

“Pretty good, Greg. Let’s see...” He looked at the seating chart.

“Hey, before you seat me, is Nadine on duty today?”

“Yeah. Pretty weird actually. She worked last night and then called this morning and practically begged Tom to let her work today.”

“Can you seat me in her section?”

“Hmm. Yeah, since you’re just a party of one I can get you that little table over by the kitchen. We usually only use it when we’re overcrowded but...”

“That’ll be great. You’re a pal, Nick.”

When Nadine rounded the corner and saw Greg sitting at the table she stopped in her tracks for an instant before recovering her cool and coming over to him.

“Hello, Greg,” she said stoically, handing him a menu.

“Hi Nadine,” he said with a smile. He looked so intently at her she felt self-conscious and furrowed her brows. He lowered his eyes to the table and slowly shook his head incredulously.

She leaned forward and said, “Something to drink?”

“Yeah, arsenic.”

Her look was one of increasing impatience. “Excuse me?”

“What else would you serve a complete blithering idiot?” he said.

“I’m not sure what blithering idiots drink; you might know,” she said dryly.

He leaned back and laughed. “Oh, Nadine, you are amazing. So am I. We’re both pretty amazing people; you in a positive way, me in a negative.”

Her eyes widened and she shook her head not having the mildest notion as to what he was talking about. “Are you going to order?”

“Nadine, what time do you get off today?”

“Greg, don’t. We’ll patch things up one of these days but not today.”

“I just want to get together with you—”

“Greg, I’ve got other tables that need me. Are you ready to order or should I come back later?”

“How about Monday?”

“You want me to take your order on Monday?”

“No, I mean to get together. You’re off Monday aren’t you?”

She closed her eyes in exasperation. “Your order?”

He took a deep breath. “Okay, okay. Steak sandwich and iced tea. And for dessert, your promise you won’t be angry with me.”

She took his menu and smiled gently. “I’m not mad at you, Greg. Honest.”

He truly believed her and did not press her further fearing that might indeed make her upset—something he was determined to avoid.

## **Chapter 12**

The business card address led Clay and Lisa to exactly the slummy over-a-pawnshop office that Les had predicted. The dingy hallway's bare light bulb revealed a small plastic slide-in-letter sign push-pinned to the wall next to the door marked 203. The sign read "KR GEN&A SSO C" and much of the frosting was worn off the glass inset of the door. They entered the office which barely had room for the two small, torn-vinyl chairs in front of the desk. Kragen, sitting behind the desk, had even less room than they did. Ronnie sat in a battered tan folding chair wedged into the lone narrow passage that allowed Kragen access to the other side of the desk. The room smelled old and there were stacks of books in every corner except where the door was, the lone overtaxed bookshelf next to Kragen being insufficient. Age, dirt, and cigarette smoke had turned the previously white plastic of the window blinds and of Kragen's undersized computer monitor a yellowish brown.

Kragen stood and greeted them too cordially. To Lisa's amazement Ronnie stood up, too, and offered a handshake. Her first reaction to seeing him was to involuntarily hug Clay's arm as her mind sent up a "Thank you, Lord, for rescuing me." Ronnie's first look at Lisa, on the other hand, caused a wistful look to come over him.

“You look good, Lisa—happy,” said Ronnie his speech hampered by a swollen cheek. “I’m glad for you. You deserve it.” He was subdued and sincere in a way she could never remember having heard him before.

It appeared to Lisa that time had not been kind to Ronnie. Either that or he had been on a recent bender. Besides the red welt, his face and eyes looked haggard and, despite his efforts to hide it, he moved very gingerly as if most of his body parts were tender.

“Clayton Osborne,” said Clay as he shook the men’s hands. He remained stoic, still not totally convinced this was a good idea.

“Could I offer either of you some coffee or ice water?” said the gravel-voiced Kragen as he pointed them into the worn chairs. The filthy office made the mere thought repugnant to Clay and Lisa as they fervently declined his offer.

Although scarcely a minute had passed Clay looked at his watch and abruptly stated, “Could we get on with whatever it is you have to say to us?”

“Of course, Mr. Osborne,” said Kragen. “Now, as I stated in my letter, there are certain rights that my client, Mr. Stubbs—”

“How much?” interrupted Lisa.

“Pardon?”

“How much, Ronnie? How much do you want to authorize Clay to adopt Terri?”

“Now really, Ms. Osborne,” said Kragen, “you must not make this sound like a *quid pro quo* transaction of some sort. Mr. Stubbs is not asking you to buy his rights to his daughter. However, since we recognize the need to do whatever is in the best interests of the child—”

“*His* daughter?” Lisa rose out of her chair. “Are you kidding? Tell me, super-dad, when is ‘your’ daughter’s birthday? Where does she go to school?”

What major surgery did she undergo three years ago? How do you spell her name?”

Clay reached up and took her forearm and she plopped back into the chair with a sigh. “What’s the use?”

“Look,” said Clay, “we don’t want to drag this out any more than necessary. Just get to the point which, as I believe my wife put very succinctly, is this: How much are you after?”

Kragen started to object then thought better of it. “We believe this can all be settled to everyone’s mutual satisfaction for the sum of \$12,500.”

The ensuing stunned silence was broken after a couple of seconds by Clay’s uproarious laughter. Lisa, grinning incredulously, rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Clay finally caught his breath and stood up to leave. “I must thank you, Mr. Stubbs, I haven’t had that good a laugh in a long time. Mr. Kragen, don’t bother bringing us any more of those absurd letters. C’mon Lisa.”

“One moment, Mr. Osborne,” said Kragen holding out a sheaf of papers. “I hold here fully signed and executed adoption papers, needing only your signatures.”

“And,” added Ronnie with an odd look of desperation, “we’ll take just \$10,500.”

Clay shook his head slowly. “Gentlemen, it doesn’t matter. As the hackneyed saying goes, you can’t get blood out of a turnip, even if we were dumb enough to submit to extortion.”

Kragen blustered, “Those are very strong words Mr.—”

Lisa jumped in, a look of disgust aimed at Ronnie. “I want to say ‘Same old Ronnie’ but this is off the map even for you. Good-bye, Ronnie, have a nice

life.” She and Clay exited quickly and were still exchanging head shakes and looks of amazement as they hurried down the hallway.

“Wait,” said Ronnie struggling to catch up to them.

Clay and Lisa exchanged glances, each with the unspoken question, “Should we or should we just keep on walking?” They stopped at the top of the stairway. Ronnie, struggling to hurry, finally reached them.

“Please,” he said, his eyes desperate. “I know this sounds like just a rip-off scheme but I really need, that is, we really need to get all this stuff settled once and for all. I’m not looking to keep coming back for more or anything.” He looked at Lisa. “I want what’s best for my—for your daughter. Do you really think having a dirt bag like me hanging around her would have been good for her? Would you have wanted me around? I could have done the visitation thing—gone to court even—but all that would have done is upset all three of us. She’s way better-off with the two of you. I know that.”

It was the most rational, sincere words she had ever heard from him and the regret and pleading in his eyes touched her.

“So, could we agree on just five thousand?” he asked. “Just that much?”

The spell was broken. It had come back to “what’s in it for Ronnie.” She gave Clay a determined look. “Let’s go,” she said tightly. They hurried down the stairs without another word to the pacing, frantic Ronnie.

### **Chapter 13**

Saturday night's concert was sold out and then some, the building bursting at the seams. Chauncette was on the top of her game but Greg's reaction was decidedly different. He could not look at her without flashing back to her tearful story of pain and betrayal. His heart genuinely ached for her. As if she could read his thoughts, she kept giving him sly little looks of disdain during the post-concert hubbub. She all but stuck her tongue out at him when Cody wrapped himself around her like an overcoat just before the two of them slipped out together.

Greg felt no resentment; his mind was still preoccupied with something entirely different. It continued to be that way at church the next morning. It was therefore not one of his deeper worship experiences. It was a struggle for him to take his mind off Nadine and their relationship for as much as a few minutes, even to focus on the Lord. They spoke amiably but the undercurrent was palpable. Their relationship had been irrevocably changed.

Shortly after he got home Greg got a call from Cinco purportedly to remind him of some trivial item. Cinco skillfully maneuvered the conversation to a mention that Chauncette and Cody had spent Saturday night together. The whole night. Greg knew it was not pleasant duty for his longtime friend but necessary to keep him from being played for a fool. Greg decided against trying to fake some upset reaction. Instead he told him what had happened to him and what he was planning.

Nadine's kitchen counter was covered with little plastic leftover containers which had been occupying so much of her refrigerator, most of which she was afraid to open. Such was the curse of trying to cook for just one. She was dressed in rolled-up blue jeans and a gray sweatshirt with the arms cut out and had a red bandana scarf on her head to keep the hair out of her eyes. She was just scrubbing the rotten-celery residue out of the refrigerator's crisper drawer when the doorbell rang. She sighed and wiped her hands on a dishtowel as she opened the door.

"Hi," said a spit-and-polished Greg.

"Hello, Greg," she said, her voice neutral. She held onto the door and stood in the opening, not inviting him to come in.

He fumbled nervously in his pocket for a few seconds and then held up two tickets. "Want to go to the movies? It's that new one just released. The one they've been talking about on TV so much. I already had to wait in line to get these."

She put her hands on her hips. "Greg, look at me. I'm a mess. I can't go anywhere."

He smiled sweetly at her. "I don't think you look bad at all. Besides, the show is not till eight. You've got plenty of time. Well, not all that time. I'm taking you to dinner first. That is, if you'll let me."

She shook her head. "Greg, I don't think—"

"Nadine, please." He looked down at his feet. "Let me get to know you." He raised his head and looked into her eyes. "As the beautiful woman you are, I mean. Not as 'my buddy, my sage advisor.' I want to get to know the caring, intelligent, and very lovely Nadine that I've been too blind to really see all these years. Please? I haven't been able to stop thinking about you ever since the other night and I'm going crazy. I know I didn't give you any warning, but I was afraid

you wouldn't even give me a chance if I tried calling first. If you've already got plans for tonight—" He looked down at the ground again then looked back up at her mischievously. "Then break 'em. Go out with me instead, y'hear?"

Her eyes welled-up as she smiled. "Looks like you've given me no choice but to say yes."

His look went from relief to excitement. "Well, aren't you going to invite me in?"

She frowned playfully and pointed to his car. "No, you get out of here. I have to go get ready and I'm not going to do it with you sitting drumming your fingers. Just tell me where we're going for dinner and when you're going to pick me up."

He grinned and said, "Bon Chance and you've got till six, okay?"

She smiled coyly, "Okay, see you then."

He was blown away at how beautiful she was in that sloppy outfit. *How could I have been such a moron for so long?* he wondered. As she started to close the door he said, "Oh, Nadine?"

"Yes?" She turned back around but he just stood there. "Did you want something?"

"Just this." With that he stepped forward and kissed her warm, soft lips for a long moment. When they parted he looked deeply into her blue-gray eyes and said, "I am so looking forward to tonight." He bopped down the stairs and into his car while she danced to her room and began hunting through her closet.

At 5:45 Greg, unable to wait any longer, knocked on Nadine's door. The long, slender frame that had elicited nicknames like beanpole and spaghetti-legs during her school days now had a very different effect. As she opened the door he literally gulped at her fashion-model looks. Her outfit hugged her in the way the designer had no doubt envisioned—a way that frustrated most women as being

unrealistic. Her swarthy complexion and soft brown hair accentuated the subtle blue-gray of her eyes. Greg again experienced amazement that not only he but also the rest of the male population had failed to appreciate her stately beauty. *Their loss*, he thought. *They had their chances but too late now. Not too late for me, though, thank the Lord.* Such was his state of infatuation that it thrilled him just to walk hand-in-hand with her.

The food was excellent, the ambiance perfect and the conversation delightful. Even so, Greg felt like he was wearing a hair shirt. There was something he wanted to say, that he needed to say, but an appropriate point in the conversation simply never arose. It was not something he could just blurt out. It needed the proper timing. Yet he was desperate to say it.

The movie, of course, afforded even less opportunity to talk. He kept wondering how a movie that was supposed to run from 8:00 to 9:45 could be taking six hours to finish. When it finally crawled to an end and they headed home, Nadine rattled-on somewhat nervously about the film the entire way.

“Want to come in?” she said even more nervously as he walked her to her door.

He took a deep breath and silently said a prayer of thanks. He tried to sound nonchalant. “Okay, sure.”

“Here, I’ll get that,” he said taking her jacket when they got inside.

“How about some coffee?” she asked as she headed for the kitchen.

“Love some.” He hung up their jackets and joined her at the kitchen counter.

She looked up and said, “So, what did you think of the movie? You never told me.”

He honestly could not even remember what it was about. “Um, seemed kind of long.”

“Really? Yeah, I guess I can see your point. That’s unusual for Howard. He’s generally better than that.”

They settled down on the sofa and he wanted more than anything for her to tuck her legs up and snuggle next to him. Instead she just sat next to him, picked up the remote and started some soft music playing. The conversational lull made her antsy to fill the void. She gave a little chuckle and said, “Boy, you should have seen this place when you stopped by today. What a mess. I got involved in cleaning out the fridge and everything else was in shambles. It’s a long ways from perfect but I feel like a magician for having gotten both it and myself presentable in such *short notice*.” She elbowed him playfully. Oddly, he did not seem as amused at her teasing as she expected. He smiled briefly and then got very serious. Any more small-talk and he would explode. He took her hand.

“Nadine.”

The tone in his voice made her gulp. “Yes?” she said softly. “What is it, Greg?”

He cleared his throat, increasing the mystery and raising her anxiety over what might be coming. “Ever since you told me, y’know, how you feel about me and all, I—well, it’s really affected me. I mean, it’s like a really myopic person getting his first pair of glasses. I see things so differently. Or I guess I should say I see you so differently. I’m not saying this very well, but I need for you to understand. It’s not that finding out that you care for me makes me think, ‘Hey, she likes me; that’s cool, I guess I should try to like her back,’ or anything like that. It’s more like suddenly some blinders have been removed.”

Nadine thought she might be following what he was getting at—and that it might be good—but she was by no means sure. She nodded for him to continue.

“Now it’s like every time I look at you—I mean *every* time—I feel my heart do something crazy and I want to—I just want to—I can’t explain it exactly.

When I kissed you today I literally couldn't help myself, and afterward I couldn't stop thinking about it. All day, all I've wanted was—was to—”

“To do it again?” she said with little grin.

“Oh, yes.” They kissed long and hungrily. When they parted he lolled back against the sofa as if he had just gotten off the Tilt-A-Whirl. “Whhhow,” he gushed. “You're terrific.”

Her heart felt like that of a perpetual Olympic also-ran who suddenly finds herself on the gold-medal stand. He reached up and gently caressed her temple down along her cheek, and her eyes slowly closed, belying the cartwheels of joy going on inside her. *After so long, thank you Lord. It's been worth the wait*, she thought.

“Since I'm spilling my guts, I need to tell you something else. Promise you won't get mad if I mention Chauncette?”

The mention of her name did disrupt the cartwheels a bit. “What is it? Go ahead, I won't get mad.”

“It's just that, whenever I kissed her, it wasn't like this. I never really enjoyed it. I was always wondering if she was laughing at me inside; or else wondering if she actually wanted to kiss me or was just stringing me along. She was a good kisser, I guess, but there seemed to be—I don't know, an ingredient missing or something.”

“Estee Lauder?” quipped Nadine.

“No,” he said laughing. “Now don't make fun of me, I'm trying to be serious. I think it's that when I kiss you it's real, genuine, like you are. I think maybe that's the difference. With you I'm not just kissing, I'm kissing Nadine. Does any of this make sense?”

She didn't answer. Instead she put her arms around his neck and looked directly into the stars in his eyes. “Greg, I know what the ingredient is that my

kisses have that hers didn't." She leaned in to kiss him again, and just before their lips touched she said, "Love."

Eventually she was curled up and tucked under his arm on the sofa, exactly as he had wanted her to be.

"Okay," he said after a long silence. "I may as well say it. Everybody else is going to anyway. I cannot imagine why I've been such a blind ignoramus all this time. I'm a slow-witted imbecile who has wasted literally years of my life that I could have been sharing with you. I have no idea why you didn't give up on me ages ago, but I praise God that you waited for me to come to my senses."

She looked up at him with misty eyes. "I didn't have much choice," she said quietly. "It's not that easy to stop loving someone."

He spoke slowly and deliberately. "You are an angel." She snuggled against him and they sat and basked in the joy of one another's company until well past midnight.

When he left for home, he felt a strange and wonderful finality. It was as if he had been in a years-long line at Disneyland, going through endless switchbacks until now, at last, his turn had come. The moment he had felt Nadine in his arms tonight, the thrilling, delightful and long-awaited ride had finally begun. Though he recognized that in his present giddy state his judgment was highly suspect, he felt certain that this relationship was a special one. Or, more aptly, *the* special one. He knew that the rush of infatuation could be enormously deceptive but he also was sure that this was different. He had been infatuated very recently—with Chauncette. It had been emotional, yes; in fact, a real roller-coaster. He had felt excitement, romance, passion—the whole gamut. But it had always been of the moment: her appearance, a conversation, their next meeting. Would the relationship survive? Could it be sustained another day; overcome the next obstacle? Not for one instant had he felt the deep, soul-thrilling confidence

that it was long-term—that *this* relationship was almost certainly forever. Yet that was exactly how he felt about Nadine. Because it had been such a very short time since his epiphany of who she really was, he had resisted with all his might saying or even thinking the word love. He would not cheapen it by tossing it around loosely after one date. Now, driving home with his heart singing the “Hallelujah” chorus, he gave in. *I love you, Nadine*, he thought. *Oh yes, I do indeed love you.*

## Chapter 14

“Hiya, choir boy,” said Chauncette, but with less bite than he would have expected. A smile bloomed on his face with the warm, peaceful knowledge that her opinion of him was of absolutely zero importance to him. Fetching, in an asset-emphasizing little outfit, she strode over to him and seemed to want to bury the hatchet. Into Greg’s mind walked Nadine and he felt their previous goodnight hug and kiss all over again. He felt a tiny twinge of sorrow for Chauncette that she could not know the exquisite joy of real, honest love. Nadine-like love. “You doing okay?” She sounded genuinely concerned.

His smile could never have been mistaken as being insincere. “Magnificent,” he said. “Hey, we gonna do one of those new songs of yours?”

She looked slightly nonplussed. “Yeah,” she said slowly. “I thought we might work on one.” She stepped closer to him and gently slipped her fingertips inside the front edge of his shirt. “Greggy, I think we can just put all that stuff we said last time behind us. Don’t you?”

He gave her a brotherly smile and took her hand in both of his. “Chauncette, something’s happened. We need to talk. But not now—after practice. It’ll keep till then. Let’s get started, okay?” He patted her hand and walked over to the stage.

She gave a little “this will be interesting” smirk and picked up her mike.

When the session ended she got her purse and sweater and strolled up to him as he was bundling up cables. “So, where are you going to take me for this little talk?”

“Oh, right over here’s fine,” he said pointing at two folding chairs off in the corner. She shook her head with an amused look but followed him and sat down.

“Chauncette, I’m not exactly sure what our relationship has been up to now. A sort of a casual dating relationship probably comes closest. I don’t suppose it’s been any secret to you that, for a while, I kind of hoped it would become more. I’m sure you’ve had that effect on a lot of guys. Well, to get right to the point, I’ve met someone.” He gave a short laugh. “Someone I had known very well for a long time. But now, at last, I’ve really met her. I’m crazy about her—she’s everything I could ever want. So, I guess you could say I’m not on the playing field anymore. I’m, like, down in the clubhouse. Whatever our relationship was, from here on it’s going to be different; but hopefully still good. You, the gorgeous, extraordinarily talented Chauncette and me the guitar player who will do everything he can to help and not harm your performance. And also a person you can count on to be there for you whenever and however I can be. I’m still your biggest fan. I’m just no longer interested in being your boyfriend.”

Greg had expected one of two reactions from her. The most probable, he thought, was that she would make some smart retort about him having found himself a little girlfriend—possibly with some derogatory allusions to his faith—but generally treat it as no big deal one way or the other. The blatant absence of depth in their relationship combined with her being able to pretty much have her pick of the litter when it came to suitors made it likely that she would have a replacement beau within the hour. By their next rehearsal she would probably

have a hard time remembering that she and Greg had ever been more than singer and guitarist.

Less probable, but by no means outside the realm of possibility was outright denial that they ever had anything that would qualify as a relationship. It would not have surprised him for her to choke back a laugh and ask him what on earth he was talking about. If this was her reaction, he pretty much expected her to make every effort to humiliate him for thinking he actually mattered to her.

Her actual response was completely unexpected.

“You’re dumping me? I can’t believe it. Where do you get off treating me like this? You preach a sermon at me and when I don’t start singing ‘Just as I Am’ you decide to give me the brush-off? Who do you think you are? What, my feelings don’t matter?”

He held up his hand to get her to stop for a bit, and shook his head like he was clearing the cobwebs. “I’m sorry, I’m confused. This is the first time you’ve ever given me any indication you had any feelings for me. There’s been a lot of pretense and playing me like a fish on a line, but the only feelings I could perceive were that you would occasionally tolerate my presence. Oh, and tease me with a kiss now and again.”

“What did you expect; me to drag you off to a bedroom somewhere?”

“Come on, Chauncette, you know better than that.”

“Oh yes, of course. I forgot. You’re wearing the breastplate of righteousness. Well, your holiness, I’m sorry if I didn’t fawn over you enough. I guess you expected me to giggle like a schoolgirl every time you looked at me?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but aren’t you the one who spent the night with Cody during this so-called relationship of ours? And the one who, when I opened my heart about my faith pretty much told me to go hang myself? I can’t imagine how I missed the part about you being head over heels in love with me.”

“Look, St. Gregory, nobody dumps me cold and gives me that ‘I want to be your friend,’ baloney. If you think you’re going to treat me like dirt and expect me to crawl around at your feet, you don’t know who you’re dealing with. Like I first told you, I never lose.”

Greg had gone from surprise, to confusion, to anger and was now back to confusion—he was no longer mad at her. “Chauncette, I don’t expect you to crawl at all. That’s the last thing I would want. Truthfully, I half-expected you to poke fun at me for even suggesting that we had a dating relationship. I’m sorry if I’ve made you upset or angry. I figured you’ve got so many guys drooling over you all the time you wouldn’t care about my absence from that group one way or the other. I only brought it up to you so you wouldn’t think I was mad at you or something when I suddenly stopped hovering around you every minute.”

“Listen, Greggy baby, it’s over between me and a guy when I say it’s over. Anybody who tries it any other way pays the price.”

Greg shook his head and gave a quick chuckle of astonishment. “Well, whatever. But it is definitely over—whatever ‘it’ was—with or without your say-so. It sounds to me like this is a whole lot more about your not wanting to lose a notch in your gun than any pain over losing me.”

“I already told you. I never lose. You will be sorry, count on that.” She got up and put her purse over her shoulder. “Too bad, choir boy, you didn’t know how good you had it.” She spun, gave a toss of her head and marched off. For his part Greg was still trying to decipher what that had been all about.

Nadine handed him a cup of coffee. “So what do you think she means? What can she do to you?”

“I can’t say exactly, but I have a general idea. Can I use your phone for a minute?”

“Sure.”

He keyed in a familiar number. “Hey, Cinc’, ‘sup?....Nothing, just hangin’ out with my honey....Yep, that’s right. Nadine’s my honey. Speaking of that, since Chauncette and I had sort of dated once or twice I figured I’d better tell her that I was off the market now that Nadine and I are crazy about each other. You know, so there wouldn’t be any scene or anything. I mean, you know how she always comes on to a lot of us. I didn’t want to have to tell her to stay away from me with a lot of other people around.... Right, I didn’t want to do anything to embarrass her. So, I took her aside after practice today.... Yeah, that’s why we stayed a little late. Anyway, she got really upset.... I don’t know. It completely blew me away. She acted like I was this big heart-breaker giving her a Dear John.... Yeah, I guess she did think of me as a boyfriend or something. Actually, no, I take that back. She’s just mad because a guy actually had the audacity to walk away from her. I’ll bet that’s never happened before. She’s always been the one to discard the guy after she’s through toying with him. Anyway, her ego’s pretty damaged over the whole thing, and she’s threatened to get even somehow.... Well, that’s just it, I don’t know. But I’m guessing it will have something to do with the band. You know, like a ‘he goes or I go’ kind of deal.... That’s just it; I don’t want either one. Not only because she’s so important to the band right now but I just don’t want there to be a bunch of squabbling and division within the group. The band is finally getting where it always wanted to be. I don’t want to see it torn apart now.... No, I don’t know how to iron it out either but I thought you ought to be prepared.... Okay, see you tomorrow, buddy. Bye.”

“Is he on your side?” asked Nadine.

“Cinco will always back me. He’s a good friend. But I don’t want to have a side. I just want the band to continue their success, and not cause them any trouble.”

“You’re not causing any trouble, Greg, she is. She’s playing the part of a jilted lover and it sounds like she can be pretty vindictive. I’m sorry, I know it’s wrong of me to be judgmental, especially when I haven’t even met her, but I don’t think I like her very much.”

“She’s not an easy person to like. I mean, she’s an easy person for a guy to desire but, if they allowed themselves to be honest, not even most guys would say they like her. And other women don’t seem to have any use for her at all—nor her for them. I can’t escape the feeling that she’s a pretty lonely person. I mean she has a lot of very shallow relationships but doesn’t allow herself to go below the surface with anybody. Maybe that’s why she had such a different view of our relationship. Maybe that’s as deep as it ever gets with her. Maybe that’s also why she drinks so much. I feel sorry for her.”

Nadine took his cup from his hand and placed it on the table. She sat in his lap and put her arms around his neck. “Now you make me feel wicked. I guess I need to love her whether she’s likeable or not. Sounds like she could use some prayer.”

“She definitely could. Of course, who couldn’t? And pray for the band. They’re going to need it, too.”

“Greg, why do you keep referring to the band as ‘they’?”

## Chapter 15

Greg tried to be as friendly as possible toward Chauncette during their next rehearsal but she remained no more than civil, avoiding him when she could. Toward the end she told the group they needed to talk.

“I’m not sure how to put this,” she said. “But we’ve got a problem with one of our band members.”

*Oh-oh*, thought Greg, *here it comes*.

“Greg’s been trying to lay this religion trip on me and it’s making me really uncomfortable. I just don’t know if I can continue with the band.”

Cinco was ready and stepped right up. “Chauncette, we’ve all known about Greg’s faith from the start. He talked to me about Jesus years ago when we were just kids. But he always lays it out nice and clear and then leaves it there for you to deal with. He’s never hassled me about it in all this time. How about the rest of you guys, Greg ever do any arm-twisting with you?”

Jerry shrugged and shook his head. “Just like you said, Cinc’. He told me what he believes once, and that the door was open for me. He’s never brought it up since. I’ve never felt pressured or anything.”

“How about you, Stix?”

“Nah, man, Greg’s always been cool with me. He told me once how the Lord saved his niece’s life. Like a miracle deal. You can’t blame a guy for

talking about something like that. I'd be down with the Lord doing some miracles in my life. Greg ain't no problem.

“Cody?”

“I think he knows he better not try any of that holy-roller stuff with me,” growled Cody. “But if he’s pestering Chauncette with it then I agree with her, he needs to go.”

“Wait a minute,” said Cinco. “Why does anybody have to go anywhere? Chauncette, you’re not wanting to tear up the group are you? Just when it looks like we might hit it big? Over nothing?”

The looks from all but Cody indicated that the him-or-me ploy was considered an overreaction. Time for her trump card.

“No, of course not. It’s just that I doubt that his views of things are going to square with the new direction I think we need to go.”

“New direction?” said Cinco.

“Yeah. I think what we need to really stand out from all the other wannabe’s is to push the envelope. Not with every song, but put some in that will make people catch their breath. Here, I’ve written a new one. It’s called ‘I’ll Never Say “Enough”’ see what you all think. I’m willing to bet that Greg will have a problem with it.”

She got them on key and got Greg, Stix, and Jerry rolling on a rhythm that Greg had to admit was dynamite. She sounded out the melody being careful not to use any actual lyrics. Cinco picked up the lead quickly and when Cody added the keyboard Greg knew this was the best song she had ever done. You could not sit still listening to it and the tune was one of those that immediately implanted itself in your brain. It had hit written all over it. After the band got the gist of it they took it from the top using their considerable musical talents to embellish it even further. Then she began to sing. Her voice was the final, perfect ingredient

until he heard the lyrics. The raunchiest high-school boys' locker-room talk was mild in comparison. This along with Chauncette's movements which stopped just short of a striptease gave the whole thing a definite X rating.

"So, what do you think, choir boy?" she said after she finished.

"Is this where we want this band to go?" said Greg to the group.

"Yeah, Chauncette," said Cinco. "That's a great song but, wow, do we really want to go there? I mean, is that what we want to be?"

"Look," she said. "Ever since I joined this group we've done nothing but have greater and greater success. So far, I'd say my ideas have done pretty well, wouldn't you?"

"Chauncette's right," said Cody. "She hasn't been wrong yet. I think it's great, as long as I don't get so caught up watching her that I forget to play."

All eyes turned to Greg. He gave a sad little smile. "Tell you what. How about we sleep on it and make a group decision on it first thing when we get together tomorrow. That okay with everybody?"

Everyone agreed, and they began wrapping-up to leave. A lean African-American man in his twenties with his head shaved walked in and stood near the front door.

"Cinco," said Greg. "Let's talk for a minute." He beckoned him to follow him over by the man at the door. "Cinco, you know Antoine Lewis?"

"Yeah, I've seen him around some. How you doin' man?" The two shook hands.

"Antoine's an excellent guitar player," said Greg. "Better than me, actually. He's willing to take my place."

"Wait a minute, Greg" said Cinco. "Nobody's saying you have to quit. We can get Chauncette to change those lyrics and—"

“It’s okay, Cinc’. She’ll change them herself once I leave. That was all just a ploy to force my hand. She’s probably already got a different, more acceptable, set of lyrics. But it’s all right anyway. I had already decided it was time for me to leave the band. And not because of Chauncette. I have come to realize that I’ve got things to do for the Lord that the band is preventing me from doing. It’s been a lot of fun, Cinc’ and you guys are going to be great. Nadine and I plan to come to Saturday’s concert. We’ll see you then. Meanwhile, Antoine will get up to speed in no time flat. Good luck guys.”

Cinco tried a few mild protestations but could see that Greg was not to be dissuaded. The fact that he had already arranged for Antoine to be there was ample evidence that it really was more than Chauncette’s issue. Greg gathered up his equipment for the last time and headed out the door. Chauncette was waiting for him, sipping out of a soft drink cup.

“So you’ve quit, huh, Greggy?”

“Yeah. You can switch to the alternate, ‘civilized’ version of that song now and drop the bump-and-grind routine. That song doesn’t need any of that. It’ll be a hit on its own merits.”

“Sorry somebody had to lose. But like I said, it’s never me.”

“Lose? Let’s see. I’ve found the love of my life, my relationship with God is finally headed where it should be, and personally I’ve never been happier. If that’s losing, I’ll take it every day of the week.” There was a look that came into Chauncette’s eyes that bothered him. It was a look of deep pain and sadness. He had somehow hit a nerve and hurt her deeply, something he did not want. He decided to lighten the mood a bit.

“Of course, if you happen to know of any employers looking for a guy whose only talent is playing the guitar, be sure and let me know. I think I saw a

‘Now Hiring’ sign over at Taco Bell; even a guitar player can probably make it there, huh?”

She again became the familiar cock-sure Chauncette. “You trying to lay a guilt trip on me? Poor little out of work musician?”

He laughed. “Nah, I wouldn’t want to see you get all teary-eyed.”

“Humph. Like that’ll happen.”

“Seriously, Chauncette, don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine, and I know you’re going to be great. In fact, Nadine and I are coming up to see the concert Saturday. Know where I can get some cheap tickets?”

“I’m going to tell them to charge you double,” she said laughing. She reached up and pulled him toward her. “Bye, Greg. It’s been fun.” She gave him a short kiss from which he knew it wasn’t soda pop in that cup she was drinking. As she walked away he could not escape the feeling that she was a disaster waiting to happen. He felt genuinely sorry for her but at the same time relieved to be completely rid of her from his life. Whatever it was going to take to get her head screwed on right, that would have to be somebody else’s cross to bear.

Saturday night Greg and Nadine arrived early at the concert and were surprised to see such a large crowd already gathered. It was considerably larger than some of the final turnouts had been not so long ago.

“Want to go backstage and meet everybody?” said Greg.

“I’ve met some of them before. From what you describe, Chauncette’s a little unpredictable. I wouldn’t want her to get upset before the performance. Let’s wait till after, okay?”

“Sure. No problem.”

The concert was top notch with Chauncette’s newest song—cleaned up, retitled “I’ll Never Say I’m Sorry” and minus the sexual overtones—clearly the

highlight. Afterward they went backstage and Nadine was introduced around. Cody seemed especially pleased; apparently feeling the competition was now out of the picture.

“Chauncette, this is Nadine Jensen. Nadine, Chauncette Dupree.”

Chauncette met Nadine’s warm smile with one of her own. “So you’re the one that’s got Greg so starry-eyed, huh?”

“It’s only fair,” said Nadine. “He’s got me that way. Hey, you guys were terrific tonight. Greg kept talking about how talented you were but I really couldn’t appreciate it until now. You’re definitely going to make it big, no question. And you wrote all those songs?”

“Not all of them. Some are from before I came on board. Eventually they will all be mine.”

Greg had a sly grin. “I especially liked that last one. Not quite the same as the last time I heard it.”

Cody came up and wrapped himself around Chauncette. “You were fantastic, Chaunce’.” He looked at Greg and Nadine. “Didn’t you think so?”

“Absolutely,” said Nadine.

“We’re going to have some drinks and we’re buying,” said Chauncette. “Why don’t you two come with us?”

“We’ve got some other plans, but thanks,” said Greg quickly.

A condescending look came over her. “Oh. Yes, of course. Prayer meeting, no doubt.” She shook her head in disgust, wheeled and walked away with Cody.

Greg and Nadine drove in silence for a bit. Then Greg said, “So now you’ve met—or should I say encountered—Chauncette.”

“Like you said, she’s not an easy person to like. Especially if you’re a woman.”

“What is it that sets her at odds with women, particularly? Is this some woman’s intuition thing?”

“I don’t know, maybe. I only know she’s not sincere, maybe not even with herself. Truth be told, both genders would probably be turned-off by her if the males could get past her looks. I’m sorry, Greg. There I go being judgmental again. I’m afraid I sound like I’m jealous or something.”

“Jealous? Honey, you have absolutely nothing to be jealous about.”

“I know. I’m not. In fact, I agree with you, she’s got trouble in her future. You can just sort of feel it. I can’t really explain it, and I hope I’m wrong, but I wouldn’t trade places with her for anything.”

## **Chapter 16**

The clock was ticking for Ronnie and he knew it. He needed money, a lot of money, very quickly. If he could not get the large sum he needed, he would settle for enough to enable him to disappear somewhere out of the reach of Eddie Petrokis.

With great effort he managed to bum twenty dollars off a low-life former cohort of his who no longer had much use for him. He bought a couple of gallons of gas at a convenience mart and a 99-cent hot dog inside. As he sat in his car and forced himself to eat his only meal of the day very slowly, he could see an occupied black BMW parked along the curb near the mart's entrance. This was the third time he had seen it today. The dark windows would not reveal the occupant but he could guess: Abdul or Wexler like as not. Ronnie rubbed his eye and was aware of how his hand shook as he did so. He rinsed down the small bite of hot dog with a gulp of water and took stock of his assets.

There was his car. An older Mazda, it still had a modicum of resale value. Unfortunately no dealership or broker would even give him what he owed on it. Of course, since he was now two months behind on payments there was a possibility it would get repossessed soon. He could try selling it to some poor, unsuspecting sucker directly. The problem there was that its left rear fender was crumpled—red plastic tape served as the taillight lens—and the passenger door so dented it was sprung and would hardly open. Even a rube would balk at paying

very much for it. He might be able to snooker someone into making him a couple thousand to the good if the car dazzled, but the needed body work would cost money he did not have. On top of all that, he was reluctant to risk his only means of a quick getaway should he need one.

Other possessions? His computer was old by technology standards but still in good shape. Of course, now that brand new desktops could be had so cheaply it was unlikely anyone would give him enough for it to help much. All of his apartment's furniture put together would not bring \$200 no matter how dumb the buyer was. His TV, DVD player, and few kitchen appliances were, for the most part, in various states of disrepair. He wished he had used more of Eddie's \$5000 to buy that kind of stuff; at least now he would have something to sell off. *Wait!* he thought. *That's it. I used a lot of Eddie's money buying a tuxedo, designer clothes, the Rolex and other accessories to impress Heather. If I can find Kendall he can fence it for me or, if nothing else, a pawn shop might give me enough that the Osborne's can get me to the \$5,000 I originally borrowed.*

Would getting Eddie back to square one with his money keep him off Ronnie's back? That was the hope. It might at least get rid of the BMW long enough for him to disappear. But it still hinged on Lisa and her husband.

He thought about Lisa. She had looked better than he remembered when he saw her at Krage's office. Still a bit on the plump side but also still very pretty. She and Clay were obviously happy; obviously in love. He ruefully reflected on how she could still have been his if he had not been such a jerk. What would his life be like now if he had let himself actually love her? If he had treated her with the same kindness she had always shown him? If he had been willing to get a job, marry her, and raise his daughter. His daughter, whom he had never even seen. Would he be content, happy even?

*I came this close, he thought, to having the love of a marvelous woman and I blew it. Then he shook his head. Twice, actually; I blew it twice. Heather also was an exquisite young woman—and a rich one. But I would give anything to have her, even if she were penniless.*

But there was no use dwelling on all that now. His physical well-being was all that mattered now—maybe his life. Best thing to do was scope out the Osborne's and size up how much he could possibly squeeze them for. First, though, he needed to lose the BMW.

He started the engine and pulled out onto the busy four-lane street. The BMW followed from three cars behind him. Ronnie was in the right lane and kept slowing more and more as he approached a traffic light, a gap of more than six car lengths ahead of him. Two of the cars between the BMW and him got frustrated and passed. The third wanted to turn right and was forced to stay behind him. The BMW lagged even more, not wanting to get within easy view of him. Finally he saw what he had been waiting for. The light turned yellow. An instant before it turned red he floored the Mazda and raced across the intersection. The light was red the last third of the crossing. A couple of horns honked but he just smiled as he saw the BMW hopelessly trapped behind the car wanting to turn, stopped at the light. He roared to the next cross street and turned right, then left at the next, then right again two blocks later. He squeezed down an alley then into a Mexican super market parking lot where he tucked his car in among twenty or so others. He forced himself to wait a full hour. The BMW was nowhere to be seen.

He drove around the back streets until he found a pay phone; something cell phones had rendered almost obsolete. The phone book was ragged but fortunately the O's were still in the white pages. He got the Osborne's address and headed there through town, scrupulously avoiding freeways and expressways. The neighborhood he found was not indicative of wealth; much of it not too

dissimilar to a lower class trailer park. Lawns were weedy and unwatered if even a semblance of lawn existed at all. The duplexes were old with nearly flat tar-and-gravel roofs and the trim around windows and doors desperately in need of paint. The yards were littered with broken toys and rusty tricycles and several driveways had dilapidated cars sitting on flat tires or up on blocks. Lisa and Clay's was notably better kept up, neat and tidy and the lawn actually green and trimmed. The other half of their duplex was less well-maintained, as a gaping rip in the screen door testified but overall there's was one of the nicest in the whole area. Still, it was where people lived paycheck-to-paycheck, not where they were apt to have four or five thousand bucks at their disposal. Nonetheless, he would see for himself. He parked a few doors down and across the street behind a pickup that looked like it had not been driven in a while. It was getting on towards evening so he leaned his seat back and went to sleep.

The next morning he watched the Osborne's home until Clay emerged around 7:30. He kissed and hugged Lisa at the door and headed to an ancient subcompact parked at the curb, followed by a young girl carrying school books and waving good-by to her mom. Even from a distance he could tell she was pretty—the very image of Lisa. So that was Terri; that was his little girl. Just before she got into the car Clay said something to her and she put her hand on her hip in mock annoyance and then laughed and got in. He laughed too and started the car. Ronnie's throat tightened and he felt tears forming in his eyes. He and she would never share a laugh together. He would not attend her volleyball games or tell her to finish her homework or watch her leave on her first date. Or warn her against guys like him. She would never even know him. Clay drove the sputtering Fiesta past without noticing him. Ronnie started his car and followed. He had not thought there were any Fiestas still running, although this one was not a shining exception. Blue-gray smoke rolled out of its bailing-wired tailpipe at

every acceleration, indicating a serious need of a ring-and-valve job. Once again this did not suggest someone with ready cash available.

Clay let Terri out at school and she kissed him on the cheek before getting out of the car. Ronnie was so entranced watching the dark-haired little beauty he almost forgot his primary purpose, to tail Clay to his work. He did catch up, though and, based on what he had seen so far, was not surprised when Clay parked his car around back and entered a small shop with this on the window:

VAL-U-PRINT

Business Cards – Letterhead – All Types of Printing

Ronnie felt pretty sure that Clay was not even the owner. As he headed back to their duplex he could see the reality of the situation. Unless he could shake them down enough to convince them to take out a loan or something, this was pretty likely a dry well. Still, he reasoned, it can't hurt to make sure.

When he arrived, Lisa was just loading their little boy into a ten-year-old model minivan. She was wearing a gingham uniform of some kind. This also did not suggest some big-money career. She drove to a house not far away with a small day-care sign in the front yard and left little Greg there. Ronnie then followed her to Staley's. Just to be sure he slipped in after her to scout things out. Sure enough, hers was a waitress's outfit. He went out and plopped-down in his car. These two probably barely made enough combined to pay for their basic necessities. Working these kinds of jobs in one of the highest cost-of-living regions in America would mean rent alone probably took most of their net pay. No wonder they thought his and Kragen's request for money was so humorous. The truth was he no longer wanted to squeeze big money out of Lisa. Seeing his little girl had affected him in an unexpected way. Even if he could manage to extort a couple of thousand dollars from the Osborne's it would just be taking money his daughter would unquestionably need. No, he would not look to them

to provide payback money to Eddie. He would go ahead and sign the adoption papers for nothing. Well, okay, a few hundred bucks—just enough to use for escape money if all else failed.

The only thing left, then, was to sell whatever he could. If he could get a decent amount for it, he might try to placate Eddie with it. If not, he would use it to blow town and hope like crazy he could lose himself somewhere safe. He pulled out his cell phone.

“Hey, Kendall? Hey, this is Ronnie... Stubbs, Ronnie Stubbs... Oh, hangin’ in there, y’know. How’re you doing?... That’s good. Hey listen, I got some stuff I want to sell and it’s not hot... No seriously, man, it’s all legit. I just need some cash in a hurry. Where can I meet you and show you what I’ve got? Uh huh... Uh huh... Okay, I need to pick the stuff up so it’ll probably be tomorrow morning sometime. That okay? Cool. I’ll see ya, then.

## Chapter 17

From the time of Greg and Nadine's first date they spent every available minute in each other's company. As foolish as it was in so short a time Greg became convinced of an inevitability regarding their relationship. It was one he was reluctant to reveal to her. They were headed for Clay and Lisa's to spend the evening. As they drove there they small-talked for a while about his new job at a local warehouse and then he mustered his courage.

"Sweetheart, I know we've haven't been officially dating for long but we've known each other for years. In fact in some ways we probably know each other much better than most couples. Only now I know what I should always have known. I'm sure you'll think I'm rushing things, but it's sort of like I need to make up for years of stupidity; like I don't want to waste any more time. Am I making *any* sense?"

She furrowed her brows. "Absolutely none, Greg. What are you talking about?"

Already fidgety, he now became agitated and struggled to find the words he wanted. Nadine tried to help.

"Honey, what is it? What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that, well, just suppose at some point—soon, sometime fairly soon—suppose we were to discuss, well, um, marriage. Would you think I was crazy?"

She smiled and looked straight ahead at the road. “I might. But then, if you were to ask me—at some point—you never know how crazy I might be.”

His heart turned a somersault and his mind was racing as he pulled into the driveway. Clay and Lisa were hurrying out the door to meet them.

“Greg, it’s Chauncette. She’s been in an accident and is in Emergency at Memorial.”

“What happened?”

“That’s about all we know at this point,” said Lisa. “Cinco called us looking for you and that’s all he could tell us.”

It was Nadine who spoke first. “Greg, we better get over to the hospital right away.”

“Do you want us to come?” asked Lisa. “We’re more than willing. It’s just that we’ve never actually met her and wouldn’t want it to seem like we’re chasing her notoriety.”

“Nah,” said Greg. “Knowing Chauncette, she’s not likely to want too many people to see her at less than her best. We’ll go by and see how she is. We’ll give you a call as soon as we know what’s going on.”

They happened to spot nurse Kamisha Williams, who attended church with them, as they entered the hospital. “Kamisha,” called Greg.

“Oh, hi, how are you guys?” She had that aren’t-you-the-cutest-couple demeanor that they encountered so frequently among those who had known them over the years.

“We’re fine,” said Nadine. “Kamisha, I know you don’t work in emergency, but could you help us get some information? Chauncette Dupree is in emergency and has had some kind of accident but we don’t know much more than that. We want to try to see her but we’re not family or anything.”

“I’ve got a few minutes. Let’s go over there together. A friend of mine, Katie, is working in the ER tonight. I’ll see what I can do.”

Emergency was busy, with patients in seven of its ten curtained rooms. Chauncette, they quickly learned, was in number six. They tried to look inconspicuous until Kamisha could give them the lowdown. Greg had learned that in situations where one might possibly be challenged as to what business he had being there, the best approach was to look like you knew what you were doing. He guided Nadine very purposefully toward the other end of the emergency ward. As they passed room four the curtain was open primarily due to there being so many people in it. One glance and they could see it was LeAnn Sprague looking terribly distraught. Her little girl was in the bed with a doctor and a nurse attending her. Several others, apparently family members including one that could only have been LeAnn’s sister, were crowded around.

“That’s LeAnn,” said Nadine. “Wonder what’s wrong with Misty.”

“Guess we better not go in there, at least not now.” They saw Kamisha coming toward them and walked over to her. Her face showed that what she had learned had not been particularly good news. When she hesitated, Nadine spoke up.

“So how is Chauncette?”

“Oh, she’s fine,” said Kamisha. “At least it appears she’s not hurt too bad.” She lowered her voice. “Now you know there are laws regarding confidentiality. I’m not even supposed to let you know she’s in here.”

Nadine started to tell her she did not need to break any laws when Kamisha continued. “They’re thinking about keeping her overnight just to be sure. The main problem is with her right knee. It might need some minor surgery. It’s pretty swollen.”

“What happened?” asked Greg.

“It’s okay, Kamisha,” whispered Nadine. “We don’t want to get you into any trouble.”

Kamisha ignored her comment. “From what I hear, she ran a red light and plowed into the side of another car. Slammed right into the driver’s door. The driver was killed.”

“Oh no,” Nadine gasped.

“Yeah. It was a man of about 30. He had his five-year-old daughter with him. She’s banged-up pretty bad but should be okay. She’s over in number four with her mother and some other family members.”

“Number four? Kamisha, do you know who’s in there? That’s LeAnn Sprague; you know, the couple with the cute little girl who were introduced in church recently.”

“You mean he’s the one that was killed?” said Kamisha. “I had no idea. I didn’t even know they were in here. Of course, like I said I don’t work down here in emergency.”

“Oh, man,” groaned Greg. “What happened, though? Did Chauncette just lose control of the car or something?”

Nadine tugged at his sleeve trying to get him to stop egging Kamisha on.

Kamisha looked around conspiratorially. “You didn’t hear this from me but, from the police interrogation, Katie thinks she failed a Breathalyzer test big time.”

Greg blew out his cheeks and ran his fingers through his hair. “Can we see her?”

Kamisha looked toward the curtained room then over each shoulder. “It doesn’t look like there’s anyone in there right now, so go ahead. Try to be as quiet as possible. And don’t stay too long, okay?”

They both nodded. “Thanks, Kamisha,” said Greg.

Despite the setting and the circumstances, Chauncette's beauty was undiminished.

"Hi. How are you doing?" they asked her in hushed tones.

She was genuinely surprised. "Wow, I wouldn't have expected to see *you* here." Her words were slurred slightly but whether from medication or the aftereffects of alcohol they could not be sure.

"We wanted to make sure you're okay," said Nadine. She felt not the slightest hint of jealousy or concern regarding Greg's feelings for Chauncette. Nadine knew how hypnotically attractive to men Chauncette was, and knew of Greg's former passion for her as well as anyone. Even so, she was inexplicably confident in Greg's love for her. She, too, felt that now that the chains on their long-suppressed feelings for each other had been released, marriage was inevitable. Greg was hers, and she was his. Chauncette was just an old flame that was now extinguished, the ashes cold. Nadine had no sense of rivalry with her. Instead she felt genuine concern that this beautiful, talented young woman was on the brink of flushing all her tremendous promise down the toilet. Above all, she was acutely aware of how much Chauncette needed Jesus in her life.

"Wanted to see me down and out, you mean," snarled Chauncette. The senseless accusation stung but Nadine forced herself not to respond in kind.

"You're hardly down and out," she said smiling as kindly as she could. "We hear you'll be up and around again real soon. Must have been awfully frightening, though."

"That guy," said Chauncette uncertainly. "He just appeared out of nowhere, right in front of me." She half sat up. "I never had a chance to avoid him, y'know?" She plopped back down onto the bed. "Bet my car's a complete wreck."

Greg and Nadine exchanged glances. Suddenly the terrified cry of a child came from a few rooms away. “Where’s Daddy?” It was Misty screaming and sobbing uncontrollably. “Mommy! Mom-meee!”

“I’m right here honey,” came LeAnn’s agonized response. “Mommy’s right here. I’ll always be here, I promise.” Several other voices were heard trying to be of comfort.

“But where’s Daddy? I want Daddy! Mommy, he was all bloody. Mommy—” The rest was muffled. Greg felt the little girl’s cries stabbing him in the heart and Nadine, struggling to keep her emotions under control, brushed away a tear.

“Here,” came a different voice, “this will calm her down.” There was a long pause.

“Lord, I hope so,” groused Chauncette. “That’s all I need is some kid screaming all night.”

Greg blew a fuse. “Do you have any idea who that is?” Nadine instinctively grabbed his arm to restrain him.

Chauncette looked at him as if he’d gone nuts. “Of course not. This is an emergency room; they don’t take us around and introduce us to our neighbors. Just some noisy kid.”

Nadine was literally manhandling Greg, pushing him out of the room and holding her hand over his mouth. “No, Greg! Don’t! It’s not your place to say.”

“Not his place to say what?” shouted Chauncette. “Wait a minute. What’s going on here?” There was a quaver of fear in her voice. “Come on now, what do you two know that I don’t?”

As much from fear at the racket Chauncette was making as anything else, Nadine stopped pushing Greg and lowered her hand. “She doesn’t know,” Nadine said to him.

“Know what?” Chauncette said again. She lowered her voice and her eyes became more fearful. “Is it about the other car in the accident? The police were really antagonistic and said the other driver was hurt pretty seriously. Do you know how badly?”

“Chauncette,” said Greg, “we’re not sure how much we’re supposed to say. Besides, we don’t really *know* anything; we’ve just heard stuff.”

There were tears in Chauncette’s eyes and her voice sounded pitiful. “Come on Greg. Please? Nadine?”

Nadine took a deep breath. “The little girl you heard in the other emergency room—calling for her daddy? We think she was the passenger in the car you hit.”

“And her dad?” asked Chauncette. “Is he...?”

Nadine nodded and started to cry. Greg put his arms around her and said to Chauncette, “We know that family. They attend our church.”

Chauncette looked up at the ceiling, then closed her eyes and spoke mainly to herself. “I’ve really done it this time. I’m going to be in big trouble. The cops only stopped grilling me because the ambulance took me. They said they’d be back to talk some more. This could be what, manslaughter?”

Greg and Nadine exchanged disgusted glances. Still worrying about Number One. Not even so much as one question about her victims. “We’d better go, Chauncette,” said Nadine. “We’re not really supposed to be here or even know you’re here.”

Chauncette got a funny look. “Hey, thanks for coming, you two. I really mean that. Thanks for caring.”

Greg stifled what he wanted to say and forced himself to exhibit some Christian love. “We’ll keep you in our prayers.” He said it but he didn’t mean it.

She smirked for a second as if about to fire a zinger at him then her look softened. “I appreciate that,” she said with conviction. “I think I’m going to need them.”

“If we can be of any help, Chauncette,” said Nadine, “just let us know. Either one of us. I know people always say stuff like that but we really mean it. Any way we can help you or even if you just need to talk.”

The look on Chauncette’s face showed this affected her deeply. “Thank you, Nadine,” she said softly. “That’s very kind.”

They turned to go and Chauncette called out, “Nadine.” When Nadine stopped and turned back toward her, Chauncette said, “Nadine, I—I’m—I didn’t treat you very—”

Nadine smiled, shook her head slightly and waved Chauncette off. “It’s okay. You just get better. We’ll talk after you get out of here. Good night.”

She and Greg met the band, minus Antoine, arriving at Chauncette’s room. Surprisingly, Cody and Jerry went in while Stix and Cinco stood outside like sentries.

“How is she?” asked Cinco. Greg considered it odd that he would not go in and find out first hand.

“I think it’s her knee mostly,” said Greg. “Hopefully not too serious. I imagine she’ll be back in front of the mike in no time.”

“Yeah. Hope so.”

A tense silence followed for a long moment while Greg overheard Cody. “...Long as we all keep our story straight it’ll be fine.”

Cinco’s eyes widened as he perceived Greg listening to what was being said. “So, how are you and your lady getting along?” he blurted loudly. He subtly moved so close to Greg that he backed up a few steps.

“Fine,” said Greg slowly, putting his arm around her. “Real good.” It was obvious that they wanted Greg and Nadine to leave; to not hear what was being said in Chauncette’s room. “Guess we should go,” he said to Nadine. They went down to room number four. There were still a lot of people in there, far more than the maximum allowable of two. They slipped in quickly and each gave LeAnn a hug. Misty was sleeping.

“Is she going to be okay?” whispered Nadine.

LeAnn could only nod. “Jim’s gone,” she said weeping.

Nadine hugged her again. “I know, sweetie. Just hold tight to the Lord. He’ll get you through this.”

An anguished, betrayed look clouded LeAnn’s face. Nadine suddenly felt like an interloper among the family members. She looked up at Greg and whispered, “We should go.”

He nodded and they squeezed several hands as they left. When they passed Chauncette’s room all four band members were inside speaking in hushed tones.

## **Chapter 18**

Funerals in movies are invariably set on rainy days with a crowd of black-garbed mourners standing under appropriately black umbrellas. Jim Sprague's funeral did not follow the script, occurring instead on one of the hottest days anyone could remember. Fortunately most of the proceedings took place inside the air-conditioned funeral home with a mercifully brief, but still stifling, graveside service. Seeing the bubbly LeAnn grieving heartbrokenly was so out of character it was, while certainly appropriate under the circumstances, nonetheless difficult to accept. It was an enigma akin to snowfall in Tahiti; a paradox that did not square with what one recognized as reality. Less comprehensible still was her aloofness primarily toward those from the church who sought to extend comfort and sympathy. Clay and Lisa chalked her distant response to them up to her simply not knowing how to cope with such a sudden and devastating loss. With that further exacerbated by the need to provide solace to her equally distraught daughter they felt it was small wonder she did not react to them as expected. They decided to just make known their love and support, and let it be an offer she could deal with as seemed best to her.

"LeAnn," said Lisa, "I don't have any magic words to lessen the pain. Although ours pales in comparison to yours we miss Jim, too. Just know that we love you and we will be there for you whatever the need." LeAnn gave a brief obliging smile and a nod.

“If you need help with paperwork or tying-up loose ends we’ll be glad to help,” continued Lisa. “Or even if you just need us to watch Misty for you while you run errands or take some time to be alone, let us know.”

“Thank you,” said LeAnn quietly.

“In fact,” added Clay, “we’ll stop by on Monday and see what we can do to be of help. And, of course, you and Misty will be in our prayers at all times.”

LeAnn shot them a cold look and walked away without a word.

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“You do realize, Ms. Dupree, that I normally consult with my clients confidentially,” said Jerome Barksdale. “So, if you would prefer that Cody not be present that’s perfectly fine. The longstanding friendship between his father and me need not alter my way of conducting business.”

Barksdale was one of the premier lawyers in the entire state and would not say “good morning” for less than a grand. He had not handled a small-potatoes case like this in more than a decade. Had Chauncette, or even the band, actually been well-known recording artists he might have had some interest in it just for the sake of publicity. As it was, this was pretty much a waste of his time. Not that he was doing it *pro bono*; he was getting full price for every minute he spent on it. Cody’s dad loved using his influence with the movers and shakers in society even more than he loved being rich. So when the chance to bring in a heavyweight to help someone instrumental in his son’s future arose, he sprang into action and threw open the purse-strings. The next thing Chauncette knew she had an appointment with the famous, and highly intimidating, Mr. Barksdale. His gold-plate, marble, and mahogany office was equally intimidating and though

Chauncette was dressed nicely she could not help feeling like she needed to run out and put on something more formal.

“It’s all right,” she said meekly. “I want Cody to stay.” Cody sat up a little straighter in the plush leather chair. The all-business Barksdale dropped the issue immediately and moved on. He leafed through a folder, not looking up as he spoke.

“So, Ms. Dupree, you were driving under the influence and caused an accident in which there was a fatality. Does that about summarize it?”

She looked over at Cody who gave her a subtle nod of support. “No” she said. “It’s not true.”

He still did not look up. “What’s not true? You weren’t intoxicated? Breathalyzer says you were.”

“No. I wasn’t driving.”

Now he looked up. “Who was?”

She looked at Cody again, then answered with an uncertain catch in her voice. “Ed—Eduardo.” Barksdale glared at her without saying a word. She cleared her throat and added, “A guy named Eduardo—a Latino guy I had just met.”

Barksdale continued glaring at her, then shifted his eyes to Cody and back to her. “Ms. Dupree, I find this an interesting revelation in light of there being no mention anywhere of anyone other than the deceased, his daughter, and you at the scene. No mention of it in the police report, no mention of it in the eyewitness’s deposition, and more significantly even you didn’t mention this ‘Eduardo’ in your interviews with the police. How do you account for that?”

Barksdale’s argumentative demeanor struck Chauncette as condescending—another man trying to treat her as an inferior. She suddenly no longer felt intimidated but angry.

“Look,” she snapped back. “I was drunk out of my mind, all right? I admit that. Add to that my just having been in a wreck that injured my knee and all these cops with their sirens and their accusatory tones and I wasn’t in any condition to provide oodles of details. Later on when they asked me more questions, I was afraid if I told them about Eduardo they wouldn’t believe me.”

“I imagine not; I don’t believe you either.” Barksdale was unfazed by his young client’s hostility. He had been through it all before dozens of times. She, however, was quite taken aback. She slapped her palms down on the arms of her chair.

“Humph, well, what chance do I have of being found innocent if not even my own lawyer believes I am?”

He looked her straight in the eyes. “Ms. Dupree, let me tell you the way things are, okay? First of all, neither I nor a jury needs to find you innocent. All that has to happen is for the prosecution to fail to prove you guilty of the crime with which you are charged: Gross Vehicular Manslaughter. When a jury returns a verdict of ‘not guilty’ that doesn’t mean you are innocent. It should more accurately be rendered ‘not *proven* guilty.’ Your actual guilt or innocence of a particular charge is very nearly immaterial—and my assessment of your guilt is even less important. All that matters is whether the prosecution can convince a jury you are guilty. If they succeed, you will be sentenced to punishment. If they fail, you will be let go. Whether you are *in fact* guilty or innocent has no bearing on the outcome.

“Second, your timing is not particularly good. The D.A.’s office has put Dennis Hong on your case. He’s a young hotshot crusader who thinks he is going to single-handedly cure all of society’s ills. One of the ways he plans to do that is by locking up people like you who drive drunk and kill others.” His bluntness gave her a chill and caused her to shudder slightly.

He paid no notice as he continued on. “Now, on the other hand, the courts like to avoid trials whenever possible. They are expensive, time-consuming, and leave those involved with the losing side angry. If I were to offer to plead you guilty in exchange for a light sentence—maybe a suspended sentence and loss of driving privileges for a while—and Hong agrees, the judge would likely concur in the interest of expediency. That’s true even though Judge Effington is not known for leniency. The victim’s family won’t rejoice, but they will derive more satisfaction from your admission of guilt than if we get you off and they believe you guilty. Assuming you are indeed innocent you won’t rejoice over pleading guilty but you’ll be glad not to be behind bars, right? Neither side is completely happy but both walk away with some feeling of relief. So here is the choice you need to make. Do you want me to work on getting you a light sentence or do you want to pursue this ‘Eduardo’ story and go with an all or nothing roll of the dice?”

Chauncette gulped. “What’s the worst they can do to me if I fight and lose?”

“Depends,” he said. “Maximum sentence is ten years in state prison but that’s highly unlikely since you’re a first offender. If it goes to trial Hong will almost certainly press for jail time. I’d guess two years in the penitentiary.”

Her eyes widened. “You said this D.A. guy is a crusader. What are the chances he will negotiate?”

Barksdale sat back and for the first time smiled warmly. “Excellent question. I was pretty sure you were a sharp young lady when you walked in here. Here’s the thing: ordinarily, in light of whom I know over there—I’m not without influence, you know—I’d say 85-90%. But with Hong I’d have to say no better than 60% tops. And there is a bit of a risk. If you really were just a passenger in the car it’s a lot less likely that I’d be over there hat-in-hand trying to make a deal. There’s a small but very real risk that he would interpret that as a sign of a weak

case and be more determined than ever to go for the jugular. Also, to be perfectly honest, he could not help but view beating Jerome Barksdale as the ultimate feather in his cap. I guess in that sense having me represent you is a bit of a liability. On the other hand, if you have any kind of case at all he won't get his chance. I'll win. So what is your decision, young lady? Negotiate or fight? I'll play it either way you want."

This was not, by far, the first time Barksdale had used this little speech with a client. The follow-up question was almost always, "What do you recommend?" But not this time.

"You're pretty sure of yourself, Mr. Barksdale," she said. "I like that. I have confidence in you; and I *am* innocent. I say we fight."

For a fleeting instant she caught a glimpse of a barely perceptible smile. "So tell me about this Eduardo. Last name? Address?"

"We don't know," she answered.

Barksdale showed the slightest annoyance. "Who does know?"

She looked over at Cody. "That's just it," he said with sincerity. "He just showed up at our practice that day. We all thought he was Cinco's friend, being Latino and all. The funny thing is, when Cinco saw us being friendly with him, he assumed one of us knew him."

"Nobody had ever seen him before?" He invariably directed his questions at Chauncette.

"No," she said. "Not before or since."

Barksdale looked confused. "You say he was driving and not you?"

"Right."

"Well, what happened to him?"

"As soon as we hit the other car and came to a stop he jumped out and ran off. We," she said indicating herself and Cody, "were thinking he must have a

criminal record or something and didn't want to be around when the cops showed up."

Barksdale rubbed his fingertips across his forehead. "Can you describe him?"

"Well, yeah. He wasn't very tall, maybe 5'8" or at most 5'9". Kind of husky though, fairly muscular. He was wearing jeans and a tee shirt for some rock band I never heard of. He had his hair combed straight back and sported a goatee. He wasn't what I'd call a cute guy exactly but he was decent-looking."

Barksdale frowned at the lack of worthwhile information. "And let me guess: dark hair, dark eyes, dark complexion, right?"

"Right," said Chauncette. "Like I said, he was a Latino."

"I don't suppose the police would find his finger prints on the steering wheel or anything, would they?"

She and Cody exchanged glances and Cody spoke up. "No. He wore leather gloves all the time. I remember thinking it was a little strange. I assume he wore them while he was driving, right Chaunce'?" She nodded earnestly at Barksdale.

"I would have bet on that," he mumbled. "Okay, let's try a different tack. How is it that you and he ended up in Cody's SUV, with him driving?"

Cody jumped in. "Well, she was—"

Barksdale cut him off with a gesture indicating he wanted to hear Chauncette's version of the story.

"Okay. I was feeling a little miffed at practice; nobody was paying me much attention. They, the guys, were all trying to figure something out with the mixer board or whatever that thing is called. I got to feeling sorry for myself. I'd already had a few drinks but now I got serious. I went over and sat by this Eduardo and we chatted about this and that. Then I—"

“Hold it,” said Barksdale. “What kind of this and that? Where he lived, where he worked, how long he’d been in town, where he was from, anything like that?”

Chauncette looked nervous. “No. I wish we would have. Just stupid stuff like what CD’s he liked to listen to and whether he had a girl.”

“Did he?”

“Did he what?”

“Have a girl?”

“No.”

“What else did you talk about? Anything that would help us find this guy.”

She shook her head. “I was getting pretty sloshed. I don’t think I’d remember even if we did talk about something worthwhile. Then I started feeling really sick. I hadn’t eaten anything all day and I guess the booze got to me. I told Cody I was sick and wanted to go home so he tossed me his car keys.”

For the first time Barksdale asked a question specifically of Cody. “You didn’t offer to drive her home?”

“I was pretty involved; preoccupied, y’know? I just thought she had a mild headache or something; she gets those sometimes. I didn’t realize she had been drinking heavily all that time.”

Chauncette added, “He tossed the keys and I could hardly get over to pick them up. Eduardo got them and said I was in no condition to drive so he would.”

Barksdale began writing notes and offhandedly addressed Cody. “And you knew Eduardo was taking your car?”

Cody hesitated. “Yeah,” he said cautiously.

Barksdale dropped his pen and drilled Cody with a cold stare. “Let me get this straight. You let this complete stranger whom you had never heard of before

leave with your staggering-drunk girlfriend and your brand new SUV? What made you think he wouldn't rape her and steal your car?"

Cody was nervous. He had not expected Barksdale to subject him to a taste of his expert cross-examination. "I—I don't know, man. Like I said I didn't know she was that bad off. And I thought he was a friend of Cinco's. He'd been real cool up to then. He said that by taking her home I wouldn't have to go get the car, he'd bring it right back."

Barksdale did not have to say he found the story difficult to believe, one look said it all. He turned his attention back to Chauncette. "And I suppose you'll tell me you were too drunk to worry about what it might mean to leave with this stranger, right?"

"Well, yeah, sort of. I mean he seemed like a nice enough guy. All I wanted was to get home."

This was met with a sniff of disbelief. "Okay, so then what happened?"

Chauncette hoped she could rally and get the lawyer to at least deem the story plausible. "I told him where I lived and—"

"Did you give him directions or just the address?"

She froze. She looked at Cody but of course he could not provide details about something he could not possibly have heard. "I was pretty out of it but I think I just gave him the address. I would not have been coherent enough to give directions."

"Ah," said Barksdale. "So he must either live around here or have spent a fair amount of time here to be able to find an address just like that. Tell me, was he drunk?"

She and Cody exchanged glances. "Yeah, I guess so. I mean, not as bad as me but he had been drinking along with me so he was at least high."

"Describe the accident."

“I don’t know I wasn’t really watching. We just came to this intersection, Warren and Industrial, and all of the sudden this car crossed right in front of us and we smashed into it broadside. I remember my leg hurting and me trying to squeeze my way out of the smashed-up car.”

“What about Eduardo?”

“I remember him being in the car. I think he sort of pushed me out. Next thing I knew I was sitting on the grass at the corner holding my leg and he was running off into the night.”

Cody spoke up. “Mr. Barksdale, see, this pretty much sews it up, right? Chauncette and all four of us band members will testify that it was Eduardo. They’ll have to let her off, right?”

“No.”

“No?”

“It sews nothing up and nobody has to let her off. Look, even if all the band members corroborate Chauncette’s story, all you can say is that this Eduardo had the keys as he and she left. There’s no evidence that he didn’t get out a block away, switch places with her, or even that he ever drove the vehicle at all.”

“But Chauncette knows what happened. She’s the only one that knows.”

“No she’s not. There was an eyewitness; a truck driver who was waiting for the light in the left turn lane. The cops have already deposed him and he’ll be one of their first witnesses.”

Cody gulped audibly. “Did he say Chauncette was driving?”

“I wondered about that myself. I’ve been checking my notes and as far as I can tell he never said specifically that she was. It doesn’t appear they ever bothered to actually ask him that. She was the only other person there; I suppose everyone assumed she was the driver.”

“So if this guy says he saw Eduardo driving, that’s it; end of case, right?”

“If this guy was to say he saw someone matching this Eduardo’s description there at all, once I told them she claimed not to be driving, they would drop the charges. They’d have to. No one else could say she was driving. The only other possible witness is the little Sprague girl and she was on the other side of the car and is too short to see out anyway. So sure, if their witness saw this Eduardo at the scene, and didn’t see who was driving, we’re home free. But again, he didn’t mention it.”

“What’s his name?” demanded Cody.

“Whoa, hold on there,” said Barksdale. “Don’t go getting any ideas about shaking this guy down.”

“No, no. I wasn’t thinking about anything like that. I just wanted to dig up some dirt on him if possible so you could discredit him. That way if it’s his word against Chauncette’s the jury will believe her.”

“Understand this,” said Barksdale, “if I let Ms. Dupree testify at all I will ask her a minimum number of questions. Whether this story about Eduardo is true or a complete fabrication, if I open the door more than a crack it will sound like a lie by the time Hong gets done with her. Anyway, I don’t need any junior detective running around asking people questions and compromising my case.”

“I’m not going ask people questions, I’m just going to go search the web for anything I can find on this guy. Maybe he’s perjured himself before or something. You could maybe use that to get them to drop the case, right? Come on, Mr. Barksdale. I feel kind of responsible for this whole thing. Like you said if I had used common sense I would never have put her in that spot to begin with. I have to help somehow, y’know to make it up to her. Please?”

Barksdale sighed. “Okay. My office is too swamped to spend that kind of time on this case so if you’re willing, go ahead. But you’re to have no contact with him or anyone else connected to this case, understand? His name is Bud

Garber and he drives for Coastal Alliance Trucking, Co. in Los Gatos. Give me whatever you find on him ASAP.”

“Will do. Are we through? I’d like to get started immediately.”

“Yeah, you and Ms. Dupree can both go. Any more of my time and I’ll own your father’s house, his boat, and all ten cars.”

On the ride home Chauncette asked Cody how he thought it went.

“Barksdale thinks we’re lying. We can’t let you plead guilty, not even if it means no jail. I mean, if it was just drunk and disorderly or something, that would actually be positive publicity. But with your having killed this ‘father of the year’ the local media would crucify you. Then there goes our recording contract, right?”

The self-centeredness of Cody’s words stung and left her speechless. She glared at him and felt more alone than she had in quite some time.

He took no notice. “I gotta get this Garber clown to mention Eduardo in his testimony. If I can do that, Barksdale will handle the rest. Then you’ll be exonerated and we can put this whole thing behind us.”

She decided not to go off on Cody. He was a spoiled rich kid who thought only of himself but she needed his help to get out of this mess. The sooner she could get it over with, the sooner she could tell him to go jump. Yeah, after his daddy spent all this money on her bail and then to get her off she would tell him, “Thanks. Now get lost, creep.” The scene in her mind made her feel better.

“How on earth are you going to get Garber to do that?” she asked.

“Humph,” sniffed Cody. “I know you understand the power of sex but you really don’t know much about the power of money, do you? And when you take money and sprinkle-in just a tidbit of sex...”

“You mean you’re going to—”

“Never mind what I’m going to do. This will be discussed on a strict need-to-know basis, and right now you don’t need to know. If and when you do, I’ll clue you in but not before.”

## **Chapter 19**

Ronnie waited until 2 a.m. and then parked a block away. He slipped through between buildings and entered through the narrow, seldom-used back door of his apartment building. He crept up the stairs and down the hall to his apartment. He inspected the door for signs of tampering and tested to make sure it was still locked. He quietly unlocked the door and went in without turning on any lights. The lights from the street filtering through the front curtains enabled him to navigate his way to the bedroom where most of the valuables were. It was much darker in there, though and he dared not use a light. It was almost certain his apartment was being watched. Eddie had said Ronnie had another thirty days but it would not have taken a genius to realize he was not making any progress toward obtaining the needed money. He would have to wait until daylight to collect up the items for sale plus the bare essentials needed for a quick but permanent trip out of town. He stretched out on the bed and luxuriated in the chance to sleep somewhere other than behind the wheel of his Mazda.

It was nearly eight when he awoke. He checked that all windows were covered enough to hide his movements but still steered clear of them as much as possible. He showered knowing it might be his last for a while and ate the rest of a box of stale Cheerios with milk that was six days past its expiration date. He found a few plastic grocery bags and loaded them with the tux, the \$300 shoes he had worn twice, the (probably hot) Rolex he had bought off Kendall for \$1,100

just to flash the name around, plus several other ostentatious items. In one bag he put a couple of changes of clothes, some toiletries and other traveling necessities. He decided he would take the stuff to Kendall that morning then lay low until close to dark. Then he had one stop to make on his way out of town. Hopefully the darkness would make it easier for him to ditch whoever would most certainly be tailing him.

As to that one stop, he decided he might as well make arrangements for it now. He slithered across the living room out of view of the window and sat in his tattered office chair. He signed on to email and began to type. The clicking keys masked the catlike footfalls behind him until it was too late.

A voice said, “Writing the great American—” The rest of the sentence was obliterated by Ronnie’s gasping and clutching from being so startled. He spun the chair around on its wheels to see an amused Wexler holding a pistol.

“Oh, I didn’t scare you did I?” said a grinning Wexler.

As Ronnie’s composure returned he frowned at his unwelcome guest. “What are you doing here? What right have you got barging in here?”

Wexler’s demeanor changed to menacing instantly. “I got ten-thousand rights till you pay up.”

Ronnie tried to look merely annoyed instead of what he really was, fearful. “Look, genius, Eddie said I had another month to get his money. It’s only been a couple of days. I’ll get it just like I said, so back-off son of Kong.” He shook his head and turned back to his computer, dismissing his adversary. It was a ploy that would have worked on some people, but not Wexler. It only riled him up. He grabbed Ronnie by the throat and lifted him out of the chair.

“Eddie charged me with determining whether you’ve really got a lead on any money or if you’re just playing him. In my judgment, you got nothing

happening. And, since I'm the judge I get to decide." He put Ronnie back down in the chair and released him.

"Oh, so you're the judge, huh?" said Ronnie readjusting his shirt.

"Yep, and jury and executioner."

"Well, judge, you see those bags there? A big chunk of Eddie's money is right there. All I gotta do is convert them to cash. Which I would be doing if some big ape wasn't taking up my time."

"Big ape, huh?" said Wexler quietly, nodding slightly with the corners of his mouth turned down. He looked into the bags, still nodding. "Interesting stuff." He reached into one bag and pulled out Ronnie's razor and toothbrush. "You expect to get quite a bit from selling these?"

Ronnie gulped. No witty retort came to mind.

"Know what this big ape thinks, smart guy? He thinks it looks like you're getting ready to blow town and welsh on Eddie."

"L-Look," stammered Ronnie, "I'm getting evicted, but I'm not leaving town. I'm going to stay with a friend so—"

His comment was cut short by a blow to the head from the butt of Wexler's gun. When he next came-to he was duct-taped to his chair, his arms taped to the chair's armrests allowing only his wrists to wiggle. His mouth was also taped shut.

"Welcome back, smart guy," said Wexler. "Your mama should have taught you to be more polite. Maybe that tape will help keep your mouth out of trouble."

He picked up all the bags except the one with Ronnie's toiletries. "Guess I'll take these to the car. Now don't go away, I'll be right back. Oh, I better take this," he said lifting Ronnie's cell phone out of his shirt pocket. He noticed Ronnie glance at his computer monitor.

“Oh no, no way,” he said. “You’re too slippery.” He reached over and unplugged the one plug in the nearest outlet. The monitor went black. “There,” he said, not realizing that he had only unplugged the monitor. “And just to be sure...” he said as he blindfolded Ronnie with more duct-tape. “I’ll only be a minute; try not to miss me too much.”

Ronnie could hear him chuckling down the hall outside.

## **Chapter 20**

So much time elapsed from when Lisa pressed the doorbell until the door opened that Clay had already started back toward the car thinking no one was home. The face that finally appeared when the door opened caused Lisa to recoil. She excused her reaction by saying she had not thought anyone was there but the truth was that LeAnn Sprague looked like a totally different person. It was not that she was unkempt or looked ill. Instead it was a pronounced absence of life from one normally so exceedingly effervescent. So vastly changed was she that the stoicism was evident immediately upon first glance by anyone that knew her—even without her saying a word. The exchange of pleasantries was quite brief and, for LeAnn’s part, reluctant. The moment grew even more uncomfortable as she stood in the doorway waiting for the callers get to the point of their visit but did not invite them in.

Lisa cleared her throat uneasily. “We had mentioned at the funeral that we’d be by last Monday but we haven’t had any success finding you at home or reaching you by phone. We figured you might have been out of town, since we didn’t see you at church.”

LeAnn made no attempt to confirm or deny whether she had indeed been out of town. She stood in silence looking eager for the visit to end.

Lisa tried further. “LeAnn, I know that people always say at times like this, ‘If I can be of any help don’t hesitate to call,’ but rarely are taken up on it. We want to be proactive and actually be of help.” LeAnn looked away for a moment and when she looked back at Lisa tears were welling-up. Still she said nothing.

Clay spoke up. “LeAnn, we just want to show you that we love you. There must be something we can help with.”

Lisa reached out and gently caressed LeAnn’s arm. “Or, we can just listen.”

Tears began in earnest as LeAnn bit her lips and nodded, opening the door and letting them in. The women sat on the sofa and Clay in the nearby swivel rocker. LeAnn dried her eyes and composed herself.

“How’s Misty doing?” asked Lisa.

“It’s all pretty overwhelming to her. But I guess kids are pretty resilient. She’s staying over at a friend’s house tonight. Still, not a day goes by that she doesn’t lament the loss of her daddy.”

“They sure were close,” said Clay.

“She was the apple of his eye. And she favored him so much sometimes I almost felt jealous of him. We’re certainly close now, though. We’re all we’ve got.”

“I know it’s a poor substitute,” said Lisa. “But we want to be here for you, too. And, of course, hold on tight to the Lord. He’ll never—”

“Don’t!” fired LeAnn. “I don’t want to hear any of that ‘God won’t forsake you’ baloney. He already has!”

Lisa and Clay felt as if they had been slapped. “Oh, honey,” said Lisa. “You don’t mean that. It’s just the pain talking.”

“I do mean it. Every word.” LeAnn’s eyes welled-up. “Jim was a wonderful husband and had so many plans to do great things for God. And look what God did in return. Took it all away from him before he could even get started. Took him away from me. Worst of all, He took him away from my little girl—tore her heart out. Why? Maybe I didn’t deserve any better but Misty did. Why would God do this to her? Why would He kill her daddy?”

Clay spoke as gently as he could. “LeAnn, we’re not going to argue or debate with you. You have every right to be upset and angry over the unfairness of losing one who loved and was loved so much. The fact that he’s now in paradise with Jesus doesn’t diminish the emptiness and loss we all—and you and Misty especially—feel without him. It’s natural to ask those unanswerable ‘why’ questions. But think about this: If the Lord personally appeared this very minute and gave you a detailed explanation of how He was going to take the tragedy of Jim’s death and work it all out for some glorious purpose ten, twenty, or fifty years from now, would that really help? It might reduce some of the sense of injustice but the emptiness and loss would still remain. The thing to do is to tell God how you feel; vent at Him if you need to. Then tell Him you’re holding Him to His promise to provide comfort and to help you through this. Shutting Him out at a time like this just makes the emptiness greater. It is your faith that will sustain you.”

“Humph. You talk about the sense of injustice. I’ll tell you about my faith. I have faith in this: That there is a hell and that curly-haired drunken sot that murdered my husband will end up in the hottest spot in it. My luck she’ll be so full of alcohol she’ll burn up instantly. Still, when I know she’s burning there, then and only then will I set foot back in a church. Only then will I know that there is a just God and be willing to worship Him. As long as she lives, and

especially if she does not go to prison, don't even mention the name of Jesus to me."

Now Lisa was in tears. "Oh LeAnn, please don't give in to bitterness. It'll just tear you apart and hurt little Misty. And it won't help anything. I know, I've been there."

Clay interjected, "LeAnn, God can take the hatred and bitterness away if you'll let Him."

"Well I don't want it taken away, and I don't want to talk about God anymore." She jumped to her feet. "I think you'd better leave."

As they followed her to the door Lisa and Clay apologized profusely.

"LeAnn, the last thing we wanted was to upset you," said Lisa. "Please forgive us."

"We still want to help in any way we can—no sermons, we promise," added Clay as they stepped outside.

"Thank you," said LeAnn insincerely. "I'll—I'll call you." She closed the door in their faces.

They drove home in stunned silence, pained by the terrifying transformation of this once effervescent young woman. They agreed that they just needed to give her plenty of time and space yet occasionally remind her that they were available and still cared deeply for her.

They were both pretty down and did not talk much when they got home. Clay turned on the tube just for the distraction. Lisa went in and sat at the computer.

A short time later someone came to the door and as soon as Clay opened it she could tell from the deep Southern drawl coming from the front room it was Les. If there had been any doubt Clay's comment would have dispelled it.

“Don’t tell me you ate *before* you came over here.”

He and Clay had just got seated in front of the TV when they heard Lisa.

“Hey, honey,” she called. “Come here and take a look at this.”

“What is it?” said Clay as he joined her.

“Look at this email. It’s from Ronnie but it’s really goofy. See? It starts out okay then it’s just a bunch of gibberish. Do you think it’s a prank? Seems a little over-the-top even for him.”

“Hmm, you’re right,” said Clay. “Hey, Les, you’re a computer guy. This make any sense to you?”

Les wandered over and also stared at the cryptic email that read:

Lisa,

I know you think I’m scamming you but I’m really disperit for money. I have sined the adoption papers and you can have them for any amont your willing to pay. I’ll let yougwko u;n gwks xORUC r iexgus Oernwbr l, rgwt;kk jukk nw, okwAW GYE

“So,” said Lisa, “anybody have any idea why it did that? I don’t think he was just trying to be funny.”

“That something to do with encryption or something?” said Clay. He could use computers for word processing and such but had a very limited knowledge of them.

Working a toothpick on an upper molar Les half-sat against a two-drawer file cabinet and said with total nonchalance, “Looks like fingers on the wrong keys to me. I should know, I’ve did it often enough myself.”

Clay and Lisa looked more intently at the message.

“Les, you’re a wonder,” gushed Lisa.

“Yeah,” said Clay. “That just might be—wait a minute though. I could see someone typing something like that if they weren’t watching but why would anybody *send* it like that? It must be something else.”

“Well, wait a second,” said Lisa. “Let’s try it out and see.” She hit reply and prepared to retype the cryptic portion. “Now let’s see, which way should I slide my hands?”

Les leaned forward and again showed mild interest. “Slide ‘em over to the right wunst, I’d say.”

upihelp I’m held captiv t

She stopped. “Why the upper case? And the “t” all by itself. And the “upi” in the front?”

“I see it,” said Clay. “If your hands were slid over, an “a” would become a caps-lock. So substitute an “a” whenever it switches to upper or lower case. I think the first three letters were already typed okay. Apparently he was interrupted in the middle of what he was typing. Go on, Hon, keep typing.”

“Okay,” she said. “Let me fix what I’ve got so far.”

She now had:

help i’m held captiv at orchid apartment 2. they’ll kill me. please hur

“Clay! Do you think he’s serious?” asked Lisa.

“What time was this sent? How long ago?” said Clay.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Not long; I just got it.”

Les leaned over and looked at the email heading, then at his watch. “Only about ten minutes ago.”

“What’s this Orchid Apartment?” asked Clay.

“I know where it is,” said Les. “Flophouse district downtown.”

“Clay, we’ve got to help him,” said Lisa. “I mean, he’s a rat but he doesn’t deserve death.”

“Who doesn’t deserve death?” asked Greg having just let himself in.

“Let’s go guys,” said Clay. “Lisa, I’m guessing whatever he’s mixed-up in he doesn’t want police there. Still, stay here and if you haven’t heard otherwise from one of us in half an hour call 911. Greg, we’ll explain on the way.”

“Clay, are you sure? I think we should just let the police handle—” The door shut and she jumped up. She tried shouting again that they should just call the police but the three had already sprinted to the minivan and were backing out of the driveway. She waved frantically to get their attention but they roared up the street. She ran back in, grabbed the phone, and called Clay’s cell phone.

“Clayton Osborne I am not going to sit here while you run off to confront killers! I’m calling 911 *now!*”

“Okay, calm down. Don’t call 911 yet. Just call the police directly and tell them the story. If Ronnie’s captors hear sirens that might be the end of him. Use 911 as the last resort, okay?”

“Okay but no heroics. I said we need to help him not get shot for him.”

“Don’t worry none of us have any intention of getting shot. Gotta go. Love you!”

“So,” said Greg after getting a sketch of the situation from Les. “What exactly *are* we going to do when we get to these Orchid Apartments?”

“We’ll figure that out when we get there,” said Clay.

## Chapter 21

“No,” said an exasperated Lisa, a profusion of peanut butter cup wrappers on the table in front of her. “It was an email. It said he needed help—that he was going to be killed... No, I don’t know who was threatening him; the email didn’t say. All I know is he’s in the Orchid Apartments, apartment 2... Yes, I know him. His name is Ronnie Stubbs... No, he’s—well, he’s my ex-boyfriend. Look, none of that matters now. My husband and my brother are headed over there now and I’m worried about their safety... NO! They’re not the ones who are threatening him, they’re going over to try to help him... JUST GET SOMEBODY OVER THERE WILL YOU? What? Lisa Osborne, my name is Lisa Osborne. Listen you need to— My address? Why on earth do you need *my* address?”

Clay, Greg, and Les looked up at the dilapidated brick building.

“See them fire escapades?” said Les. “I got me a idear. Was it apartment ‘2’?”

They nodded.

“Y’all just wait here a minute.”

He jumped out of the car, being careful not to slam the door, hurried across the street and into the building.

“What in the world is he doing?” said Greg.

“Lord only knows—but fortunately He does. That might be the only thing that keeps Les out of trouble.”

Barely half a minute later Les reappeared and came jogging back to the car.

“Just as I thought. Apartment two’s got a fire escapade.”

“You want us to go up the fire escape?” asked Greg.

“Nope. But that’s where the bad guys are coming down.” He gave them a quick run through of his plan.

Greg stationed himself at the corner of the building and spoke into his cell phone. “You hear me okay?”

Clay, wearing an earpiece from his cell, hissed, “Yes! Now keep quiet till it’s time.” He and Les were at the top of the stairs approaching the door marked two.

“Ready?” mouthed Les.

Clay nodded and Les pounded on the door.

Clay whispered, “I admire the...” Then he shouted, “...San Jose Police Department! Unlock the door, step back with your hands up, and leave any weapons you have on the floor in front of you!”

“It worked,” said Greg over the cell. “Somebody’s coming down the fire escape, and in a big hurry, too.”

Clay and Les nodded at each other and threw their shoulders against the door. The ancient wood holding the lock and chain surrendered readily. They found who they presumed was Ronnie duct-taped to the chair with a strip across his mouth but no longer blindfolded. Les hurried in and began helping remove duct tape. Greg called again to report that the fire-escaper had climbed into a black BMW and sped off.

“Let’s get out of here, quick,” said Clay.

“I’m for that,” said Ronnie. “I don’t know how to thank you.” They headed for the door when Ronnie stopped them. “Wait. I need to grab something.” He reached into the desk drawer and took an envelope bulging with a sheaf of folded papers. Then they headed down the stairs.

Clay keyed his cell phone. “Hi, hon. We’re fine. Did you call the police? Call them again and tell them to meet at our place. We’re getting out of here right now in case the guy who just fled down the fire escape decides to come back. See you in a few.”

The police pulled into the Osborne’s driveway right behind them. All but Ronnie told the same story from what little they knew. Cryptic email, frightened thug, Ronnie tied up. Ronnie gave a pathetically implausible story about not knowing who the ruffian was, why he had tied him up, or what he had wanted.

After the police gave up trying to get any straight answers out of Ronnie and left, they all sat around the Osborne’s kitchen table waiting expectantly for the story Ronnie had refused to tell. Instead he got an introspective—and somewhat sheepish—look in his eyes and turned his attention to Lisa.

“Nice place you got here, Lis’. It’s good that you’re happy.”

She reached over and squeezed Clay’s hand. “I am.”

Ronnie looked around. “I’m glad for you. I really am.”

“Thanks,” she said. “Hang on a second; I want you to meet someone.” She headed to the back of the house.

Ronnie looked at Les. “Guess since you all risked your lives for me I should introduce myself. I’m Ronnie Stubbs.” He held out his hand.

“Lester Dinwiddie,” instructed Les pumping Ronnie’s hand.

Ronnie looked at Greg. “I think we might have met.”

Greg flashed a sardonic grin. “Yeah, a time or two when you and Lisa were an item. I didn’t think too much of you then.”

“Can’t say as I blame you. I wouldn’t want a guy like me hanging around my sister either.” Ronnie offered his hand to Clay. “Glad she finally got it right.” Clay smiled warmly and shook his hand.

Lisa returned with Terri and little Greg in tow. “This is Greg and this is Terri,” she said.

Ronnie smiled at both kids but stared at the pretty little six-year-old. “You’re the spitting image of your mom, but I guess you must hear that all the time.”

Terri smiled politely but was obviously confused as to the somewhat tense atmosphere and who this man was. “Terri, honey, this is Mr. Ronnie Stubbs. Would you stand over next to him? I want to get a picture.”

She produced a camera and it was plain that Ronnie was struggling to keep his emotions under control as Terri posed next to him. Lisa snapped the picture and said, “Okay, you kids can go play.”

“Nice meeting you, Mr. Stubbs,” said Terri.

“It was real good seeing you, Terri,” he said, and she and little Greg scampered off.

“She knows Clay’s not her real daddy, sort of,” said Lisa. “It’s kind of confusing for her so she just treats him like her dad anyway. One day soon I’ll show her the picture and explain things to her. That is, unless you’d like to start seeing her from time to time; you know, be a part of her life.”

He shook his head ruefully. “Nah. I mean, I’d like that in some ways but she’s better off without me interfering in her, and your, lives. It’s best if I just sort of disappear.” He looked across at Clay. “You really love Terri, don’t you?”

“As if she were my very own,” Clay said intently.

Ronnie smiled. “I knew that. I could tell. I saw you and her together the other day and I can tell she loves you, too. That’s why I brought these.” He pulled the envelope out of his jacket pocket.

“These are the papers Kragen drew up. I’ve signed them and everything. You can officially adopt her and be her real daddy now, which is as it should be.” He handed the papers to Clay and cleared his throat.

“Look, I know you folks aren’t rich and can’t afford to give me enough to get me out of the trouble I’m in. But if you could come up with just a few hundred bucks—for me to pay Kragen off—I’d really appreciate it. But I’ll let you all decide. If you don’t want to give me anything, the papers are still signed anyway. I’ll just leave it up to you.”

“Ronnie,” said Clay. “I think it would really help if you would come clean about this guy that had you tied-up today. What’s he after and why?”

Ronnie took a deep breath and shook his head. “Typical Ronnie foul-up. I met up with this girl, um, young woman. Heather. Gorgeous girl, daughter of a loaded surgeon. She invited me to a swimming party at her folks’ mansion and we really hit it off. I decided I could take her for a ride; y’know scam her out of a bundle then disappear. But I needed to look like I was well-off y’know or she’d ditch me before I got a foot in the door. I made it through the swimming party because trunks are trunks but I knew I was going to need better clothes, a nice rental car and all to look the part.”

“So you were going to scam a young woman,” said Lisa. “Imagine that.”

Ronnie gave a rueful look. “Yeah, I’m sure this sounds familiar to you, Lisa. Anyway, I needed some cash quick so this guy I know said I could get it from a guy named Eddie Petrokis but that his interest rates were sky high. Meanwhile Heather invites me to this big shindig and I have to rent a tux. By the end of the evening we’ve really got something going, know what I mean? So I

decide I've got to do this. I get hold of Eddie and get five thousand so I can throw a lot of cash around in her presence, take her to fancy restaurants, buy a used Rolex, the whole deal. He tells me it'll cost ten thou' by the first of May but I'm not worried. Things are going great. And they keep going great. She and I are together every night and her folks really take to me. I'm telling her about moving money around and some real estate investments my folks and I needed to take advantage of very soon if we could just get some other investments liquidated in time. She actually offers that, when the time comes, she will loan me fifteen thousand for a couple of days if I need her to. I'm thinking a couple of days are all I need to disappear. Fifteen thousand is chump change for these people. But I also decided this was the last hustle. I was determined to take the money from this one and go up to Tahoe and start a business like we always talked about, remember Lisa?"

Lisa nodded and slowly rolled her eyes.

Ronnie looked sheepish. "Yeah, I know, always a dreamer. But this time it was for real. And I had it planned-out for the end of the month. Just enough time to really make it all seem legit but soon enough to maintain my cover.

"Then things start to go south. For one thing I overplayed my hand. I told them I was a college grad from the Midwest who had taken a year sabbatical on the West Coast to decide if I wanted to start working or go for a Masters. Her folks asked what college. I had just watched a Texas-Mizzou basketball game that day and Texas isn't the Midwest so I said University of Missouri. Just my luck her old man had studied there for a year and still had connections there. But something else went wrong. I actually started falling for Heather. Yeah, go figure. Me falling in love. I guess it was that I was always careful to treat her nice—not try to run all over her like...like I usually do."

Lisa gave a knowing nod.

“Somehow it got to me the way she responded to me, really ate up the kindness. She didn’t have to be defensive, angry, or fearful and we weren’t always fighting with each other like usual. Lisa, I guess I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. Anyway, I could just feel the love pouring out of her and, and I just couldn’t help but respond the same way. I was sort of able to get a taste of what it might be like to know real happiness. The kind that you and Clay have. Only now I didn’t know how I was going to undo the mess. As the day approached I’d made up my mind I wasn’t going to scam her. I couldn’t.” Ronnie halted and choked down a sob but a tear escaped despite his efforts. He rubbed it away with the heel of his hand, angry and embarrassed to be so transparent.

Finally he continued. “I just couldn’t do that to her. I made reservations at a fancy place for dinner for a booth away from everyone else. I was going to come clean with her, tell her the whole story and hope like crazy she’d forgive me. And, you know, she was so kindhearted there was actually a chance that she would.

“When I got there to pick her up I immediately knew something was wrong. She and her folks were standing around the front door as I entered. But I was so focused on just getting her alone and what I was going to say I didn’t see what was coming.

“Her old man says, ‘I was wondering if you lived in the same dorm I did on the Mizzou campus or if you just rode a bike in from one of those apartments near Union Station in KC.’ I was afraid he’d want details about the dorm so I took the bait and said near Union Station. He of course informed me that Mizzou is in Columbia, well over a hundred miles from Kansas City. I fumbled around for a bit but I could tell by the look on Heather’s face that I was writing my own epitaph. I decided I better just confess but before I could her dad said, ‘You’ve

never spent one day in Missouri, let alone the university, have you?' I shook my head and he goes on to say he's done some asking around and found that I'm an all-around phony. I admitted it.

"Then I said to Heather, 'You're probably not going to want to ever see me again but would you just give me five minutes to explain? Out here on the porch?' Over her folks' protests she came outside with me—I told you she was that kind of girl. I tried my best to explain that I had started out to scam her but that I couldn't now because I loved her. All she could hear was that everything else I'd told her was a lie. She was kindhearted but not a fool. She very quietly said that if I ever attempted to contact her in any way she would press charges. Then she began to cry and entered the house. It was the only time I ever saw her cry. I haven't seen or spoken with her since." The regret in his eyes was discernable.

"Now I was in big trouble with Eddie. I didn't have any of his money left let alone the whole ten thousand. So I've been trying to steer clear of him till I could figure something out."

"You don't have any of the money left?" said Greg.

"No. I did have some merchandise that I was going to convert to cash—maybe half of what I borrowed if I'm lucky. That goon of Eddie's that came in and tied me up took all of that stuff."

"So, in a sense you have paid some of it back," said Lisa.

"Yeah, but I don't know how far 'some of it' goes with Eddie Petrokis. I keep hoping if I could just give him back the \$5,000 I borrowed he might at least give me some more time."

"Do you think this Eddie Petrokis knows any of us or where we live?" asked Greg.

“No. He wouldn’t know anything about me and Lisa from before and none of his boys have followed us here. But, hey, if you’re worried about you all getting mixed up in this, it’s okay. I understand. If you’ll just let me wait until after dark, I’ll just skip town.”

“No, actually, staying with one of us might be the best place for you,” said Greg. “Since no one knows where you are this could give you the chance to get your bearings and figure out what to do next. Why don’t you just stay with me for a few days? I just live a short distance from here. You can use my couch and at least there’ll be food and a place to stay—something you won’t have if you head out of town broke. Only you need to stay put and out of sight—no tooling around town. And turn off your cell phone.”

“Sure, no problem but—you’d do this for me? Put me up and everything? Why?”

“Because you could use some help and we have the means to help. That’s basic Christianity 101.”

Ronnie got a pensive look Lisa had never seen him have before. He sat stone silent for a good three or four minutes then said intently, “This Christianity thing. Tell me about it.”

There was no high-pressure, just a sincere discussion among the group of the meaning of a Jesus-led life. Lisa was amazed that the usually shallow, self-centered, hard-shell Ronnie was deeply involved in the discussion and asking all the right questions.

At length he just sat back and said, “Wow. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“It’s a big decision, no doubt about that,” said Clay. “But a glorious one. Why don’t you take Greg up on his offer and spend a few days with him. If you want to talk more about it, someone will always be close by.”

“Well, I’ve never been one to turn down free room and board. And we’ll be talking more about Jesus. You can be sure of that.”

## Chapter 22

At her first appearance before a jury, Chauncette, under orders from Barksdale, wore a conservative gray little business suit that revealed no skin but followed and accentuated her lovely curves. The theory was that the women would recognize that she was not being purposely provocative—just a pretty young thing trying to get a break. The men, on the other hand, would also not be able to proclaim her a hussy while at the same time not miss her considerable assets. Some of them might be inclined to want to protect the fair damsel. She tried to maintain a slightly frightened, bewildered look as if she had no idea why all this was happening to her. In some ways that did not take much acting.

Due to several delays during the week, they were beginning jury selection right before the weekend. If they were fortunate enough to complete it in one day, nothing more would be accomplished until Monday. After the first twelve jurors had been randomly selected to sit in the jury box along with four alternates, Barksdale approached the bench.

“Your Honor, with the court’s permission I would like to address the entire panel with some preliminaries before we get down to addressing individual jurors. As I mentioned to you, I have this display to assist my discussion.”

“You may proceed, Mr. Barksdale.”

“Thank you, your Honor.” He carried an easel with a large poster-board sign on it out in front of the jury box.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen—” At this point he turned to the jurors in the gallery waiting to get called if any from the original group were dismissed. “And all of you prospective jurors as well, I would ask that you listen closely.” Turning back to the jury box he continued. “I have a little one-question quiz for you all before we go any further. This is a written quiz. Here you see I’m handing out cards and pencils for you to write with. These happen to be my business cards, please write on the back. I hate to see my name get written over—you know how egotistical we lawyer types are.” This caused a few chuckles.

“Now, I want you to select one of the answers to the question I’m about to ask and write it down on the back of the card; either A, B or C. Okay? All right, here’s the question on this poster here, I’ll read it just for clarity. It says, ‘At this exact moment, which most nearly expresses your attitude about the defendant? A) She is absolutely 100% innocent of the crime with which she is charged, B) She is neither innocent nor guilty, I’ll wait and hear the evidence to see which convinces me, C) She is probably guilty or else why would they have charged her with the crime.’ Now, please mark your answer, either A, B or C and be as honest as you can.

“All right, everyone finished? Good. Now I’d like to see a show of hands. How many of you marked ‘A’ as your answer?”

Five hands went up, one of them barely.

“Okay, quiz over. Ladies and gentlemen, ‘A’ is the only correct answer. As of this moment, since no evidence against her has been presented, she is as innocent of this accusation as you are. It is as if she were someone we just grabbed off the street a few minutes ago and dragged in here. According to our system of law, she is not ‘maybe innocent, maybe guilty.’ She is totally innocent. It is the responsibility of the prosecution to change that 180 degrees in the opposite direction. Let me demonstrate further.”

He turned the poster-board around to show a drawing on its back. It looked like a big fuel gauge with the needle pointing to where empty would be. But instead of empty it said “Innocent.” At the half full mark it said “50/50” and at the full mark it said “Guilty.” The “gauge” was red all the way across to just before the “Guilty” mark. Barksdale pointed to the “50/50” mark.

“You see, many people believe they are to start here; to take a neutral view of the defendant’s guilt. Then, as evidence is presented by first the prosecution then the defense, with each being challenged by the other, the guilt or innocence of the defendant will unfold.” He suddenly whirled around toward the jury and pointed his finger at them fiercely, “People, that is wrong, wrong, wrong! American criminal justice does not work that way at all.”

He pointed at the empty mark. “This is where you must begin. The law—not I but the law—says that you *must* start here, believing Ms. Dupree to be absolutely innocent. Then, as the prosecution presents evidence, perhaps including testimony by witnesses, her innocence might begin to erode somewhat in your mind.” He moved his hand to the quarter-full point. “However, it might also be that when that so-called evidence is questioned, you will remain convinced—as convinced as you must be this moment—of her innocence. However, let’s suppose that after the prosecution has presented its entire case, your opinion of the defendant’s guilt is about right here.” He pointed to a spot just slightly to the “Guilty” side of the halfway point. “What would your verdict have to be under the law?” He waited for someone to answer. “Go ahead, speak up.”

A middle-aged man with fingernails blackened from years of working in an auto shop finally ventured an answer. “She’d still be not guilty.”

“Absolutely correct! Now, how about if your opinion was here when the prosecution rests?” He pointed to a spot at about three-fourths of the way to “Guilty.”

“Same thing,” said a CPA-looking type with wire-rim glasses.

“Correct again. The only time you can find the defendant guilty is if you are absolutely convinced beyond a reasonable doubt. If your thinking is anywhere in the red, you must find the defendant not guilty. So, suppose again that your thinking is here when the prosecution rests.” He pointed again to the three-fourths mark. “As we’ve already said, that is not enough to convict her. But notice, the defense hasn’t even presented its case. The truth is, unless the prosecution can take you all the way from this end of this gauge to that end, the defense doesn’t need to do a thing. I can sit there on my fat, overfed, overpaid lawyer duff and never even get out of my chair and the law says you would have to find the defendant not guilty. If the prosecution’s evidence obviously proves nothing and its witnesses say nothing of significance or are not in the least credible, I don’t even have to challenge them. I don’t have to cross-examine anyone. I don’t have to offer an alternative explanation. I don’t have to say one word. Although, being a lawyer, you know that’s not going to happen.” Now the laughter was more pronounced. He was winning them over.

“Just as important, the defendant does not need to ‘tell her side of the story.’ It is common for people to think that unless the accused testifies, he or she must be hiding something and is therefore guilty. But as we have seen, unless you are convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that she is guilty by the time the prosecution is finished, the defense doesn’t need to present its ‘side’ of things at all. Now, there are any number of reasons why an accused person might not testify. Perhaps the defendant doesn’t speak very well and would be easily misunderstood. Perhaps the person is not articulate or is not highly educated. We

don't condemn people just because they don't have a string of fancy degrees do we? Perhaps the person is just plain terrified of speaking in a public setting. Did you know that is the number one phobia people have? Perhaps the person does not do well when someone is attacking them verbally. I can assure you my learned opponent is highly skilled at rattling a person on the stand during cross-examination. Why would I subject a defendant to that when it would be painful for her and, if the prosecution gets her confused, possibly even detrimental to her case; especially if the prosecution has not proven her guilt? Now, I'm not saying we don't plan to present any defense or even that the defendant will not testify. I'm only saying that, according to the laws we are governed by, it is unnecessary for us to do so if the prosecution does not prove its case.

“One final example and we'll move on. Suppose that, as I'm standing here speaking to you, someone out there in the gallery stood up, pointed a finger directly at you and shouted, 'I know for certain that you were involved in the conspiracy for the September 11 World Trade Center disaster.' How would you react? Probably you'd be incredulous and say to your accuser something like, 'Oh yeah? That's ridiculous. Prove it!' Suppose the accuser then said, 'Well, for one thing you were here in the U.S. in the weeks leading up to the disaster.' Would you feel like you needed to defend yourself, to tell 'your side of the story,' to give some elaborate moment-by-moment accounting for your whereabouts? Or wouldn't you simply recognize that everyone knows there were over 200 million other people in the U.S. during that time period and this supposed evidence proves absolutely nothing? You see, just because someone accuses you of something, that in no way obligates you to defend yourself. In American criminal justice the burden is totally on the prosecution to bring your opinion of the accused all the way from totally innocent, to unquestionably guilty. And if they stop even one inch short of that, your verdict *must* be 'not guilty,' regardless of what the defense

does or who testifies.” He walked over to the jury box, leaned on the railing and spoke in low, no-nonsense tones. “That, my friends, is the law.”

Several jurors were challenged and removed by both sides in an effort to give them maximum sympathy to their side of the case. Just before 4 p.m. the final alternate was accepted by both sides and the jury was set. Monday the trial would begin in earnest.

## Chapter 23

Cody approached a group at the Watering Hole bar and spotted a smallish but powerfully built man in his thirties wearing a NASCAR tee-shirt with a pack of cigarettes rolled-up in the sleeve. He didn't appear to be involved with the group, staring straight ahead instead while nursing the dregs of a beer. Cody sat down on the other side of him.

"Excuse me," said Cody. "You Bud Garber?"

Bud furrowed his brows. "Yeah," he said cautiously.

Cody held out a publicity shot of Chauncette in a provocative pose. "Do you recognize this babe?"

Still perplexed, Bud frowned at the picture for a moment, then brightened. "Oh, yeah. The girl in the accident. Do you know her?"

Cody smiled. "Oh yeah. I'm in her backup band. Do you know who she is?"

Garber shook his head, "Not really. I'm supposed to testify at her trial about what I saw at the accident scene. Don't know much about her, though."

"She's Chauncette Dupree, lead singer of Peasant Danger. Would you like to meet her sometime?"

Garber gave a facial shrug. "Sure. I don't think I'm supposed to, though. Not till the trial is over. That was quite an accident. She didn't suffer any permanent injury did she?"

“She’s fine. Just a little soreness in her knee, but she’s as good as ever—and I can assure you, that’s *very* good. She insisted that I talk with you.”

Garber looked puzzled.

Cody gestured to a booth at the far corner of the room. “Can we talk for a minute?” He gestured for the bartender to bring a refill to booth.

As soon as they sat down the bartender brought a beer and Cody handed him a five-spot motioning for him to keep it. Garber’s eyebrows lifted at this. When they were alone Cody leaned forward and spoke in conspiratorial tones. “If you don’t mind my asking, what did the police ask you about the accident?”

“Pretty routine questions, I’d say. Why?”

“Did they ask you about who was driving, who was in the car, that sort of thing?”

Gardener shrugged. “I don’t know, mostly just what happened; what I’d seen. I told them the SUV ran the light and hit the Toyota. Then I got out to see if anyone was hurt. I got the little girl out of the car, but the guy—I couldn’t even get to him. By the time I got to the SUV, this girl—Chauncette?—she was sitting by the edge of the road holding her leg. That’s pretty much it. After that the cops came and everything. I heard the guy died.”

“Yeah, too bad,” said Cody. “Listen, Chauncette could really use some help. See she wasn’t driving; this short Latino guy was. He ran off immediately after the accident and hasn’t been seen since. She needs somebody to back-up her story.”

Gardener shook his head. “I didn’t see nobody run off.”

Cody squinted directly into Gardener’s eyes. “See, that’s just it. People’s memories get kinda fuzzy sometimes. A fellow just needs to let his mind relax. You’ve had that happen, right? Where you’re trying to remember something and

the harder you try the worse it gets? Then you get all nice and relaxed somewhere and ‘Ding’ the light turns on and everything becomes clear.”

Gardener looked even more puzzled and started to speak but Cody continued on.

“And you know what weighs on a fellow’s mind and keeps him from relaxing more than anything else? Money worries. Right? I mean, who doesn’t have money worries? Then again, if a guy comes into a sizable chunk of change unexpectedly it can just sort of set his mind free. Like you, for instance. I bet if you suddenly had an extra, say, five thousand dollars your mind would be so at peace, everything that happened that night would come back crystal clear. You know what I mean?”

“I think I’m gettin’ the idea.” He rubbed the stubble on his chin and squinted at Cody for a bit. “Of course, a guy could get into a lot of trouble for remembering things wrong, you know. It might take quite a bit more for me to remember it just the way you’re saying.”

Cody sat up a little straighter and cleared his throat. “Just how much more do you think it would take?”

Garber smirked. “Mmm, I don’t know exactly. Maybe double that amount.”

Cody stared at him for a long, uncomfortable moment while Garber sipped his beer. “Okay, but no maybe about it. Ten thousand. Period. Half before you testify, half after. Agreed?”

Now it was Garber’s turn to sit and stare. After a long pause Cody became impatient. “Well?”

“I’m thinking. You must have an awful lot of money to agree to let loose of ten big ones without even flinching.”

“Now, Mr. Garber, you don’t want to go getting greedy on me and lose out on the whole deal, do you?”

“Don’t jump to conclusions, kid. I’m not going to raise the price. Not exactly. What I was getting at is somebody with as much disposable cash as you seem to have probably rubs elbows with some VIPs. It might be pretty easy for you to pay the first installment and give ol’ Bud the brush-off after he’s perjured himself knowing he can’t afford to go to the cops. And with the people of influence you know, you can probably make sure I don’t bother you about getting the rest of the money either.”

“Hey, look, I’m not into the Mob or anything,” said Cody. “This is strictly a business proposition. You render us a service and we pay for it. But somebody has to trust somebody or we’re never going to get anywhere. After all we both have plenty riding on it, right?”

“Maybe,” said Garber. “But I’m still not clear how exactly you fit into the picture and I’m going to guess you won’t tell me. That makes me kinda nervous. So, I think I need a little something extra—a show of good faith you might call it.”

Now it was Cody’s turn to be puzzled and it showed plainly on his face.

Garber reached across the table and picked up Chauncette’s picture. “Say like if this little honey was to deliver the first installment to me *personally*. Alone. That would make me feel like you all were really sincere; y’know, trustworthy. You did offer to let me meet her. You were talking about how getting relaxed helps a guy’s memory. Now I’m betting she could get me real relaxed. In fact if she was to spend a whole night with me and was real cooperative, I might even just forget the other five grand. Notice I said ‘might.’”

Cody turned to stone, an occasional eye-blink his only movement for a good two minutes. Could he really sell Chauncette, *his* girl, to this lowlife? Then again, this whole thing was to keep her out of prison; and it wasn’t like she was a

pure, chaste maiden. He knew she'd had other men before him, would have others after, and might well be involved with some now—possibly even this very moment while he was away from her.

“Look, I can't promise she'll agree to this. Assuming she does, you'd better treat her like a Ming vase. You make her the least bit unhappy and I'll see you pay for it permanently; and I don't care if it means I go to prison for life. Savvy?”

“No problem there, hot shot. I'm as gentle as a lamb around gorgeous babes. An adult male lamb that is. So, who is this mystery guy I saw driving the SUV?”

Cody shook his head. “No, no, no. You tell the story just like you saw it. Initially you were looking at the vehicles, not who was driving, right?”

“Yeah, that's pretty much the case.”

“After the collision, you ran over to the Toyota first.”

“True enough,” agreed Garber.

“While you were helping the little girl you glanced over and saw Chauncette and a guy about 5'8” with dark hair and a dark complexion getting out of the SUV. Next time you looked up he was nowhere to be found.”

“That's it? I tell the cops that in exchange for ten big ones and an evening in paradise?”

Cody cringed at the thought of Chauncette in the arms of this creep. But it was for her own good as well as the good of the band and his future. Too much was riding on her charisma to see her spend a year or more in jail and become the *cause célèbre* for MADD and every anti-drinking bunch in the country. “Yeah. That's it.”

“When and where do the little lady and I have our memory enhancement session?”

Cody bristled. This guy's cuteness was pushing him to the brink. "The trial starts Monday. You'll be one of the first witnesses the prosecution puts on the stand. So we better make it tomorrow night. Let's say seven o'clock sharp at the Sterling Inn. Give me a number where I can reach you. I'll either call you with the room number or tell you that she has refused to go along with this."

"Just let her know if that's the case—or if I get there and she's not—the whole deal's off. Depending on how annoyed I am, I might even take this little arrangement to the cops."

Cody suddenly became very nervous. Chauncette could refuse and claim no knowledge of what Cody was doing, leaving him hung out to dry and her off the hook. At this point the only one involved in anything illegal was Cody. He had offered a bribe but since no money had changed hands no one else was guilty of anything.

"I think you can be pretty confident of her cooperation."

Garber leaned back and smiled. "You know, I feel like my memory might be getting a little clearer already."

Cody's loathing for Garber went off the charts but he felt he—and Chauncette—had no other option. He sighed disgustedly and made it clear he wanted to bring this meeting to an end. "The phone number where I can reach you?" Cody said curtly.

## Chapter 24

“You want me to what?” Chauncette was so furious she had trouble forming the words. “What right have you got to go around offering me to guys like some kind of pimp?”

“I told you, I didn’t offer him anything. He demanded that you deliver the money and, well, be cooperative with him. In exchange for that he’d make it so you don’t have to go to prison, Chaunce’. Look, it’s not what I want—I even told him you might not go along with it. But he was insistent that you be part of the deal or no dice. I guess I shouldn’t have shown him your picture. I should have known; you have that effect on everybody. I’ll have a room right next door. If he gives you the slightest trouble just make some noise and I’ll be over there in an instant; I have access to a .38 and I know how to use it. I’ll let him know I’m going to be there and that I have it. The mere sight of it ought to make him behave. Chaunce’ I hate this whole thing, but isn’t one night of unpleasantness better than years in jail? Still, it’s your decision.”

When he put it like that, Chauncette felt she really could not argue. Besides, it would not be the first time she had been intimate with someone less than her ideal. For that matter, Cody fell into that category. She sighed deeply. “When?”

“Tonight. At seven. I didn’t know what your decision would be but I reserved two suites at the Sterling Inn just in case. I’ll bring the cash to your place

at five, then I'll go on over to make sure there aren't any cops around or anything suspicious in case he plans to double-cross us. Keep your phone with you. I'll call about a quarter till seven and let you know if it's okay. If I don't call, you don't come. Got it?"

She nodded resignedly, a look of abject disgust on her face.

Cody turned her toward him and placed a hand on each of her shoulders. "It'll be all right Chaunce'. It'll be over soon and we can put this whole terrible business behind us and get on with life." He leaned forward to kiss her but she pulled away.

"Chaunce'?" he added. "Just one more thing. Stay off the sauce till you get there, okay? I mean, once you're there with him drink as much as you want—whatever it takes for you to deal with the situation. But none beforehand, okay? Everybody's necks are stuck out a mile in this thing. There's way too much that can go wrong if you're not in control."

"Not in control?" She fired-off a bitter laugh. "It doesn't look like I'm in control of anything." She began to cry—something he had never seen her do. "Take me home, Cody. Right now."

During the intervening hours her mood became more and more sullen as the unthinkable started to interject itself into her mind. She was going to the cabin with Mike. After escaping and vowing never to let a man manipulate her again, now she was going. Only this time this "Mike" was not using any thinly-disguised deception. He was crudely blunt; he wanted to use her for his own enjoyment. And she would allow it. She would hate every second of it but she would allow it. Indeed, she would hate him for making her allow it. She hated Cody for opening the door for this to even have become a possibility. She hated herself. The day she graduated from high school she had promised herself she would be in complete charge of her own life from that moment on. Now she was

no longer in charge. She had to admit, though, that she had done a pretty lousy job with her life even when she was. Now she was getting ready to take it to rock-bottom. And what made her hate herself the most was that she would go to the cabin with Mike of her own free will.

Free will. She thought about those words. Where had she heard them recently? Who had used that phrase? Greg. *If you give Him your heart of your own free will, He'll be the best friend you could ever have.* "I need more than a friend right now," she said aloud to no one.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. It was five o'clock and Cody had come to the apartment to give her a small box containing the cash. She said nothing to him, responding to all his instructions and reassurances with only a sullen nod. He would have been convinced she was going to bail out on him were it not for her being all dolled-up like she was going to a party at the Ritz.

"Look, I've got to head over there. Jerry's going to take me so I'll leave you the rental car I've been driving. Here are the keys. You gonna be okay?"

She closed her eyes and nodded as she opened the door, silently urging him to leave her alone.

"Remember, Chaunc' I'll be close by, okay? If you need anything..." Nothing he could say would make things any better.

After he left she decided she could not just sit and wait any longer. She needed noise, people around, and most of all a drink. She remembered Cody's instructions not to get loaded before she got there but rationalized it with assurances to herself that she would only have one or two at the most. Just enough to dull her self-loathing.

She got in the car and headed toward the Sterling Inn. It was at the opposite end of town, affording plenty of places for her to stop and bend the

elbow on the way. Of course, she realized, it would not be good to pick too familiar of a place. Having friends questioning her about the evening's plans was not what she wanted. What she wanted. She thought about the cruel irony of the phrase. None of this was what she wanted. For that matter, her life was not what she wanted. And it never would be. If she became a famous singer, she would have a whole cadre of people telling her what to do all the time. If she did not make it big, she would be a failure—a nobody—a loser. Somebody that women seemed to just naturally despise and men considered a utensil for gratification. Her life was devoid of love. She could not love and no one loved her. No one. *But you do have a Father's love—an unconditional love that is pure and total.* "Yeah, right," she said aloud. "Jesus loves me, this I know. What a crock." Maybe that would be the best answer. To go meet God and be done with it all. Maybe the real problem was that she had survived the accident. If she had been the one killed she could avoid all this and all the future troubles that her past indicated were sure to come. She drove across an overpass. Just whip the wheel hard to the right and sweet peace would be hers. *No, I'd probably land on another car and kill even more people. As it is, I'll bet it's not peace but Hell that's waiting for me anyway. Another thing I can't control. Oh, I'm so lost.* Her eyes welled-up, as a little girl deep inside of her wished earnestly that she could just go back and start over. If only she could have a second chance. *God is the God of second chances—of starting over. He can give you a brand new start.* She heard Greg's voice as clearly as if he were in the car with her. She turned onto Capital Expressway, not at all a direct route to the Sterling Inn. *What are you doing?* she asked herself. *Thinking of Greg made me think of Staley's,* her mind answered. *I can get a drink there as well as any place. Since it's not a bar it'll make it less likely that I'll drink too much.* She refused to let the next thought—that this was only a flimsy excuse—form. She turned up the CD player

for use as a distraction. It only worked for a while, though. Eventually her mind made itself be heard. *Who are you trying to kid? You could stop at any of a dozen other places. You want to find Greg. No, not just Greg, Nadine.* “Oh, come on, they’re not going to be there.” *But what if they are? Would that be a sign of some kind?*

*A sign? From Whom? You’re not buying into this God baloney are you?*

*No. But before I off myself could it be any worse to talk to them?*

*Whatever. They won’t be there anyway.*

She actually felt butterflies in her stomach as she pulled into Staley’s parking lot. A surreal, dreamlike feeling swept over her as she exited the car and walked toward the entrance. As she reached for the handle a feeling of final despair hit her. They were not here. She would go in, have a couple of drinks alone, leave and then go to Hell—whether figuratively or literally remained to be seen.

The door hit her hand and jammed her finger as a couple was just coming out.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Greg. “I should be more—Chauncette?”

Chauncette backed away as if reeling from a left hook. Seeing her shock, Greg and Nadine both asked if she was okay. To their amazement she threw herself into Nadine’s arms and sobbed.

“Whoa, did I hurt you that bad?” said Greg.

Chauncette shook her head. “It’s not that.”

“Here,” said Nadine. “Let’s go sit in the car for a bit.”

They all three got into the back seat of Greg’s car, Chauncette in the middle.

“You probably think I’m crazy,” sniffled Chauncette.

“No, not crazy,” said Nadine gently. “Pretty upset but not crazy. What is it, hon? What’s the problem? And how can we help?”

She looked up at the roof of the car and a sigh shuddered through her as she closed her eyes. “You can’t. Nobody can. I should just go. I’m sorry for behaving like this—”

“No, Chauncette,” countered Greg. “Tell us what’s going on. Whatever it is we’ll do everything we can to help. I have a suspicion it might help just to talk about it.”

Nadine added, “We don’t want to be nosy. But something’s really troubling you.”

Chauncette spoke slowly. “I don’t really know where to begin.”

“Take your time. We’re not in any hurry to get anywhere.”

“Tell me something about God.”

Nadine was taken by surprise. “Sure. If we can.”

“Is there really a Hell? I mean, is it a real place with fire and everything?”

“Well, yeah, but there’s no need in anybody going there. The way to avoid it has already been provided.”

“But a person that commits suicide goes there for sure, right?”

## Chapter 25

Greg and Nadine's eyes met. Nadine spoke quietly and calmly. "Greg, why don't you get up front and take us to Clay and Lisa's? Okay?" He complied without comment. She looked at Chauncette. "Lisa is Greg's sister. She's reached the point of pondering those same kinds of questions before and found a much better way. Is it okay if we stop by and see her? They live really close."

Chauncette's silence was taken as consent. Nadine continued. "Chauncette, something pretty drastic must have happened. Is it something to do with the accident?"

She nodded. "Yeah, in a way. But that's not it completely. I just don't see any happiness in the future for me. Anywhere."

"Chauncette there's plenty of happiness in your future if you give yourself the chance to find it," said Nadine. "I'm not talking about 'whoo-wee let's party' kind of happiness but a real joy of living—a life of peace, contentment, and a sense of purpose. Does any of that sound like what you're after?"

She nodded silently. It was evident that as much as she wanted those things in her life she was convinced they were unobtainable.

As Greg pulled onto the expressway he used his cell phone to call Clay. "Hey, man, it's Greg; how are you doing? Oh, I just picked Deeny up at work. We bumped into Chauncette there and she's pretty upset. Yeah. We were wondering if we could bring her by for a while if you and Lisa aren't busy. She

just really needs some open ears and hearts right now. Great, I was hoping you'd say that. We'll be right over."

Nadine spoke again to Chauncette. "You asked about God and that's the right question. He is the way to the kind of life I just described. We can tell you exactly how to make that happen for you. But I don't think you're in the mood for listening just now. I think you need to talk."

Chauncette looked embarrassed. "I really shouldn't be bothering you guys or Greg's sister with any of this. I should just go. Why don't you take me back to my car, Greg?"

"We're almost there, Chauncette. Just come in for a few minutes to talk. A little talk can't hurt, can it? After we've talked a bit, if you still want to leave I'll take you back. I promise. Just give us a chance to help. Please?"

Chauncette gave Nadine a puzzled look. "I don't know why you're so anxious to help me. I got Greg forced out of the band."

Greg spoke very gently. "Chauncette, none of that matters. You're more important than my being in the band. Besides, God is doing some really cool things in my life and my being in the band is not part of His agenda. You just forget about me; we need to focus on you.

"Here we are."

They spent a minimal amount of time in introductions and found seats in the Osborne s' living room. Nadine got straight to the point.

"Chauncette, something has you extremely upset. I get really frightened when I hear anyone—and especially someone I care about—talking suicide." Lisa and Clay shifted uneasily in their chairs and exchanged wide-eyed glances. "No matter what the problem, there is another solution. And none of us will rest until we—and you—find it."

“Someone you care about?” Chauncette repeated with a hint of sarcasm. “Why would you care about me? You hardly know me.”

“My Father loves you so much it hurts Him. How can I not feel that way about you?” Chauncette did not know how to react.

“Chauncette,” said Greg, “why don’t you just tell us what has happened.”

She looked down at her shoes and struggled to find words.

“We’re not gossips,” said Lisa, “and we’re not here to pass judgment. I’ve been at the exact same point you are and for making my own mess, just as I suspect you have. Start at the beginning; all we want to do is be here for you and help if we possibly can.”

“Well, okay, but I can’t imagine how you can help. Nobody can. Anyway, I guess you all know about the accident and that I’m on trial for killing the driver of the other car.” She looked around the room almost in panic. “Look, you all have to swear that you won’t tell the police or anyone else what I’m about to tell you. Promise?”

“We’ll keep our silence even if it means going to jail,” said Clay. “Agreed?” Everyone nodded. “Go ahead, Chauncette.”

“Some of the guys in the band made up this story that some guy I’d just met was actually driving and not me. The only person besides me that can vouch for this story is a trucker that was at the scene. He’s agreed to lie to keep me out of jail but only if we bribe him.”

She paused.

Nadine could tell something important was being left out of her story. “So are you upset because you don’t want to lie or you don’t want to go through with paying a bribe or because he’s asking too much or is it something else?”

“He doesn’t want money. I mean, he does, but not just money.”

Lisa spoke up knowingly. “He wants you. Physically, right?”

Chauncette nodded and hung her head. “I was just going over to his hotel room when I stopped at Staley’s.” She looked up at them with tear-filled eyes. “What do I do? If I don’t go through with this I could go to prison. In fact, he’s even threatened to expose the whole bribery plot. But if I do I’m nothing but a cheap prostitute.” Anger filled her voice and forced the tears to rush down her cheeks. “And I’m letting him use me, control me, make me do what I don’t want.” She broke down into sobs as Nadine and Lisa took her in their arms.

After her crying subsided somewhat Greg spoke up. “Chauncette, I know how important it is to you that you have complete control over your own life. From what you told me a while back I completely understand why. However, there’s a major problem with that. It’s impossible. It’s impossible for anyone. No matter how determined, rich, beautiful, or famous a person is, having complete control over one’s life can never happen. The beautiful, famous Marilyn Monroe died in a lonely hotel room, her life completely out of control. The determined and incredibly rich Howard Hughes died a paranoid hermit afraid of every spec of dust. Inevitably others control us or circumstances do or, more often, both. But there is an answer and it sounds so contradictory it seems like nonsense. But I guarantee it works. You need to give complete control of your life to the Lord Jesus.”

She tilted her head and looked at the ceiling, her body language saying she had expected him to say something like this. Clay could read every unspoken word.

“Chauncette,” said Clay, “let me ask you something. What possible difference could it make to anyone in this room whether you give your life to Christ or not?”

The question caught her by surprise.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean, what’s in it for us? Why would we bother?”

There was dead silence in the room; no one spoke up to disrupt the uncomfortable pause. Finally, shaking her head, she responded meekly.

“Nothing, I guess. I don’t know why you would bother with me.”

“You’re partially correct,” said Clay. “There is nothing in it for us. But you aren’t a bother. As Nadine said, God loves you and so do we. But Christian love is not an emotion, it is action. The most loving thing we can do for you is help you find Jesus—we know He is the answer. We’ve all run up against tough situations in our lives just as you are now. And each one of us will readily affirm that Jesus has been—and continues to be—the answer for us. When we tell you about surrendering control of your life to Him it’s because we know Him, we have complete confidence and trust in Him, and we’ve watched Him rescue us from problems. We’re not giving you theoretical baloney; it’s first-hand experience. Every life desperately needs Jesus, all of ours, and yours, too.”

She looked a bit reprimanded. “Okay, I’m ready to listen.”

Greg spoke up. “Chauncette, I know from what you’ve told me that you have never experienced a real father’s love. But that is exactly the relationship God—the God, the One Who rules over the entire universe—wants with you. A come-sit-on-my-lap-and-tell-me-about-your-day kind of relationship. It’s pretty amazing that the creator and sustainer of everything that exists gives us the freedom to turn our backs on Him if we want to, and then waits with a wounded heart for us to return.”

Suddenly her demeanor changed as if something hit her that she had forgotten. “Look,” she said, “God doesn’t want me. I’m drunk half the time, I smoke, I’ve got a gutter for a mouth, and...” She hesitated, wondering if she should be so bold to such a genteel audience, then shook her head and let them have it. “And I sleep around, okay?”

To her surprise everyone just shrugged. Lisa said, “You just described me when I came to Jesus. I did all that.”

“And I was an avowed atheist,” said Clay. “I used to—” To his own surprise there was a catch in his voice. “To consider Jesus a joke.”

“Jesus doesn’t want you to become perfect before you come to Him,” said Greg. “If we were perfect we wouldn’t need Him. It works the other way around. First give Him control of your life, then He’ll help you get past all that other junk.”

Clay then asked, “Ever hear of the prodigal son?”

She nodded. “Yeah, at least, I’ve heard the phrase.”

“It’s from a quick little story that Jesus told. Prodigal means wasteful, and this kid was wasting his life. Here, let me read it to you.”

Clay proceeded to read the parable from Luke 15. As he began to read Chauncette did a mental eye-roll that she was sitting listening to Bible stories. Then something within her shushed that negative reaction and demanded that she listen. As she did she felt something welling up inside her and inexplicably tears began down her cheeks.

Then Greg asked, “Do you know who the father in that story represents?”

She nodded. “God?”

“That’s right. And how about the lost son? Who does he represent?”

She hesitated and looked down at her shoes, trying hard to swallow the lump in her throat. “Me?”

Greg nodded and smiled warmly at her. “And me.”

“And me,” added Lisa.

“And me,” said Nadine.

“And me,” said Clay.

Then Lisa said, “You know what I consider the most important part of this story? Where it says that the father saw the lost child when he was a long way off. You know what that says to me? It says he was watching for his child; longing for him to return, his heart aching. That’s what this great, big, powerful, almighty God is doing right now: looking down the road with an aching heart hoping to see one special lost child come home...you.”

Chauncette seemed to be deeply moved by what she was hearing but could not decide what to do. Nadine spoke up. “Jesus is the open door that restores us to that Father-child relationship with God. He’s already taken the punishment for all our sins—including yours—on Himself. If you put your trust in Him and commit yourself to letting Him be Lord of your life God will welcome you with open arms.”

“But like I told you once before,” added Greg, “God will not force you to respond to Him. He leaves that decision to you, within your own heart.”

Chauncette thought for a while then asked, “But what about my situation? How will deciding for the Lord solve that?”

“We don’t want to deceive you,” said Lisa. “Giving one’s life to Jesus won’t untangle the messes we get ourselves into. Take it from one who knows. But somehow, relying on Him gets you through it all. And miracles do still happen. When you pray and give the problem to Him it’s amazing how often things work out in ways you could not possibly have imagined. That’s where faith comes in.”

There was a lengthy pause as Chauncette digested all she had heard.

“So,” said Nadine finally. “What do you think about all this? Does surrendering your life to Jesus sound like the right decision?”

At that instant Chauncette’s cell phone rang and near-panic seized her. “Oh no, that’s Cody. He’s expecting me to show up at the hotel.” Greg

scrunched his face at the realization that Cody had been the one to arrange for Chauncette to humiliate herself.

“Hello? Cody?” she said.

## Chapter 26

“Yeah,” said Cody. “Okay, everything’s a ‘go.’ You on your way yet?”

“Well, I was but now I’m not so sure.”

“Not sure? Listen, Chaunc’ don’t bail out on me now. We’ve been all through this. I know it ain’t gonna be easy for you but consider the alternative. You think one night in a hotel room is rough, think about two or three years in a cell with a bunch of desperate women. Right? Now everything is all set. I’ve had a heart-to-heart with Garber and he won’t give you any trouble. Just sees a chance for a quickie with a gorgeous babe and doesn’t want to miss it, that’s all. You’ll probably be back home before midnight and it’ll all be over. Just get that car headed this way, okay? He won’t mind if you’re a couple of minutes late, which is all it will be if you leave right now. Okay?”

Chauncette looked around the room at the concerned but caring faces. They all had the gist of what the call was about and each was silently praying she would make the right choice. Nadine went so far as to mouth, “Tell him no. Please?”

“I—I don’t know, Cody. I think there might be another way out of this.”

“Another way? What are you talking about? There ain’t no other way, Chaunc’. If there was don’t you think I’d have taken it?” His voice became sterner and more urgent. “Now look, I’ve put my head on a chopping block for

you. Don't you dare leave me out on a limb. You gotta get down here and get this overwith."

"Maybe—maybe I'd rather take my chances and see how it all turns out. Maybe God will work a miracle for me."

"God? A miracle? You been drinking? I told you not to."

"No, I haven't touched a drop."

"Then knock off all this 'maybe' stuff and come on, will ya? Garber's going to start getting antsy and might start upping the ante on us. Now hurry up."

A tear started down her cheek and her voice quavered. "Stop rushing me. It's not that easy. I have an important choice to make here; one that could change my life forever either way."

"For cryin' out loud, Chaunc' it's obvious there's only one right choice. So hurry-up and choose. Jesus!"

He meant it as a curse word but to Chauncette it answered all the questions. She suddenly let out a deep breath and relaxed noticeably. She closed her eyes and smiled a beautiful smile of peace. "That's exactly what I'm going to do," she said calmly. "I choose Jesus. Thanks for helping me decide, Cody. Tell Mr. Garber good night for me and that I won't be needing his testimony—God's going to handle it from here. See you Monday. Bye."

"Chauncette? Chauncette!" Whatever else Cody had to say was lost as she hung up the cell phone and turned it off. She was swarmed by everyone in the room hugging her, congratulating her, rejoicing.

Clay was already on the phone to Dave Creighton. "Dave, can you meet us over at the church? We've got a precious young lady who's decided to give her heart to Jesus and who has a lot of issues she's going to need help with."

The clock in Dave Creighton's office read 10:54 p.m. and there were a number of tired eyes in the room. It had been a roller-coaster evening. They had celebrated the addition of a new sister to Christ's family and had tried to give her as much of the basics as they could. She was very bright and those months in Sunday school as a child had not been wasted on her. They had also tackled the immediate issue of what would happen with her trial. She kept asking how God might find a way to get her off. Finally, Clay spoke up. "Chauncette, I need to ask you a very difficult question."

She nodded for him to proceed.

His voice was so quiet it screamed at her. "Chauncette, are you responsible for Jim Sprague's death?"

She stared at Clay, and then at each face in the room, with a deep frown of shame and regret. It was obvious she had never confronted that question so directly before. Up to now it had always been an issue of how *she* might be affected. Her chin began to quiver as the pain on her face answered the question even before her voice did. She hung her head and very quietly answered "Yes."

"Then," said Dave, "how do you think you should plead at the trial?"

A tear escaped the corner of her eye as she took a deep breath of resignation and nodded. "Guilty."

They spent a long time discussing what that might mean and how she would need to rely on God during the difficulties ahead.

Now the topic had turned to restitution. She earnestly wanted to know what she could do to make amends with LeAnn Sprague. "You said she attends here, didn't you? I mean, what should I say to her when I see her?"

Everyone in the room exchanged glances. "That won't be an issue, unfortunately," said Lisa. "She doesn't have much use for God since the accident."

Chauncette looked as if she had been slapped. “You mean she blames God?”

“In a way, yes—or at least is angry that He didn’t intervene to save Jim’s life. I only know she doesn’t want anything to do with church or with the Lord—none of it. Won’t even discuss it.”

A stab of pain crossed her face. “I did that? Oh no. No, I can’t let that be. I have to fix that somehow. She just lost her husband and her little girl’s daddy. She needs Jesus now more than ever, right?”

Everyone nodded.

“Well,” continued Chauncette, “we’ve got to do something. Tomorrow. I need to talk to her tomorrow. To apologize; to make her understand.”

“Chauncette,” said Lisa regretfully. “I think I understand how you must be feeling but I don’t think you’re the right person—”

“But that’s just it. I’m the only person.” She looked at the floor. “I’m the one who killed her wonderful husband. I’m the one who ruined her life. You have to help me make up for it—somehow. I’ve got to see her.”

“Sweetie,” said Lisa gently. “She won’t talk to you. She’s so bitter I doubt that she would even let you in the same room with her.”

“Plus,” said Dave, “I doubt that it’s legal for you to see her, what with the trial in progress and all. I just don’t see anyway it can happen.”

“Don’t you think God can sort all this out and make a way?” said Chauncette. “Come on, you guys, where’s your faith?”

They laughed. “Touché,” said Nadine. “Okay, so I guess this is one of those cases where we *rely* on a miracle from God, huh?”

“Right,” said Chauncette enthusiastically. “Only, this miracle is going to need a little help from you—and Lisa.”

“Oh-oh,” said Nadine. “Why do I feel like Daniel being led into the lion’s den?”

“Oh come on,” said Chauncette. “Besides, didn’t God do a miracle for Daniel in that lion’s den?”

## **Chapter 27**

The two women were oblivious to the perfection of Sunday afternoon's clear sky and temperature as they stood fidgeting. "Hello Lisa," said LeAnn, her voice tight and her front door open barely a foot.

"LeAnn, you remember Nadine, right?"

LeAnn narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Yes. Hello Nadine," she said without warmth.

"LeAnn, could we come in for just a half minute? There's something I need to ask you."

Still suspicious, she paused for a long moment then nodded and opened the door.

"Thanks," said Lisa as they sat.

"Mommy, who's here?" called Misty as she came into the room.

"Hi, sweetheart!" said Lisa opening her arms for a hug. The little girl ran grinning into her arms. "My goodness it's good to see you! Oh, you're just the sweetest little thing I've ever seen."

"Okay," said LeAnn. "Go on in back and play now, we all need to talk for a minute."

Misty looked a bit sad to not be able to stay with the adults but complied with her mother's wishes and scampered off.

Once they were seated in the living room, LeAnn looked at Lisa expectantly.

“LeAnn, I have no right to, but I need to ask a favor. I promise I’ll never ask you for anything else.”

LeAnn sighed and lowered her eyes guiltily. “Lisa, you know you’ve shown me and our family so much kindness you have every right and I have no right to refuse. But you’re certainly being mysterious about it. What is this favor? You’re not going to insist I go to church are you? We’ve already been through that—”

“No, it’s not that. I need you to agree to spend five minutes with someone. Just five minutes and not one second more. After that we’ll all leave and never bother you again, on my word of honor.”

LeAnn furrowed her brows. “What kind of scoundrel is this person that you’d have to—” Suddenly a light of understanding came into her eyes followed quickly by incredulity. “Wait a minute. You can’t mean her.”

Lisa nodded. “Yes, Chauncette Dupree.”

“No! You can’t ask me that, Lisa! I won’t have her dirty my home with her disgusting presence.”

“She has something extremely important she needs to say to you; something that could be of profound significance to your life.”

LeAnn cut her off with, “Nothing she could say would be of any interest to me. Besides, isn’t it illegal for the defendant to meet privately with me during a trial?”

Lisa hated to resort to emotional manipulation but it was her last and only hope. “LeAnn, since we’ve known you Clay and I have opened our home and our hearts to you and Misty, and to Jim. We’ve never asked anything from you in return. Well, now I’m asking. Just this once. Just five minutes—no more.

Nadine will check the clock and no matter where Chauncette is at that point we promise we'll leave, if you want us to. Please, LeAnn? I know it will be for the best. I just know it."

LeAnn glared at her. "I didn't realize your friendship came with a price tag." she said coldly. Lisa just hung her head. "Very well, you've got your five minutes. But this makes us even. When you leave here let it be for the last time. I will never speak to you again." Lisa's heart shuddered with fear at the incredible risk she was taking. If she was miscalculating the effect of Chauncette's contrition, this could be an unmitigated disaster.

Nadine was already at the door frantically beckoning toward the car. The message of urgency was plain and Chauncette fairly sprinted to the house. When she entered, the disgust that greeted her from LeAnn literally made her step back. She gulped and crept into the room sitting noiselessly on the front edge of the swivel rocker. True to their agreement, Nadine looked at the clock on the wall and made a mental note when the five minute deadline would occur; hoping frantically that Chauncette would hurry and get on with it. LeAnn had ceased looking at Chauncette after the first glance and now sat staring out the front window, arms folded. Lisa's eyes were closed as her mind screamed a prayer at God.

Chauncette's voice was tiny, childlike. "Mrs. Sprague? I wish I could tell you how very, *very* sorry I am for the terrible thing I've done. But 'I'm sorry' sounds so inadequate it's almost an insult to you." Tears began forming in Chauncette's eyes as she continued.

"I won't ask you to forgive me because I have no right to ask anything of you. You owe me nothing—I'm the one that owes you. Because of my wicked self-centeredness I took away the life of your precious husband and the father of your little girl. What I want more than anything is to somehow fix the horrible

crime I've committed." Her voice caught as she began crying outright. "But I don't know any way to do that. If it were somehow possible I would trade places with your husband this minute and have him sitting here with you, and me the one they had the funeral for. But I can't find any way to make that happen." She had come prepared with Kleenex and now made use of one. LeAnn, still looking away, now had tears streaming down her cheeks which caused Lisa and Nadine to follow suit.

"Tomorrow I'm going to stop the trial and plead guilty. But even if I go to jail, that doesn't seem like enough for the harm I've caused, and it won't bring him back. Everyone tells me what a wonderful man he was and I believe them. When I look at what an evil person I am, the only just thing would be for me to be executed. I considered taking my own life, but that wouldn't bring him back or fix anything either. Besides, now that I've given my life to Jesus, I know that doing that would be as bad as the sin I've already committed. It would be the ultimate hurt to the Lord, and I've already hurt Him so much, I just don't want to hurt Him anymore." LeAnn began to cry openly and allowed Lisa to take her in her arms. Chauncette hesitated, but Lisa nodded for her to continue. Nadine checked the clock; time was running out.

"Mrs. Sprague, as I said, I have no right to ask your forgiveness. I do want to ask something of you, but not for me—it's something for you. Lisa tells me that since my inexcusable actions destroyed your family, you've turned away from the Lord. Mrs. Sprague, please don't do that. I can't undo the other misery I've caused you but if there is any way I can convince you to not give up on Jesus, I have to try."

Chauncette slid off the chair to her knees and clasped her hands in front of her. Her crying was making it hard for her to find her voice. The brief silence caused LeAnn to look over at her.

“Mrs. Sprague, I am begging you not to let what I’ve done cause you to miss the chance to see your husband again in heaven. I’ve already hurt you and your family too much. Please, please don’t let me ruin your faith, too. Please, Mrs. Sprague, please don’t turn away from Jesus. He loves you so much—I know He does. If He can love someone like me after what I’ve done, there’s no question He loves you, and your little girl. She needs God’s comfort, too. Please don’t turn this into an even worse tragedy. Please?”

LeAnn sobbed into Lisa’s shoulder until Nadine shifted and cleared her throat. The five minutes were up. Chauncette was still on her knees, her head down, crying quietly.

LeAnn turned and looked upward then squeezed her eyes shut. Her voice cracked. “Lord, I’m sorry. Forgive me Jesus; it’s just been so hard.” The words made Chauncette look up at her. As LeAnn continued crying she beckoned to Chauncette to join her on the sofa. Chauncette’s heart fluttered as she did so and LeAnn threw her arms around her.

LeAnn’s words came quietly, reluctantly, haltingly. “I forgive you,” she said.

“Oh, Mrs. Sprague! I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Oh, I’m so sorry.”

The two wept in each other’s arms for several moments until, amid much sniffing Chauncette said, “Thank you, Mrs. Sprague. Your forgiveness is more than I could have hoped for.”

LeAnn reached up to Chauncette’s face and brushed a tightly curled lock of tear-soaked reddish blonde hair back. “It’s LeAnn. Okay?” Chauncette nodded and smiled. “Besides,” continued LeAnn, “I guess I’m forced to forgive you. You’re my sister in Christ, aren’t you?”

Chauncette hugged her and Misty walked into the room. Tears began welling-up in her little eyes. “Why is everybody crying, Mommy? Did somebody else die?”

LeAnn reached her arms out. “Oh, no, sweetie. We’re just crying because we’re so glad that we’ve gotten some problems taken care of.”

Misty crawled up into her lap. “Who’s she?” she asked.

“This is Chauncette Dupree,” said LeAnn. “She’s—she’s my new friend.”

“Did you know my daddy?”

Chauncette had a difficult time swallowing. “No, sweetheart, but I wish I had. I’d like to hear about him, if you and your mommy don’t mind.”

“Mommy, can I get the pictures?”

LeAnn shuddered-in a deep breath. “Sure, honey, they’re on the shelf.” Misty got a large photo album and sat between LeAnn and Chauncette.

“See,” said Misty, pointing at a snapshot. “This is Daddy. He was in college then.”

“Ah, a basketball player,” said Chauncette, smiling as she wiped her eyes. “Very handsome, too.”

“Yeah. I wasn’t born yet. He’s making a funny face in this one...”

## Chapter 28

“Hello? Cody?”

“Chauncette?” he shouted into the phone. “Where the blazes have you been? I’ve been calling all over the city looking for you. Look, you haven’t skipped town have you?”

“Of course not, I just—”

Cody cut her off. “You better not. You’re in trouble big-time after that stunt you pulled. When you didn’t show up—which means the *money* didn’t show up—Garber was mad as a hornet. He said there’s no chance he’ll do anything to help you now. In fact he’s going to make special mention that he saw you driving the car.”

“That doesn’t matter,” she said.

“What? Doesn’t matter? Hey, are you drunk?”

“No,” she said with a sad little laugh. “Cody, I’m going to plead guilty and stop the trial. I’ve already told the victim’s wife I’m guilty and first thing in the morning I’m going to tell the court.”

“Well that’s just dandy. What about all the cabbage we paid Barksdale for defending you?”

“I know. Tell your father how grateful I am for all his help. I’ll pay him back somehow. It just might take a few years—once I get out of prison, that is.”

“Chaunc’ don’t do it. You’re throwing your life away—and our future—all because of an accident. Let me try Garber again. I might be able to get to him yet. Money’s a powerful motivator.”

“No, Cody. I’m through with all that. It wasn’t an accident. Not really. When I got behind the wheel of that car drunk out of my mind it was as if I went driving around town firing a shotgun out the window. I deliberately put people’s lives in danger and I ended-up hitting someone. How can that be called an accident? There’s a grieving widow and a fatherless little girl because of me. I *am* guilty. If I say I’m not it just compounds my crime with a lie; and truth has become very important to me.”

“Chaunc’ you’ll go to prison. Do you have any idea what can happen to a gorgeous babe like you in that place?”

“Whatever I have to face it’s better than what the Sprague’s have been through. I’ll just have to rely on the Lord to protect me.”

“Rely on the—? Hey, have you been talking to Greg Taylor? Is that what’s going on? Has that jerk been getting to you? Is that where you’ve been? Are you two hooked-up at his place?”

“No, I’m at my apartment and I can assure you Greg and I are not ‘hooked-up.’ Besides he’s already got a girl, remember? Look, Cody, I’ve got to go. I thought I owed it to you to tell you about my pleading guilty. I know you’ve been through a lot for me and I just wanted to let you know really appreciate it. Tell your dad I’ll pay back the attorney’s fees; it might just take a while. Oh, and I still have that box of money. I might not have a chance to get it to you in person but I gave it to some friends of mine. They can get it to you.”

“You did what?” exclaimed Cody. “You gave it to— What are you trying to do to me? Look, I don’t know anything about any box of money. It’s not mine and you didn’t get it from me. If anyone tries to give it to me I’ll refuse it. Are

you out of your mind? Do you have any idea what thin ice I'm on? You connected me with that money?"

"It's okay, calm down," said Chauncette. "I never told them specifically where the money came from, I just asked them to hold it for me and that someone might come pick it up."

"Well nobody's going to pick it up. Ever. Tell them to just give it to a good cause or something. Just keep my name out of it. I'm serious, Chauncette."

"I know you are. It'll be okay. You never actually gave anything to that Garber fellow. And he would implicate himself as much as you if he tried to accuse you. I'll just tell them to use the money for someone who needs it. You'll be all right. Guess I better go. 'Bye, Cody."

"Chaunc' wait," said Cody quickly, but she had already hung up.

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Chauncette, Lisa, and Clay sat staring at the box of \$100 bills sitting on the Osborne's table.

"So, nobody wants this box full of cash?" said Clay. "I don't think I understand."

"I really don't want to say anything more than that," said Chauncette. "Just that it's \$5,000 for you to use for anyone who needs it."

"I suppose we could give it to LeAnn," he said.

"I wonder, though," said Lisa. "Could that leave a negative impression with her; like someone is trying to—I don't know—buy her off or something?"

"Hmm, you might have a point there," said Clay. "Feelings are pretty sensitive right now. But speaking of buying people off..."

“I was just thinking the same thing,” said Lisa. “Chauncette, I think we have a good use for that money. And it just so happens he and Greg are here just for a minute.”

Lisa called down the hall and Greg came in followed by Ronnie putting on a jacket borrowed from Clay. He did a noticeable double-take when he saw Chauncette.

“Ronnie, this is Chauncette Dupree. Chauncette, Ronnie Stubbs.”

He was so taken by the gorgeous Chauncette he did not even notice the box of money—no mean feat given Ronnie’s attitude about money, Lisa observed.

“Ronnie,” continued Lisa, “I think we have the means to pay off the amount you initially borrowed from Mr. Petrokis. I would assume you’d rather not risk meeting with him yourself. If you will tell us where to find him, Clay and I will do that for you.”

“What? You two are going try to pay Eddie off? With only part of the money?”

“Actually,” said Clay, “only I am. Lisa’s not going.”

“I beg your pardon,” said an incensed Lisa.

“Wait a minute,” said Ronnie. “I really appreciate what you guys are trying to do for me and I’m in no position to refuse but you don’t know this guy like I do. He plays hardball. What makes you think he won’t work you over?”

“Well, first of all I assume he’d rather have his original investment back than nothing,” said Clay. “Second, I think the Lord can generate mercy in even the most hardened heart and that His protection is reliable.”

“Clay,” said Lisa softly. “Do you really believe that?”

Somewhat taken aback he responded. “Sure, buttercup. Of course.”

“Good,” she said smugly. “Then there’s no reason for me not to go with you, is there?”

Clay tightened the corners of his mouth. “You set me up, you rascal.”

“Look, guys,” said Ronnie doubtfully. “You might be right and he might not send his ‘boys’ after you with the rubber hose, but mercy? From Eddie? When there’s money at stake? Ha! I’ll tell you what, if he accepts that money and calls it square I’ll absolutely know there’s a God; and I’m all His.”

“I’ll hold you to that, Mr. Stubbs,” said Lisa.

“Yeah, well, all the same you might want to hide your car’s license plate and not use your real names—avoid any way he might trace you in case this doesn’t go so well.”

## **Chapter 29**

Jerome Barksdale sat at the defendants table rifling through papers from his briefcase. He was the workaholic type who crammed productivity into every minute even using time in the restroom stall to catch up on cell phone calls. This staunch refusal of his to allow a single idle second meant that whenever Chauncette spoke to him she was necessarily interrupting him from something. Knowing this, she did not wait for him to stop or acknowledge her as she sat beside him.

“Mr. Barksdale, I have something important to tell you.”

“Okay,” he said without looking up or showing much interest.

“I can’t have you as my attorney anymore.”

Still distracted with his papers he was unperturbed. “Oh? And why is that.”

“Because I can’t pay you and now that I’m going to plead guilty Cody’s father won’t pay you anymore either.”

He actually stopped and looked up at her, clearly annoyed. “I’m sorry, what is it you’re saying?”

“I said I’m going to plead guilty. So I won’t need your services anymore and besides when I do that Cody’s father won’t be willing to pay you for anything further.”

He gave her a severe look and hissed, “Keep your voice down. What on earth are you talking about?”

She rolled her eyes and lowered her voice. “I’m going to tell the judge I’m changing my plea to guilty. So the trial isn’t needed anymore.”

“Now look,” he said sternly. “You are not going to plead guilty. You are not going to tell the judge anything. You are going to sit right there and keep your mouth shut and do exactly what I tell you.”

“It’s no use, Mr. Barksdale. All that stuff about ‘Eduardo’ was a complete lie. I was driving, I was drunk, I killed Jim Sprague and that is exactly what I’m going to tell the court. I am guilty and I deserve whatever consequences the court decides. Now you’ve been very kind and helpful and I appreciate all you’ve done. But I know you don’t like to waste time and if you represent me for one more minute that is exactly what it is, a waste of your time. Even if you are able to get me off by raising doubt about my guilt I won’t allow it because there is no doubt. And, as I said, no one will pay you for anything you do on this case from this moment on. Cody’s family won’t want to and I can’t afford to, especially since I’ll probably be in prison very soon. I’m not even sure they’ll pay what I owe you so far, although I’ve assured them that if they do I’ll pay them back someday.”

Barksdale lowered his head and rubbed his forehead with his fingertips as if trying to comprehend what he was hearing. “Look, don’t do or say anything. Let me get with Hong and see if he will agree to a guilty plea to a lesser charge. He’ll know he has the upper hand but I like to think my powers of persuasion are pretty keen.”

“No,” she insisted. “I already told you, I can’t pay you and nobody else will.”

He glared at her. “I want that to be the last time you talk to me about payment. Got that?”

She shrugged. “Okay, fine. But I don’t want a lesser charge, I want to plead guilty.” Her voice was still subdued but that final phrase was emphatic enough that Dennis Hong, who had just sat down at the table opposite them, was having difficulty pretending he had not heard.

“Ms. Dupree I have never had a client remove me from a case and you are not going to be the first. Now just because you want to fall on your sword doesn’t mean you no longer need someone to help you navigate the legal system. And one of two things is true: either an epiphany has occurred making you as remorseful as you seem or you are hoping that by coming clean you will get off easier. In the first case you are acutely aware of the seriousness of your crime—which is what prison is supposed to teach you—making imprisonment pointless. If the latter is true, prison is the very thing you’re seeking to avoid. Either way an alternative to prison is to your advantage. At least let me see what can be done about your sentence.”

“You mean you might be able to decide my sentence?”

“Not decide; influence, perhaps.”

Her eyes widened. “There is one thing I’d really like to do. I mean, it has been in the back of my mind but I never really thought there was any way—”

“All rise,” came the pronouncement of the bailiff. Judge Effington, a jowly, ruddy-faced man who gave every impression of not having cracked a smile in at least thirty years ascended to the bench. As everyone sat Chauncette remained standing. The judge did not notice but, looking through his half-glasses at a document muttered, “I believe we’re ready for opening statements.”

“Your honor,” said Chauncette. Barksdale began tugging at her arm to sit down. “May I speak?”

The judge scowled at her then shot a look at Barksdale who jumped to his feet.

“Your honor, my client and I have not had sufficient opportunity to—”

“Your honor,” Chauncette interrupted. “I want to plead guilty.”

“Mr. Barksdale,” said the judge now more intrigued than unhappy at the disruption in proceedings, “am I to gather your client has not fully consulted with you before making this statement?”

“Quite true, your honor.”

Again Chauncette broke in. “Your honor, I got behind the wheel of a vehicle when I was too drunk to do so and as a result I rammed my car into the Sprague’s. I killed a wonderful man and left a grieving widow and a fatherless little girl. I am so very, very sorry and I can assure you I will never do anything like that again but that doesn’t erase the pain I’ve caused. I’m also sorry for all the trouble and expense of getting this trial started and for not admitting my guilt sooner. But I just want to be sentenced and try to start my life over again.”

“You wish to be sentenced immediately?” asked a surprised Judge Effington.

“Your honor, may I have a moment with my client?” said Barksdale.

“I think that would be very prudent, Mr. Barksdale. Will the bailiff please escort the jurors to the waiting area?”

Barksdale pulled her down into her seat and spoke quietly but urgently. “Chauncette, please listen to me.” He had never used her first name before and for once instead of an arrogant attorney his voice sounded like a concerned parent. It got her attention. “You are being very noble to just accept whatever punishment is coming to you. But prison is not something to take lightly. It’s bad enough inside but even when you get out people don’t want to hire a person who just got out of prison. This can have consequences for years and who benefits? If you’ll let me I can lobby for community service although I can’t promise anything, especially if the victim’s widow presses for a maximum sentence.”

“Oh but she won’t. She has forgiven me; we’re sisters in Christ.”

Barksdale frowned his confusion, trying to figure out if she was saying the two of them had become nuns or something. “You mean you’ve spoken to the widow?” he asked, his eyes wide.

“Yes. I told her I was guilty and was very sorry.” Her eyes welled up. “She forgave me.”

Barksdale closed his eyes in disbelief and fought to keep his anger under control. “Ms. Dupree,” he said in clipped, emphatic tones. “Don’t you understand how much harm you may have done? By admitting your guilt directly to Ms. Sprague you have opened the door for her to sue you for everything you’ve got or ever will have.” He looked away and shook his head incredulously then hissed, “That was an incredibly foolish thing to do.”

“She won’t sue me. Even if she did it wouldn’t matter. It’s what I deserve. Besides, I don’t have anything for her to take anyway.

“You mentioned community service,” continued Chauncette, dismissing the lawsuit issue. “I have an idea and it really would benefit people. I’d like to go to schools and warn teenagers against doing what I did.”

Barksdale winced slightly and began to think out loud. “I don’t know. Judge Effington doesn’t take well to criminals dictating their own sentences but if you could get the widow to champion the idea and—” He suddenly brightened. “How quickly could you come up with a demonstration of the speech you would use at the schools?”

“Tomorrow,” she said without thinking.

“I’ll ask for the day after. Can you be prepared to present it before the judge by then?” She nodded eagerly and he stood and addressed Judge Effington. “Your honor, may counsels approach the bench?”

### **Chapter 30**

“What’d the judge say?” Nadine asked Chauncette as they left the courtroom. “What happens next?”

“The judge told Mr. Barksdale he is willing to consider me doing a program in schools against drunk driving as community service in lieu of imprisonment. I need to put a demo together to show him by Wednesday morning.”

“Chauncette that’s great,” said Greg. “What do you have in mind?” As she described it Greg and Nadine were impressed by the mental image it created. “So you need someone to put together an audio-video montage to accompany the program, right?” She nodded. “I know just the guy. How about we meet at six tonight at the church?”

At six sharp they met in front of the church and headed for the audio-video booth. Chauncette showed a DVD to Greg.

“It’s a video clip of one of my performances with Peasant Danger along with some pictures.”

“Okay, great,” said Greg.

They entered the booth to find Les Dinwiddie ready and waiting.

“Hey, Chauncette,” he said shyly.

A smirk formed on her face. “Wull, hey G—” She looked around guiltily then walked over and put her hand on Les’s shoulder. She smiled warmly and

waited until he looked up at her. “Hello, Les. I really, *really* appreciate this. Especially since I’ve been so…”

He waved her off. “Don’t worry yourself none about it. Whatcha got?” He pointed to her disk.

“Well, I want to start with me doing the song ‘I’ll Never Say I’m Sorry’ from our last Peasant Danger concert and as the song is concluding switch to some pictures of me in rare form. Then I give a talk and at the end show pictures of the Sprague’s and the accident while I sing a new song I’ve written.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” said Les. “Is the music for y’all’s song on here?”

“No.”

“Do you need a band to record some?” asked Greg.

She scrunched her face a bit. “Actually, I’d rather not sing it to a recorded track. I’m afraid it will seem too canned, too staged. It needs to be just me singing and an acoustic guitar accompanying it live.”

Les stood and reached into the corner and grabbed a guitar. “Let’s hear it; I’ll see if I can pick it up. What key?”

She sang more magnificently than they had ever heard her. For once the sound, the voice, and the meaning in the song matched her angelic beauty perfectly. By the time she finished all of them were wiping away tears.

“That settles it, Chauncette,” said a sniffling Nadine as she hugged her. “This presentation is going to knock that judge’s socks off, not to mention the powerful message it will be to those kids.”

“And you were right about a single, live guitar,” said Greg. “It has a dynamically haunting effect.”

“That’s sort of a problem, though,” she said. “I don’t play the guitar; not at all. Who am I going to get to take time away from their lives to go with me to all these schools?”

“I will.” The voice was Les’s.

“What?” said a shocked Chauncette.

He alternately looked into her eyes and then shyly down at the guitar he was holding as he spoke. “I reckon I’d be honored to help you. If y’all’d be willing.”

She gulped noticeably. “Les? You’d do that for me? No. No, I couldn’t ask you to.” Inexplicably tears began streaming from her already wet eyes. “All this time I’ve treated you like dirt. I couldn’t—”

Les held up his hand toward her. “Now just hold on there. In the first place y’all didn’t ask me, I offered. And in the second, just you don’t pay no never mind about what’s been said in the past. It’s done and gone and ain’t worth mentionin’ no more. ‘Sides, I can work whatever hours I want and I’d consider it a privilege to help both you and them kids.”

Her voice was barely audible. “Oh, thank you.” There was such sincerity in her tear-filled eyes that Les looked away with a little sheepish grin. Then he produced a neatly folded red handkerchief and handed it to her. After drying her eyes a bit she laughed lightly. “I haven’t really taken the time to get to know you, Les.”

He grinned. “Well, I ‘spect we’ll have plenty of time to get acquainted if we take this show out on the road.”

She sighed deeply. “That’s a big ‘if.’ There’s no guarantee the judge will go for it. I guess it’s in the Lord’s hands. Right?”

“That’s true,” said Greg. “How about if we all pray about it? Then let’s get to work.”

## Chapter 31

Clay and Lisa double-checked the address on the piece of paper and then looked up at the gated mansion. The gates were open, for which they were grateful since they had given no warning of their visit.

“Wow,” said Clay, “looks like Eddie does all right for himself.”

“Well, at 100% interest, no wonder,” said Lisa. “Do you think he’ll be angry that we came to his house? I mean, he doesn’t mind beating people up; invading his privacy might set him off.”

“I don’t know, Lisa. That’s why I kept after you to let me come alone. But, of course, you insisted.”

“I know, I know. I guess I’m counting on him not wanting to commit any violence in his own home. That and the Lord’s help.”

They drove the semicircular driveway and stopped at the columned front door. Lisa could not help thinking how out of place their aged minivan looked amidst such obvious wealth. Clay rang the bell.

An elegant and attractive woman in her late forties answered the door with a concerned look on her face. “Yes?”

“Hello, is this the Petrokis residence?” said Clay.

“Yes, but you didn’t call in at the gate. How did you—”

“The gate was open,” said Lisa. “Sorry if we’ve done anything wrong.”

“We’ve come to see Mr. Petrokis,” said Clay. “It will only take a minute. We apologize for just showing up unannounced and for disturbing you. Is he home?”

Her demeanor softened. “Yes. I’ll get him. Won’t you come in?”

They stepped into a house whose lavishness inside far outshined what they had already seen outside.

“Who shall I tell him is here to see him?”

“We’re here representing Mr. Ronald Stubbs, one of Mr. Petrokis’s clients.”

“Want me to go up and get Dad, Mom?” asked a handsome teenage boy standing in the doorway that appeared to lead to a glistening dining room.

“Yes, thank you George.”

The boy headed up a sweeping spiral staircase. He was replaced in the doorway by a perky teenage girl who would almost certainly have been a cheerleader.

“Mom, Marie says dinner is in five minutes.”

“Thank you, dear.”

“My, what lovely children you have, Ms. Petrokis,” said Lisa. “You must be very proud.”

“You’re very kind and yes, I must admit they make me very proud. They are wonderful children.”

“I’m Lisa and this is my husband Clay,” blurted Lisa despite their prior agreement not to give their names in case Eddie decided to send his goons after them.

“Very pleased to meet you. And, please, have a seat.”

“Thank you,” said Clay as they sat on a spotless, snow white settee that looked and felt like ermine. “We promise not to intrude on your dinner. This should only take a minute of—”

Eddie Petrokis, dapper in a designer suit came down the stairs adjusting his cuffs. “May I help you?” he asked as he reached the bottom. He was clearly perplexed, with a hint of irritation, at the presence of the two strangers.

They both stood but before either could answer he spoke to his wife. “Dear, could you give us a moment?”

She took the request in stride as if it were common. “I’ll check on dinner. Nice to have met you—you’re welcome to stay, there’s always plenty.”

“Oh no thank you,” they both said. “We’ve already intruded long enough and we need to get going.”

She smiled and exited.

“Now,” said Eddie moistening his lips. “What is this about Mr. Stubbs?”

Lisa reached in her purse and pulled out an envelope bulging with \$100 bills. Clay spoke in hushed tones, somehow perceiving that Eddie’s family was kept away from his business dealings. “This is \$5,000 toward repaying what Ronnie owes you, Mr. Petrokis.”

“I see,” said Eddie, showing a certain amount of discomfort at the presence of filthy lucre in his pristine abode.

“We’re very sorry to intrude on you at your home, Mr. Petrokis, but we didn’t know how to reach you otherwise without—well without putting Ronnie at more risk.”

“How did you get in here through the gates?” Fortunately the question was one of wonder not irritation.

“They were open.”

He raised his eyebrows and shook his head. “That’s never happened before. I’m a man who keeps my business and my personal life very separate, and my personal life very private.”

“Again, we’re very—”

He held up his hand. “So you are friends of Mr. Stubbs.”

“Friends?” said Lisa. “I don’t think you could say friends. We just want to help him out of a tough spot and show him the love of Jesus in action.”

“And, speaking of Jesus,” said Clay, “Mr. Petrokis, there is an attribute that He spoke very highly of: mercy. We know this is only half of what Ronnie owes—it just reimburses you for what he originally borrowed. But we understand that one of your ‘associates’ took some pretty valuable items from his apartment. I know it doesn’t cover the full amount but you do still come out ahead. We were hoping you’d be merciful to him. He has told us he is thinking about letting the Lord give him a fresh start. This would go a long ways toward making that happen.”

Eddie moistened his lips. “So, Ronnie Stubbs says he’s getting religion. And you believe him?”

Lisa spoke. “Look, Mr. Petrokis, no one on earth knows what a rat Ronnie can be better than I do. But we’ve seen Jesus do some pretty amazing things to turn a person’s life around; people you would never imagine—like us.”

“Perhaps even you,” ventured Clay. “That’s a beautiful family you have, Mr. Petrokis. I wonder if you are able to enjoy them with the kind of peace in your heart that comes from serving the Lord.”

Eddie stared at them, deep in thought, and moistened his lips.

“I guess we better go,” said Lisa. She handed the envelope to Eddie, who shoved it into his inside coat pocket. They both headed for the door when Eddie’s wife reappeared in the dining room doorway.

“Dinner’s ready, dear. And you folks don’t have to run off. We’d love for you to stay.”

“No, really, but thank you so much,” said Clay.

“You have a lovely home,” said Lisa. “We’ve imposed long enough. Nice meeting you.”

Eddie opened the door and stepped out with them. “If you see him you may tell Ronnie that his debt is satisfied and I won’t be bothering him anymore. But I must tell you that I’m a pretty good judge of people. I’m betting he has already skipped town.”

As they drove away Lisa called Greg’s cell phone. “Greg, you can tell Ronnie that it’s okay. Mr. Petrokis says the debt is satisfied. He doesn’t have to worry about it anymore.”

“Yeah, well, there’s no sign of Ronnie. I went to the store for some Cokes and chips and when I got back his car was gone and so is his toothbrush and stuff. I’d say he isn’t coming back.”

Lisa let out a deep sigh and took a peanut butter cup out of her purse. “That seems to be the consensus of opinion.”

## **Chapter 32**

“I understand you have a presentation you would like to make, Ms. Dupree.”

“Yes, your honor.”

“Before we proceed with that, I’d like to know if there is anyone who would like to speak on behalf of the prosecution with regard to sentencing. Mr. Hong?”

Hong cleared his throat. “There is no one, your honor. The people, however, point out that Ms. Dupree’s negligence has resulted in the death of an innocent person and left a grieving family in great emotional and financial distress. This should not be treated lightly.”

“So noted, Mr. Hong. Are there any who wish to speak on behalf of the defendant with regard to sentencing? Mr. Barksdale?”

“Your honor, may I point out that the defendant has a spotless criminal record up until this unfortunate mistake. In addition I must honestly state that in all my years of practice in the legal profession I have never known an individual more sincerely contrite and remorseful over her actions as Ms. Dupree is. There are some others who will also vouch for that and you will be able to see it for yourself first-hand during the defendant’s presentation. First to speak is the senior minister at her church, Dave Creighton who will be followed by the victim’s own widow, Ms. LeAnn Sprague.”

“Very well,” said the judge. “Mr. Creighton?”

Dave stood and stepped forward. “Your honor, I realize that judges see a lot of people who claim to have ‘gotten religion’ when faced with sentencing but I’ve been a minister for seventeen years and I can state categorically that Ms. Dupree has a genuine and committed faith. She wants nothing more than to do what the Lord considers the right and just thing. None of us who know her have ever seen a more complete and dramatic change of heart and attitude. We sincerely ask that you show her the utmost leniency.” He then sat down.

“Thank you. Ms. Sprague?”

“Your honor, it was my husband that Chauncette killed through her act of irresponsible negligence. I loved my husband very, very much. He was not just a good husband; he was a great man and the love of my life. I cannot begin to tell you how much it hurts every time I hear my little girl cry for her daddy. I would literally give anything to have him back again. But I beg you to be merciful to Chauncette. I have forgiven her and know that she also would literally give anything, including her very life, to undo what she did. Her heart and spirit have been totally broken by our pain and grief. She stands ready and able to use this tragedy to prevent as many others as she possibly can. No one gains if she is imprisoned. She is now my sister and I ask you with all my heart to let her take her message to young people.” LeAnn then turned to Chauncette. “I’m praying for you Chauncette.”

Chauncette, her face wet with tears, whispered, “Thank you, LeAnn.”

Judge Effington’s eyebrows raised. “If there are no others, Ms. Dupree you may proceed.”

“Thank you, your honor. This is only a portion of the full 45-minute presentation.”

The lights dimmed and Chauncette in concert was projected on the screen. Beautiful, sexy, conceited, shameless, and mesmerizing with the captivating sound of “I’ll Never Say I’m Sorry.” The irony of the lyrics was striking. As the song wound down the concert video was replaced by still pictures of her after the concert laughing and showing-off holding a fifth of Jack Daniels and, in one, drinking straight from the bottle. The music faded, the picture changed to that of two crushed cars and an ambulance, and she began her narrative.

“That was me not long ago. Arrogant, cool, not one to follow the crowd, my own person—or so I thought. I figured drinking was one way to be unique.” She laughed sardonically. “Yeah, that’s really unique, I mean nobody else drinks, right? I don’t know what you think about drinking; personally I’m through with it. But whether you think it’s okay or not here’s what’s not okay. Drinking, even a little, and getting behind the wheel of a car. See, it doesn’t matter how skilled a driver you are, you’re a horrible driver when you’ve been drinking. Everybody is. Oh, but wait. That doesn’t apply to you. You can hold your liquor, right? Let me ask you something. How many of you ever drink—and are willing to admit it? Come on let’s see your hands. Okay, now—be honest—how many of you drink to get a buzz? Sure you do. I’ll bet there aren’t a handful of all of you that only drink a sip now and again because it’s ‘yummy.’ See? That buzz that you’re after is the same thing that makes you an attempted murderer when you get behind the wheel of a car in that condition. And if some poor, innocent person happens to get in your way like they did me, you go from attempted murderer to actual murderer. Maybe you never thought about it that way. I know I didn’t. But now I know it’s the only way to think about it. I killed a wonderful young husband and father and only wish I could stop thinking about it. Let me tell you about Jim Sprague...”

She went on to give a biographical sketch of him and his family then wrapped-up as Les, who had been sitting quietly, began picking the intro to her song, “But I Had Fun” on his guitar. Then, as she sang, pictures of each family member displayed:

*Jimmy was a family man whose future looked so bright.  
LeAnn, his college sweetheart, was the apple of his eye.  
His little girl was his delight that was plain for all to see.  
Their tragic flaw was daring to be on the road with me.  
Now Jim is gone, his life destroyed, but I had fun.  
Jimmy’s gone, his life destroyed, but I had fun.*

*LeAnn wakes to an empty room, the love of her life gone.  
She calls her daughter through the gloom—her reason to go on.  
She slogs her way through a day of work, an empty ache inside.  
She hides her tears till she’s in bed so Misty doesn’t see her cry.  
LeAnn weeps herself to sleep but I had fun.  
LeAnn weeps herself to sleep but I had fun.*

*My fun is worth another’s death; it’s about me after all.  
At least I think that it was fun—I was too drunk to recall.*

*Misty longs to ride upon her daddy’s back again,  
But he is never coming back; she lost her dearest friend.  
She wakes up screaming from memories of her dad’s blood in her hair.  
The one who best could comfort her is the one no longer there.  
Misty cries out in the night but I had fun.*

*Misty cries out in the night but I had fun.*

*Jim is gone, LeAnn weeps, and Misty cries in fear.*

*Victims of my selfishness—Lord, why am I still here?*

*Please don't take another's life just to have fun;*

*Please don't take another life—not even one.*

Using the big, red handkerchief Chauncette dried her tears. Judge Effington was visibly moved.

“Ms. Dupree this court is impressed with your apparent remorse and your approach to delivering this vital message. We are particularly moved by the pleas on your behalf by Ms. Sprague. Therefore the ruling is that you will present a 45-minute program including the material as presented here to 50 schools, at least half of which must be high schools, throughout this state within a twelve-month period. You are to provide this court with a complete schedule of schools in which these programs have been arranged and weekly reports of their successful completion including the signature of each school’s administrator who can vouch for your compliance.

“However, this court also believes that the impact of your message will be enhanced by the inclusion of first hand experience with the extreme consequences of such crimes: jail time. Therefore, before you begin your 12-month tour of performance, this court is sentencing you to 30 days in the county jail, to commence immediately, and requiring that one or more unposed pictures of your incarceration be included in the video montage you present in the schools.”

“Thank you, your honor,” said Chauncette. “You’ve been more than fair.”

The judge almost smiled. “Young lady, I sincerely hope that your attitude is genuine, it will make a world of difference from here on in your life. There are a lot of people counting on you. Don’t let them down.”

“I won’t, sir.”

“The defendant is remanded to the custody of the county sheriff.”

As the gavel banged a deputy approached her with handcuffs.

“Oh please,” said LeAnn, “could we just have one minute?” The deputy nodded.

LeAnn, Dave, Clay, Lisa, Nadine, and Greg all hugged her and promised to pray for her. Then she came to Les.

“I’ll, um, *we*’ll come visit you reg’ler. While you’re away I’ll send copies of your presentation to the schools and get ‘em all lined up for when you get out. ‘N ‘en I’ll come pick you up when you do.”

She reached up and threw her arms around his tall shoulders and hugged him a little longer and tighter than she had the rest, and then kissed his cheek.

“Thank you, Les. Thank you so much. You’re a pretty special guy, you know that?”

His eyes darted all over the room; he clearly did not know how to react but his joy was too obvious to hide.

“I’m ready,” said Chauncette to the deputy, holding out her hands to be cuffed.

Les stared after her as she was led away, the rest all nudging each other with knowing smirks. Oblivious to them he just slowly shook his head.

“That there is one fine lady. And, I’m thinkin’ one fine Christian woman.”

## **Epilogue**

“Hello?”

“Hi, Daddy, it’s Lisa.”

“Oh, hi sweetheart. How are my two favorite grandkids?”

“Doing great and anxious to see you. Hey, is mom there?”

“No, she went to the mall with Dorothy. You want me to have her call you? She should be back soon—at least I hope so, otherwise I’ll probably be broke!”

Lisa laughed. “No, I just had some good news and thought I might get you both on the phone. Anyway, I’ll go ahead and tell you. It’s official, Clay has adopted Terri.”

“Oh Lisa, that’s great. Does Terri understand?”

“Well, Clay and I did our best to explain it but she’s awfully young. Clay finally just told her he was her ‘forever daddy’ who would always, always love his Terri-bear and she gave him a huge hug and kiss. So, I think she at least knows she can always count on his love and I guess that’s enough for now. I told you I took a picture of her and Ronnie together. I’ll bring it out every so often so she remembers him. Then when she’s old enough to understand I’ll explain who he is.”

“Did you all ever hear anything more from him after he left your house?”

“No, not a word. We have no idea where he is or even if we’ll ever hear from him again. Who knows, maybe the teaching we did about Jesus will someday take root in his life. As much as I dislike him I would truly rejoice to hear that.

“Speaking of rejoicing,” she added suddenly, “what did you think of Greg’s news?”

“Oh, honey,” said her father, “we couldn’t be more thrilled. We couldn’t ask for a better daughter-in-law than Nadine.”

“I know; or me a better sister-in-law. You think mom will be ready by August 20<sup>th</sup>?”

“Oh, she’ll be ready. I suspect this trip to the mall might be part of it. Besides, we don’t have as much to do since we’re just the groom’s parents.”

“Well, while we’re on the subject of couples, you remember Les Dinwiddie and the girl Chauncette who had the accident we were telling you about?”

“Yeah,” he said. “They were going around doing school assemblies or something.”

“Right. Apparently they are creating quite a sensation. Les and Chauncette have started talking about doing it as a regular ministry even after her community service is completed. And, although I could never have imagined a more unlikely couple they are definitely an item. They’re both crazy about each other. Les is even footing the bill for the whole thing.”

“Doesn’t Clay always say Les has the first nickel he ever made?”

“Yep, but not anymore. He even treated the whole bunch of us to dinner at a pricey restaurant last week for no apparent reason. I get the distinct impression they might be doing this new ministry as husband and wife one of these days.

Anyway, the paper did an excellent article on their program; I'll bring it when we come up next weekend."

"We're looking forward to seeing you. I can't tell you how much joy it brings us."

"I know, Daddy, us too. You know, I don't know how often people stop and think about the good times in their lives. Have you ever wished you could just freeze a moment and have the whole rest of your life be just like that moment? I sort of feel that way right now. It's like being on a Monopoly board, landing on Chance and getting the 'Advance to Go' card. I know things can't stay this way forever; that we'll have to take our next turn. Then, who knows? But for now, just now, I really feel blessed."

"So do I at having such a wonderful daughter. I love you, hon. I'll tell your mom you called."

"Love you, too, Dad. Bye."

THE END