

Out of the Fog

A Novel By
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Chapter 1

PHONES have changed many times over the decades in size, shape, color, capacity of function and ability to annoy parents trying to talk to their teenagers. Who could have predicted our current epidemic of texting and driving many years ago? As Hal Dorsey extended his index finger made a little bit crooked by middle age to tap that small sterile black button next to the blinking red light on his phone at McLeod Greater Lansing Hospital and turn it green, he knew one lurking fact that has never changed with all mediums of electronic communication. People picking up a call have no idea how the conversation they are about to have will change their life. How can the widest of extremes between a simple reminder to 'pick up milk' on the way home and a life crushing surprise all be equally represented by that same tiny innocent blinking red light?

Hal massaged his temples sprinkled with silver distinction with the thumb and middle finger of his other unique and tanned hand. Checking emails was so mind numbing at times, but if he did not keep up with them they would breed like bunnies in spring, so he multi-tasked always. He also had not been sleeping very well and did not like the dullness that seemed to be creeping up on the edges of his supposedly ideal upper middle class divorced life.

With his brain trying hard to do at least four things at once Hal pushed that persistent button on his phone like he had done it thousands of times before.

"Hal, its Peggy come to ICU now, it's your dad and it doesn't look good."

Before Hal could ask for any details he heard a click. As the reality of what might be happening hit him in the face like a dirty smelly wet rag Hal stood while staggering just a little and mumbled enough details to a co-worker so they knew things were serious. He rushed to the elevator and pushed the button extra times to increase the speed it would arrive at his floor. Sick of waiting he bounded towards the stairs to descend the five flights to the ICU on the second floor. Sweating and panting he arrived in the ICU as he chided himself for not using the stairs right away, then he chided himself for chiding himself. His cycle of self-chiding was stopped as Peggy his friend for a decade who worked in the ICU rushed to him and grabbed his arm to escort him to his father.

As Hal and Peggy entered the sanitary cookie cutter ICU room surrounded by so many doctors you could only see his feet, Albert Dorsey was slipping away from life. With the high pitched monotone beep from the heart monitor blaring the doctors scattered like roaches running for cover when discovered. One doc-

tor while removing his mask remained and walked right to Hal and said “Let’s talk.”

As the doctor led Hal down one hall, then around a corner to the family room at the end of the next hall he knew his dear dad was dead.

“Mister Dorsey we are so sorry, but your father appears to have had some form of blood clot which lodged in his lungs making it impossible for him to breath, but we cannot know for certain without an autopsy. We did everything we could but could not revive him. We are so sorry for your loss”

Peoples’ minds do weird things when they grieve, the first thing that went through Hal’s mind was ‘why did the doctor take him all the way down two halls before telling him what he already knew, his dad was gone?’ Hal was quick to collect his thoughts and realized the doctors have protocols to follow just like everyone else even though in practicality they often are cumbersome.

“You can stay in the room as long as you like and I will get you information about how to have a funeral home come for the body” said the doctor.

Back in the room alone with his dad Hal sat still and sobbed. He wiped his tears from his face with his palms and wrists and then wailed some more. Flashes of memories of things done with his dad started to play in his mind like a home movie. Sitting in relative silence listening to the sound of his own breaths and sniffles, Hal felt as lost as a ship in a typhoon. ‘Stephen and Candace need to know’ came into his mind with some force. He stood up and shook himself into shape. ‘I am not lost, I have a family who loves me and I need to let them know what has happened’ he thought.

The busyness soon felt good as Hal worked his smart phone like the true professional he was. He called his brother, Stephen and sister, Candace first and then called his ex-wife Jeana. He kept the conversations brief to not hold them up as at least his siblings would for sure be on their way immediately.

When younger sister Candace came into the room she was already puffy around the eyes. She complained about the traffic and stroked her father’s hair as she began her grieving process. Hal started up again with more tears as he saw his sister cry. When Stephen the older brother and his two girls arrived close to an hour later, the empathy tears flowed in Hal and Candace as Stephen and the girls loosened their grip on the presence in this life of their father and ‘gampa’. Stephen’s oldest daughter when learning to say “grandpa” was understandably inaccurate, but was so cute the term of endearment stuck.

As promised the nurses at McLeod were very accommodating and said the fami-

ly could stay as long as they wanted and they would still mark down the ICU billing for only half day. The mourners took full advantage and stayed two more hours. When leaving Stephen gave his now much colder dad one more hug and as he stepped away Hal saw some reddish liquid come out the side of his very pale father's mouth. The inevitable 'dust to dust' march was well on its way.

Through the foggy numbness the five grievors decided not to request an autopsy to find out the exact cause of death. They all now knew Albert had undergone elbow surgery to fix long time damage from youthful pursuit of excellence in the art of Ultimate Frisbee. While starting physical therapy after the surgery, suddenly he could not breathe and felt like an elephant was standing on his chest.

As the fellow consolers stood in the hallway of the hospital looking at each other with the 'what do we do now?' look on their faces, the enormity of the list of what they needed to do started to sink in. Arrangements were made for a funeral home to come get the body and the exhausting work of notifying extended family began.

Hal's ex-wife Jeana lived a few hours away in Perry MI with their son Brian and daughter Rose. When she received the news about her former father-in-law her emotions were mixed with empathy for Hal and sorrow for the slow erosion of their twelve year marriage. Brian the oldest was eleven and engrossed in all things related to baseball. At age nine, cuteness was Rose's greatest weapon.

Jeana was of course divorced. She was a single mom even though Hal got the kids two weekends per month according to the divorce decree. Muddling through and struggling on were her everyday reality. What hurt the most were those very subtle expressions of either pity or blame that came on the faces of those she interacted with in the course of her regular battle of daily living. Sometimes enduring interactions with new people as they 'figured out' the existence of her divorced and single mom status made her just want to avoid going out all-together. She struggled inside as so-called 'service professionals' could not hide their condescending thoughts that she was some kind of second class citizen. Jeana simply wanted to be treated as a valuable person doing her best not some statistic that 'represents' the decay of the morals and pillars of progressive society.

Stephen had kept close to Jeana and his nephew and niece even after the divorce. She had seen that pain was familiar to Stephen since losing his wife Anna to a long arduous battle with breast cancer three plus years prior. Hal and Jeana watched closely as his big brother seemed to somehow grow stronger through

the process as he received support and encouragement from his local church. The road back to ‘normal’ was absolutely not all fluffiness and bunnies. The occasional cathartic meltdown was also witnessed by the younger sibling and his ex-wife. Stephen’s daughters Jessica age 8 and Brehanna age 6 were still at varying places on the healing and grieving journey.

Back in his office, Hal’s co-worker’s seemed startled and uncomfortable as they fumbled for appropriate condolences. For the last thirteen years Hal had carved out a good living in the marketing department of a major hospital. He often said “marketing is what makes the whole world go round”. Communicating ideas in a way that invokes emotion and response is a very valuable skill. After making arrangements with his supervisor to be gone for two weeks he started to clean off his desk to prepare to leave.

“I am so sorry” came from over his shoulder in a very familiar voice.

He turned to take in the full effect of those lovely blue eyes which always took his breath away.

“Darla, thank you, we are still in crisis mode and I suspect will be for a while.”
Said Hal.

Without even trying Hal’s fertile mind replayed the details of the affair that ended his marriage and added so much stress to his life.

Last spring Darla exploded on the scene in Hal’s safe and boring department when she was promoted from the registration team. She had dedicated herself and completed her marketing degree while working full time. She was given a desk right next to Hal and hit the ground running with lots of fresh ideas and a can do attitude. Darla was very eager to please and craved approval even though she was skilled enough to frame her cries for attention in socially acceptable ways. Reddish blond hair and natural beauty in a petite frame went a long way to keep any complaints about her need for attention from seeing the light of day in any peer reviews.

From day one Darla was the blue light bug zapper and Hal was the bug. Being a professional Hal knew how to keep the conversations light and appropriate, but under the surface a fuse was lit that would not be put out. Hal took care of himself with good diet and exercise. Even with a few isolated silver threads of distinction in his chestnut hair he still was a striking man. The thrill of his marriage had waned as he and his wife seemed to always rub each other wrong

without even trying and then when they tried to apologize and fix the hurt they felt like a surgeon doing brain surgery wearing oven mitts. The result was more pain and isolation.

Darla on the other hand was so easy to talk to and she laughed at all Hal's jokes. She did not dress to provoke lust, but just the way she was made her desirable. Her pain of abandonment by her father at age six made the gentle empathy of Hal something she desired even more than her weekly allowed junk food indulgence.

Three weeks into a major ad campaign it just kind of happened. Hal and Darla were hammering away on the launch of a new commercial. The cliché of 'working late together' claimed another victim. The first kiss brought Hal back to his youth.

"Now that is just wrong, how can you say that LeBron James is better than Michael Jordan in his prime, who won more NBA championships?" Darla said as she smiled and leaned a little closer to let her Christian Dior perfume tickle Hal's nose while patting his arm in a playful manner.

"I say that time will tell, but if LeBron keeps making it to the finals and wins a few more championships with different teams you gotta give him the nod" Hal said.

He smiled back and enjoyed the twinkle in her eyes and her becoming smile.

Looking sharp as usual in her knee high black skirt with salmon silk blouse, Darla moved her shoulders back and forth like she was slow dancing and lifted her right heel off the ground as she again moved closer.

While staring directly at his lips she said "why do you always know just how to make me laugh"?

Before he could respond with another clever remark she leaned in and tasted his lips like she was enjoying the juiciest peach she had ever eaten.

Hal turned a different shade than his normal self and smiled, wanting more of those lips. His heart ached with the wrongness of this contact, but every place else in his body was on a four alarm fire drill. He returned the kiss and they paused to enjoy the glow and newness of blossoming romance. He fumbled to grab parts of her hand on the sly in case anyone came into the room. They both just could not stop smiling. The light-hearted duo returned to work and contrary to what Hal thought would happen, managed to get a great amount of work done before calling it a night. While he 'protected' Darla to her car they made

arrangements for dinner and a movie on Friday. Hal expected and hoped the movie portion of the date would be preempted by more fun activities.

Jeana saw the lights from Hal's car in the driveway late and sighed as she replayed their last fight in her tired mind. Dressed in her pink flannel pajamas with no make-up she still had radiance about her even though it had been a long day. She naturally kept her shoulder length brown hair straight. Her medium frame hid the bearing of children well. She was just a nice lady and a devoted mother. That morning she had tried so hard to be non-demanding in how she asked her husband to remember the dry cleaning. It was early and the kids were not awake yet to be witnesses to the theatre of the absurd arguments over the littlest stupidest things.

"Honey I told you, I have placed a reminder on my phone and I will get the dry cleaning tonight" blurted Hal. "Why do you always assume I will forget things and remind me over and over again? I am not 5 years old and you are not my mother"!

Jeana's face flushed and her hands clenched as she tried to respond in a way to not incite more conflict. "I am just trying to be helpful not smother you."

Hal rolled his eyes and sighed which provided clear signals to Jeana this was not going anywhere good.

"I am sorry you felt mothered, have a nice day at work". She said as she slumped slightly and exhaled small puffs of air. She retreated to the bedroom. Hal left for work.

Returning from work Hal pushed the garage door opener, he could see Jeana waiting in the bay window of their four bedroom three bathroom 'Third Empire' style home. The home had all the markings of an upper middle class normal residence and was well kept to maintain appearances. They were so excited to move into their dream home just eight months earlier. How had the good memories so easily slid into the despair of mild irritations stacked on top of each other like small blisters upon small blisters?

The door from the garage did not even have time to close before Jeana wrapped her arms around Hal's neck and said "I am so sorry, please forgive me!"

Seeing a luminous glimpse of the woman he fell in love with, he replied with a soft tone "I am sorry for being too sensitive, I know you are just trying to help"

While they held each other in silence he purposed in his heart to break his date with Darla. The tired bodies of parents of children who work very hard collapsed into bed and sleep came quickly as the Friday loomed.

Friday did not wait for anyone to be prepared for it and despite Hal's best efforts to work up the courage to break their date, the curiosity and excitement of young romance kept trumping all thoughts of nobility. Remembrances of that kiss kept dancing through his foggy head. Hal was expected to continue working late for the foreseeable future so leaving at normal quitting time with Darla was way too easy. Staggering their leaving times by about ten minutes they rendezvoused at Puppies Bar and Grill which was twenty minutes away from the hospital but the opposite direction from Hal and Jeana's neighborhood. "Puppies" was a secret to the locals who liked great food and drinks with valuable portions at a fair price. Patty Puppina was the proud owner who immigrated from old Russia years ago. The special feature of "Puppies" was lots of booths hidden away in corners for maximum privacy. Hal and Darla arrived and Patty quickly got them a cozy booth to snuggle into. Darla and Patty had known each other for a few years and enjoyed talking about fashion illegalities of their favorite celebrities. Hal of course had never been there before and failed miserably at looking casual while sliding his wedding ring off before they entered the establishment.

While sitting close side by side Hal slid his arm around Darla's shoulder.

"Alone at last." Darla exhaled as she leaned backwards for another lip tasting, Hal touched her with passion under her chin with the back of his fingers.

"I really like being with you." Hal said. Darla smiled with shyness mixed with smoldering desire and locked her eyes on his.

A great meal of Rib Eye steaks with baked potato accompanied with wine was the introduction to heart to heart conversation lasting hours but seeming like minutes. The love birds left the restaurant while thanking Patty and their server. In the car Darla let Hal know in ways that only a woman can that she was interested in spending the night with him.

With the glands working overtime in Hal's mouth they sped to a nearby Express Inn and parked around back. After stumbling and trying to act casual as he checked them in, the lovers indulged in each other for what seemed to be a long time, but was really only about twenty minutes. Soon a familiar ache returned to Hal's heart and psyche. Memories of using salacious images for self-gratification and the aching emptiness that followed remained hauntingly similar as he drift-

ed into a somber mood. Darla now looked a little tarnished to Hal. Her beauty was still undeniable, but her twinkle and joy flowing from the inside seemed faded in his view.

‘There you go again stupid, now you’re a screwing up someone else’s life.’ Hal thought as he resisted the urge to thump his forehead in self-disgust. As they left the room it felt musty and dreary.

No words happened between the dirty feeling lovers as Hal returned Darla to her car at Puppies.

“Well, I better get back home.” said Hal, “See you Monday.” she replied.

The next morning while puzzling at the distance that seemed to have returned between herself and her husband, Jeana set out to forget what she could not control and focus on the tasks that are always at hand for a mother who always seemed to be in need of something at the store.

“Johnny Stevens just got a new glove and mine is really getting old, can you please get me this glove right here?” Brian said as he pointed with blinking pleading eyes at the highlighted glove in the sporting goods store publication.

“Brian, I told you our budget says we have to wait until next month.” Jeana sounded weak in her resolve.

“Ma you don’t want the other mom’s to say bad things about you do you?” Brian said.

Her son had her and she knew it. With a slight shrug, she said “Ok I will get it for you, but we will need to skip some eating out for the next two weeks, money doesn’t grow on trees you know.”

Rose pounced with no conscience. “Well, if he gets a new glove then I gotta get that new ‘One Direction’ T-shirt, it costs much less than his glove and I will help out extra all week around the house.”

Jeana nodded and smiled and left for the garage trying to give off the air that she was still in control. As she pulled out of their driveway in the latest crossover vehicle that all the hip moms were driving. She was tired of keeping up with everyone else and also marveled at how fast things change in kid culture regarding who is ‘hot’ and who is ‘old news’.

Jeana turned onto the main highway headed toward Bob's Sporting Goods. Knowing they opened early on Saturdays. Not even ten minutes on her way she saw the dreaded detour signs routing her down town. She liked to keep her routes to areas she was familiar with so the diversion was already raising her blood pressure. As she diligently followed the detour signs to hopefully get back to familiar ground soon, a huge dump truck kept pace just ahead of her on her right side so she could not see the next detour sign to turn right until she was past the turn.

When she stopped seeing detour signs she knew she was lost. Trying to breathe deep and stay calm she meandered for a while looking for land marks she would recognize. After fifteen minutes of this futility she started to look for a place to pull over to ask for directions. A deafening BANG rattled her peace and her life simultaneously as she felt herself lurch forward until she was stopped cold by her seatbelt. Her vehicle rushed forward and smashed into the end of a cement partition. She felt pain in her lower back and neck. She saw the SUV that hit her while getting out and examining the damage to her beloved vehicle. Random thoughts went through her mind like, 'why was I so excited to drive this car off the lot, when now it is just mangled metal?' The driver of the Escalade that hit her quickly apologized and exchanged insurance information. The police arrived and completed the accident report and a tow truck was called. Anxious to get out of the street as soon as possible and avoid as much of the 'oh the poor woman driver had an accident' glares from other drivers creeping by, she ran to the nearest business to wait for the tow truck to arrive.

"How did you come up with the name "Puppies" for a restaurant?" Jeana asked. "Well" replied Patty, "My last name is Puppina so the name just works."

Jeana liked Patty in an instant and was soon passing the time as she listened to the owner's flowing story of how she came to America from the old country. Patty sensed she was rambling a bit about herself because Jeana was a good listener.

She paused and asked Jeana "Where do you live and what is your story?" She overcame the fact quickly that she knew Patty was practicing good manners and listening skills, and launched into a nicely delivered cliff notes version of her life with Hal and their two wonderful children in suburbia.

When she mentioned where Hal worked Patty perked up and said "My good friend Darla works there, what a small world".

Now Jeana was curious to know where in the huge organization Darla worked. The world got smaller when they discovered Darla and Hal worked in the same

marketing department.

“Funny you mention it because Darla was here on a date last night with someone from work. They really seemed to be hitting it off. I am a little concerned because the guy seems to be a little older than the people she has dated in the past. Really nice guy though, he has an ease about him.” Said Patty.

Gradual uneasiness crept up on Jeana like a shadow in one of those monster movies.

“Funny you mention it, I thought there is only one other guy in Hal’s department and he is fresh out of college. Are you sure this guy was from Darla’s department?” Jeana said.

Patty replied, “I recall that some of the conversation related to work was about some big campaign of some kind.” Now the shadows were getting larger and growing teeth.

“Patty, could you describe this ‘date’ of Darla’s for me?” Two sentences into the description and Jeana felt her breathing increase as disbelief fought hard to hold the line in her pounding head.

“We have not known each other long, but I feel that I trust you Patty and you trust me. I need to ask you a huge favor. Can I see the credit card receipt from Darla’s date last night? I would not ask if it was not very important.” Jeana exuded seriousness as she spoke.

Now Patty looked puzzled and nervous as she slipped in the back and grabbed the prior day’s receipts from her safe. “Letting a stranger look at my receipts is a privacy violation, but you are already my friend so why don’t you just happen to look over my shoulder while I look for something from yesterday.”

Moistness began around Jeana’s eyes as she examined the steady stream of signatures over Patty’s shoulder until she saw the familiar signature of her soon to be ex-husband. When she saw what she knew deep down she was going to see, she hung her head and exhaled a deep somber flow of air as she leaned on Patty’s shoulder for support. A solitary tear pushed its way down the crease between her cheek and nose.

Patty reached over and touched her new friend’s hand with empathy. “I am so sorry, I will be praying for you.”

Chapter 2

Earlier on Friday night when Hal got home from his 'date' the heaviness mixed with elation put him in a weird state of mind. He was relieved that everyone appeared to be in bed. While grabbing some water from the fridge to bring to bed, Rose emerged around the corner wearing her favorite pink pajamas while rubbing the sleep from her eyes and slid with ease into her daddy's arms for a hug.

"How are you doing pinkie?" Hal said as he squeezed his daughter with joy.

She smiled and yawned and mumbled something about going back to bed. As she headed toward the stairs Hal remembered how captured his heart was by his precious daughter when she was born. Jeana had glowed even after enduring thirteen hours of labor as she held their special little bundle. Brian bounced for joy as he celebrated no longer being an only child. What happened to that joy he felt on that day? It seems like everything always wears off after a while. 'New car, new house, new wife, new child, new lover, they never stay new.' Desire for sleep overcame the need for further contemplation and Hal slipped into bed next to his wife.

After restless sleep filled with tossing and turning he arose early and right away felt a strong urge to get out of the house to avoid a morning conversation with his wife that would most likely require him to lie in some form or another. He dressed like he had done it just a few times before in his workout clothes. He grabbed a change of clothes for after his exercise and headed for a garage escape from any conflict.

Brian was lounging on the couch with intent face and flying fast fingers wearing the paint off the Nintendo controller.

"Why are you up already?" Hal queried.

Without even looking up Brian replied "I could ask you the same thing".

"I have to go work out".

"Well I have to work on getting my highest score!"

Hal smiled at how many times his conversations with his son were like talking in the mirror. He gave his son an affectionate shoulder punch and walked out the door to the garage and soon was on his way to the gym. He prided himself

on going to a gym with local ownership and a distinct non-franchise feel to it. Floyd's Gym had been around for as long as Hal could remember. Just ten minutes from their house, it provided him with a good forty five minute respite to think while he worked on his endorphin high.

After stretching and getting on the stair master, his mind started to wander and process what he had been going through recently. He really felt he loved Darla, but how could he hurt his kids and Jeana with the fall out of a divorce. 'Why is it so hard to do the right thing and be the honorable stand-up guy that I want everyone to think I am?' Just as that thought was tracking through his brain, his eye caught orange movement to his right. He looked towards the orange without even thinking and there was the most beautiful young lady he had ever seen in orange leotards getting started on the elliptical machine.

Without even trying to restrain himself, Hal stared for eight seconds and then tried to act cool and keep working out when the owner of that beauty and orange leotard named Stacy noticed his gaze. Feeling like he had a neon 'post it' note on his forehead saying 'middle age crisis in progress' Hal kept looking over and Stacy kept catching him in the act with her light green eyes and perfect face augmented by naturally straight brown hair. Finally after three bouts back and forth of 'I caught you looking' tag, Hal glided over and struck up a conversation.

"How many minutes you do per day on that machine?" Hal said while trying with all his might to look Stacy only in that sweet face.

"That is a great line old man, you tired of gawking at me from a safe distance and now you have the nerve to question my work out ethic?" Stacy twinkled just a little as she teased.

Hal was listening to Stacy's body language not her words. He knew teasing banter was romantic.

"Old man? If I am that old why is the best lookin' woman in this place checking me out to see if I am checking her out?" Hal said this as he looked Stacy square in the eyes with confidence and experience which caused her to gulp just a little.

Hal was on a hot roll like room temperature butter. He was the king of his domain and knew he was about to pluck some luscious young fruit from tree of free love planted by the river of anything goes.

"I think you should rehydrate your wonderful body with the best smoothie this side of town and I need to accompany you to keep all those crazy inexperienced men away from you. What you think?" Hal spoke with his usual persuasive tone, shocked at how easy it was.

Stacy saw no need for any more banter, she got what she wanted. She said with cheerful joy “Sure”.

Hal’s mind played with potential of what might happen as he showered, changed and primed in lightening fashion. Both emerged from their respective locker rooms with interesting synchronization. Hal wore jeans and Polo shirt with a light jacket and Rockport shoes. Stacy was comfortable in her all matching turquoise sweat suit, but she did have earrings on and her hair was neatly combed. She had no make-up on but Hal couldn’t tell.

As the giddy good looking pair approached the exit to Floyd’s their body language shouted they were leaving together.

The possibilities of fun ‘adult’ activities after a smoothie flushed in a second from Hal’s head along with all of the blood from his face as he saw Jeana stomping in the door with puffy eyes and a hurt look on her face.

Without hesitation Jeana walked straight up to the ‘couple’ and said “Is this Darla?”

She did not mean to say it so loud, it just kind of happened. Suddenly they had an audience for their little soap opera conversation.

“Who are you and who is Darla?” Stacy blurted.

“I am Jeana, the soon to be ex-wife and the mother of this hot shot’s two children. If you are not Darla than I am afraid you are third in line sister!”

Now Stacy felt the rushing of extra blood to her face and tried to exit the club quick without any more stinging arrows of stares piercing her psyche from onlookers.

Hal’s face had no problem showing color now as he tried to be calm and usher his wife outside to complete their conversation which he knew had no possible good outcome. The overcast forty degree weather with a light gusty wind fit the mood of the painful processing that somehow needed to happen, but everything inside each member of this marriage wanted to run for the hills.

With nowhere to go but through, Jeana landed the first blow. “How many affairs have you had mister stud muffin?”

Hal mumbled his reply into his chest “Only One.”

“So what did I interrupt just now, were you interviewing a babysitter for our

children?” Jeana glared with her arms folded and shifted her weight onto one side.

Hal was no longer the king of his own domain. He was the pauper eating the slop outside the kingdom begging for food. Hal was beaten and broken. He disclosed the exact nature of the ways he had broken his marriage vows to his wife and their children.

When Hal was done talking, he looked to Jeana’s face for any signs that she believed he was sincere.

“Hal Dorsey, you sound very sincere, but you are in marketing for a living and you could sell manure to a pig farmer. I take no joy in this, but you need to find another place to live.” Jeana stomped towards her car.

Those pounding words from many months prior still echoed and lingered in Hal’s head as Darla shook him and said “you must still be in shock, you kind of zoned out there for a minute.”

“Sorry, I just have lots going on in my mind as we make all these arrangements for dad’s funeral, I will call you later.” Hal said as he turned to leave with his chin low.

As Hal made his way towards his car he grieved many things, but the most bitter and painful of all was the look on his kids faces as the news that daddy was not going to be living at home anymore crept into their understanding like the sneakiest cat burglar in the world coming to steal their dreams of a normal childhood.

As he drove to his studio apartment close to the hospital he remembered the route he used to take when he went home to a family. Now all that waited for him was average divorced bachelor decor with flat people on the television trying hard to substitute for real human interaction.

He still was kind of dating Darla, but the edges of their relationship were wearing thin and he was actually relieved by the distraction of dealing with his father’s funeral. His heart ached to be able to talk with his dad about all that was going on in his life.

Albert Dorsey was Hal’s biggest fan. He and wife Samantha loved all their kids. Samantha was joyful and friendly and just knew how to make everything feel like home. Hal loved to hear the story how they met at Calvary College in their

second year. After getting married soon after graduation, they moved to Detroit and worked hard in the suburbs to raise a respectable and God fearing family. Albert enjoyed games and especially Ultimate Frisbee which took him away a few times a year for tournaments. He also played on a church league where the behavior and lack of sportsmanship sometimes caused people to question if it really was a church league. The church they attended fit the mold of most heartland denominations. Hal felt the same as he suspected his siblings did that their only job was to be good and stay out of trouble to not embarrass the family. Grace was talked about in church all the time, but the family seemed to do a good job of looking and acting like a receiver of grace should look and act, but not really having a real encounter with God.

Life was mostly care free for the three siblings as they grew up. Minor arguments were resolved fairly well as the effective conflict resolution skills that Albert and Samantha had learned growing up were brought to bear at opportune times. Stephen being the oldest went through a minor bout of rebellion for about six months before graduating from high school, but seemed to steady once he locked to a career path in college at Michigan State. He fell in love with CAD design software and Anna about the same time. After being married fresh out of college they made East Lansing their home and settled in nicely with his job at Red Oak Technology and Anna nursing at McLeod until the children came along and she reduced her hours to part time.

When Hal came out of college he started paying his dues in the marketing field in Tampa, Florida at the first job he could find to give him the time of day. Four years into his chase for the American dream at Tampa General he met Jeana and even though he knew she was the one for him right away she took some convincing. Soon after they were married a position in marketing opened up at McLeod and Anna put in a good word for her brother in law. Before the dust settled from Hal and Jeana starting their married life together, they were on their way to a new future near family. 'Where did things go so wrong in this near perfect scenario?' Hal thought to himself.

Candace's route to the East Lansing area came from her love for animals of all kinds. From an early age she talked of wanting to be a vet or vet's assistant and living with Stephen and Anna while she went to East Lansing Community college worked out great for all concerned. Anna died eight months before Candace graduated and went to work at the pet hospital where she was already interning. Beloved "Auntie Candace" stayed on to help with the kids and help with the costs of the home. As Hal thought more of his twig of the family tree and how they arrived in the same city, the synapses in his brain involuntarily led to the review of how his Dad ended up in the same locale four years before he died.

If trauma makes the brain do funny things, then Hal's brain could be on a clean 'Comedy Central' special. Enjoying fruitful retirement in Detroit, Albert and Samantha were just doing normal retirement stuff when normal was shattered into many little pieces. Hal's dad was out of town attending the National Ultimate Frisbee Championships. He was only going to be gone for the weekend. Someone was casing their townhome in the mid to upper class suburb of Detroit and knew he was gone. The robbers were clumsy in trying to subdue Hal's dear mother before robbing the place and she fell backwards down the stairs snapping her neck. Hal was at a strip club when he got the call from his hysterical father telling him his dear mother was gone. Shock and horror mixed with guilt over where he was when he got the news, created a powerful guilt cocktail which Hal drank every day since.

Albert of course moved close to his kids after the funeral of his life companion. Now, with his father gone, Hal was parentless, wifeless, kids less most of the time and felt quite hopeless. As he settled into his couch in his apartment which felt very temporary, he needed on deep levels to feel good to take all the slime of loss away from his mind. His high definition television indicted him for his low definition life. Pay per view adult films which are anything but mature, made him feel better for a few fleeting moments. Too soon the dull feelings of loneliness and despair returned unabated and heavier. With no other options, Hal stumbled into bed for another night of restless sleep.

Chapter 3

The obituary for Albert Dorsey read as follows:

ON MAY 17 2013 ALBERT FRANK DORSEY WENT TO BE WITH THE GOOD LORD.

ABLERT FRANK DORSEY IS PRECEDED IN DEATH BY SPOUSE SAMANTHA JANE DORSEY AND DAUGHTER IN LAW ANNA LOUISE DORSEY.

HE IS SURVIVED BY SONS STEPHEN JAY DORSEY, HAROLD JOSEPH DORSEY AND DAUGHTER CANDACE LOUISE DORSEY.

HIS GRANDCHILDREN ARE JESSICA, BREHANNA, BRIAN AND ROSE DORSEY.

The siblings decided to keep things as simple as possible for the Saturday morning ceremony. The turnout for the funeral was quite surprising as the two hundred seat Baptist Church which was the only place available on short notice swelled to capacity. The musical numbers were picked from the favorites of the deceased. Hal moved in and out of cognitive awareness of all that was going on as the service grinded to a close and the food in the basement sought to bring soothing to places in the heart that no calories could touch no matter how hard they tried.

As the dust settled and clean up was completed, no grave side service was done because Albert was clear about not wasting money on a casket which was going to be seen for a few hours by people and the rest of the time in the ground. Cremation had been completed two days prior to the funeral. A tasteful but simple urn temporarily held his ashes until they would be deposited in front of his head stone in Detroit next to the long ago vacated resting place of the remains of his dear Samantha.

Not really wanting to leave each other and go back to trying to handle the daily drudgery of life without their father, the siblings and their kids just sat around a table with no particular seating arrangement and reminisced about their father and grandfather for well over an hour. Fond memories flowed as they laughed anew at old stories of funny things that just seemed to happen when he was around.

The story that got them all laughing so hard they cried was about their trip west when they were grade school and high school ages.

Stephen recanted the tale blow for blow. “Dad had extended family in Jackson Hole Wyoming. The best inexpensive vacation was to go visit family, so our family of five piled into the station wagon and headed west for adventure and intrigue with the in-laws. Driving straight through, we were making good time. Only stopping for gas and one meal per day, with mom supplying the rest of the food needs through her amazing ability to get everything needed for ‘on the go’ picnic lunches crammed into just two coolers kept in the exact best place for easy access. NASA engineers who helped bring Apollo 13 back had nothing on mom’s abilities for packing the prep for lunches in a small space.” Everyone chuckled and leaned in to hear the rest of the story like it was the first time they heard it, even though they all knew it by heart.

“On the last stretch coming into Jackson Hole watching the sun come up opposite the Teton Mountains, we stopped in Moran for breakfast. Five travel weary faces yawned our way into the local diner yearning for the all American breakfast that included bacon, eggs and huge pancakes with hash browns. Once we had settled into a booth and used the facilities, orders were placed and the anticipation began. On the sly dad had a private conversation with the server and the hook was set. When the meals were delivered by the clearly adept server, dad’s pancakes had butter on them and he had requested no butter. When he mentioned in a respectful tone that he had requested no butter on his cakes the server was already headed back to the kitchen. With a startling scowling snarl she whirled back to the table and said ‘fine’ and grabbed the butter with her bare hand and stomped back into the kitchen.” Stephen acted the grabbing and stomping off motions to add luster to the story.

“Dad pretended to be deeply hurt as he enjoyed our dropped jaws and saucer sized eyes. Soon he could not contain himself and he spilled the beans that the whole thing was arranged and the server reappeared for her applause and a big tip.” Stephen and the family laughed and enjoyed the precious memory.

Then Stephen stated with a far off look on his face, “I look forward to seeing dad and mom again in Heaven someday.” The statement just kind of hung in the air as everyone digested it in their own way.

Hal was secretly annoyed with his older brother who always seemed to be bringing up this God stuff in regular conversations. He was glad his brother found a crutch to help himself through the loss of his wife, but why couldn’t Stephen keep his faith in a nice polite box so it stopped interfering with other people’s lives?

Everyone said their goodbyes and left the church as fast as foggy grieving brains could process and move forward. Hal headed for Jeana's place and spent a few hours with his kids. Jeana hugged Hal as he left and said "Again, I am so sorry for your loss."

In the midst of the embrace a cloud of sorrow and regret draped over Hal again like sticky slime from a ghost movie. Hal felt such embarrassment and loss and tried to hold on to the hug a little extra. Jeana lingered only for a second then pulled away, but as she retreated to the doorway Hal did see sorrow in her face.

While driving back to his apartment with no particular plans, Hal's desire to run from the pain of his life started pushing him another step further down a sink hole that would never let him go. The rationalization for greater escapades slithered into his want center and planted the weedy seed that what he really needed was passion without consequences that hurt relationships. While driving he started checking escort websites on his phone and somehow his car just happened to find its way to the Marriott hotel on M.A.K. Ave. Once inside he fidgeted nervously as he checked himself into room 375. The escort was already on the way so now all he had to do was wait.

Sharon Favless received her instructions to go to room 375 at the Marriott with no real emotion. She had been an escort for two years and numbness was the standard emotion. At age twenty two she felt much older as she saw no real way out of her current occupation. When she was fifteen her parents were divorced and her mom followed her selfish impulses into the arms of marriage to the man she had been having an affair with.

Amazed at how her mom could buy into the lie that there are no real consequences for our actions, Sharon left home at age sixteen when the step dad became more affectionate than a new step dad should be. She soon found a place to stay in the college town of East Lansing and thought she would be just fine working her way up in the restaurant business at a local diner called Fat Pats.

Unfortunately the owner of the diner soon took a real liking to Sharon even though she was half his age. When his advances were spurned he framed her for stealing money and fired her. In the tight circle of restaurant owners and managers the owner had lots of clout and charisma so he easily blacklisted poor Sharon.

While looking for other work her resources quickly vanished and soon she was desperate and homeless and sniffing at a Denny's on the wrong side of town.

Geno the 'recruiter' for her now employer only needed fifteen minutes of empathetic listening to mold her will to his and soon she was doing things nobody should have to endure so she could still get her part of the American Dream.

While scolding herself for being so sentimental about her past, she rubbed the small beginning of a tear from the corner of her eye. She freshened up her face and hair before exiting her car for the Marriott lobby. She had learned how to act like she belonged anywhere to go un-noticed despite her good looks.

Once on the third floor Sharon worked her way toward room 385. She knocked on the door and said "Somebody call for a date?" The door opened slowly but the light was not on. Not surprised by abnormal behaviors of her dates she walked with boldness into the room.

The silence shattered as she was grabbed around the neck and shaken from behind by two gloved hands. She was thrown like a rag doll onto the bed and before she could regain her bearings she was assaulted with a large sweaty gloved hand keeping her silent and then smacked unconscious.

Knowing just what to do, her attacker knew he had little time before the noise would be reported. He used alcohol wet wipes like he had done it before to clean all evidence he had been there from Sharon, her clothes and the room. He placed her inside a large duffle bag used by athletes surrounded by towels with her mouth taped with duct tape. He put the wet wipes and everything from the bathroom into a zip lock bag and put that in the duffle bag also. Using the luggage cart from the end of the hall he was careful to load his victim on the cart while in the room so onlookers could not tell there was a person in the bag.

Wearing a Virginia Tech baseball cap over hair he had colored and a hooded sweat shirt with fake mustache and colored contacts, he emerged from the elevator on the first floor and moved to the exit selling the persona well of being an out of town athlete tired and headed home.

He moved with casual ease to his grey Ford Escort parked with the trunk facing the back of the lightless hotel property, our criminal loaded poor Sharon into his trunk and left the parking lot at a speed that would not attract any attention.

Driving non-stop for fifty minutes south on Highway 127 into Jackson put some fear easing distance between the attacker and the scene of the crime. He wanted to leave his victim where she was sure to get help, but that process would give time for his trail to grow cold when he escaped back to his normal looking life in

Charlotte MI. 'I am no murderer, I have standards.' He thought as he smiled to himself feeling invincible.

Being just past midnight, the edge of a regular Midwest town like Jackson was a great place to leave someone. Just a mile from the nearest house, he found a side street that seemed to not really go anywhere. He opened the trunk with speed as he heard muffled struggling sounds from Sharon. Leaving her in the bag he felt for her neck and put her in a sleeper hold until she passed out again. Careful to not leave any physical evidence he was even there, the assaulter placed her in a low spot in the grass on the side of the road. After giving her one last "goodbye kiss" while trying hard to feel romantic in the spring night air, he wiped her lips with another wet wipe and rolled everything into the duffle bag including his gloves. Putting the duffle bag into some plastic in the trunk he eased away from his prey at a speed that he felt was sure to say "Nothing to look at here."

With efficiency our mystery assailant made his way back to highway 94 headed west. Near Albion he saw a farmer burning off some trash and old fence posts in a large fire pit. After getting as close as possible by car without being seen, he snuck through the fence and trees from the back of the property and tossed the duffle bag filled with all the evidence against him into the red hot coals. Not having to work the next day, the rapist feeling superior that he was too smart for murder meandered his way along side roads back to his home in Charlotte. No one saw him ease into his driveway after 3:00 AM.

Hal started to be concerned as he sat in his room in anticipation for too long without any tantalizing knock at the door. He started to get angry when he tried to find the website he had gone to before and could not remember what site it was. Now he could not call and complain about bad service, not that he would have done so. He knew it was not smart to make people who could easily ruin your reputation mad at you. Feeling clammy and despondent he completed his cable TV ritual and decided to go to bed early. 'Can't I do anything right?' was the accusatory question rolling around in his mind.

Chapter 4

At 2:35 AM Sunday Sharon jerked into consciousness and sat up to see where she was. Feeling very thirsty with the taste of a stale wet wipe in her mouth she also realized she needed to relieve her bladder post haste. While walking with urgency towards the nearest building she could see she started to unpack the trauma of her evening in her mind and try to decipher any clues to the identity of her attacker. ‘What kind of sicko pays for a date and then attacks them?’ She shuddered and blinked and felt the small beads of sweat form on her forehead and lips.

Thankfully the first house she came to answered the door right away. It might have had something to do with the time, but more likely the thirty three times she rang the bell while screaming at the top of her lungs “HELP” provided the best motivation for the inhabitants of the average sized home to rush to her aid.

The Jackson sheriff arrived on the scene. Sheriff Wesley who was elected in the fall took as thorough of a statement as he could about the attack. Not wanting to miss anything he recapped what he had so far so the victim could make sure nothing was missed.

“So you went to room 375 and the man attacked you in the dark and you woke up here in the middle of the night, is that about right?” He spoke with a flat tone.

“Yes, I was supposed to meet my uncle visiting from out of town for a late dinner and before you know it I was being attacked and left in the middle of nowhere.” Sharon said while looking with moist eyes at everyone else at the crime scene to make sure no one knew her.

“So this uncle visiting from out of town, what is his name?”

“Stan Favless from Detroit.” Sharon looked the Sheriff straight in the pupils of his eyes while using the moistness still around her eyes to her full advantage and keep him from digging further into details about this uncle of hers.

The face of the Sheriff appeared to Sharon to soften just a bit even though she knew he probably had suspicions about this convenient uncle from out of town story.

The Sheriff barked at one of his deputies. “Take Sharon to Jackson ER for a rape kit and then straight home to East Lansing immediately.”

The deputy sighed and rolled his eyes, but did what he was told. As the deputy and Sharon walked to the squad car she heard the Sheriff calling someone at East Lansing Police Department to investigate.

Charles Cordway had been a detective for thirteen years at ELPD and was effective and tenacious sprinkled with just the right amount of empathy. He was average in height and looks only. He kept his black hair, mixed with so little grey you could not see it, short for ease of maintenance. He just had a way about him that commanded attention and respect. Even innocent people felt a little nervous when encountering his persona. He felt that putting all kinds of slime away off the streets was the highest of callings. Because the detective had two daughters of his own, sex crimes hit extra close to home.

“Cordway here.” He said while leaning back on his chair at his desk and reading a report at the same time.

“Yes, Detective Cordway, this is Sheriff Wesley over in Jackson, we got a rape victim from your city who was dropped here. We are sending her over right away for a rape kit and then home. Name is Sharon Favless I will send everything we got on her and the place she was dropped.”

“Sure, I will get right on it!” Cordway sat up and moved his eyes back and forth showing his highly tuned brain was shifting into top gear.

“Thanks for being so eager to attack this, usually the detectives I talk to about new cases are crabby and overwhelmed.” Said the sheriff.

Smiling as he remembered once being introduced to a new rookie in his department as a highly motivated intelligent hard-nosed bloodhound. Cordway just said “You are welcome.”

Cordway reviewed the info from the crime scene like he had done it a few times before. Not even waiting to interview the victim once she got back to her apartment, he headed right to the Marriot to see who checked out from room 375 and look for physical evidence. He went first to the front desk. Not expecting that any self-respecting rapist would be dumb enough to use their own name and credit card to check into a hotel, he was surprised to see that Hal Dorsey checked out and he had used a credit card to pay for the room the night before. Records showed he checked in around ten and left the next day. Cordway frowned when he was informed that the security tapes from the night before were not available because the system crashed at about 9:30 PM and the techs

were working to restore it as soon as possible.

When our detective arrived at room number 375 it had already been dusted for prints and samples taken of as much hair and dust particles as possible. He bemoaned the fact that hotels are terrible crime scenes because every night there are brand new sets of DNA evidence left behind. Some good prints from Hal were found on the basic places you would expect them. There was nothing showing Sharon had been there, but her statement said she was immediately attacked and the attacker wiped things down really well. 'A smart criminal would leave traces of a normal hotel stay and remove everything else.' He reasoned.

Confident Sharon would be home by now he headed to her place and called the Lab at the ER in Jackson for the results of the rape kit while on his way. He expected disappointment in the results because of the time between the attack at about 11:15 PM and the kit being done at around three in the morning. He got what he expected when the lab told him the results of the kit were inconclusive. 'I am dealing with a real cool customer who has done this crime before.' He exhaled with disgust as he lamented the "it is never enough" component to sex crimes that spurs on the twisted egos to greater and greater conquests while increasing the damage and horror of their victims.

When the detective knocked on faded green paint on the outside of Sharon's door she was sitting inside on her couch with a dazed look that even a nice hot shower and warm chicken noodle soup could not remove.

She winced and crept to the door looking for a possible defensive weapon and said "Who is it?"

"Detective Cordway", was the response from someone who knew how jumpy victims of sex crimes are.

As he saw the door creek open just enough for Sharon to look him over he held his badge next to his face so she could see he was one of the good guys. She opened the door with a mixture of fear and crying for help written all over her face and offered him a seat. She appeared to the detective to know that the inevitable recounting of what happened to her to help catch the creep who attacked her was going to be like getting help removing a speck from her eye.

Careful to put the victim at ease the detective asked her some light conversation starter questions about how long she had lived in her apartment and how she liked the neighborhood. After small talk about important trivial matters he sensed she was trusting him more and more.

Sharon confirmed his trust by saying, "So detective, I can read people and I know

I can trust you to fight for justice for me. No need to soften me up with small talk any more. What can I tell you to help you catch this perverted coward who pounced on me?"

Detective Cordway liked the spirit in Sharon. Being as skilled as a fortune teller at reading people he usually had to loosen them up a bit more for optimum results. He admired her tenacity to rip the band aid off and go down the dark path in her memory to come through on the other side with the victory of prosecution and punishment of her attacker.

"Sharon, I am not vice, so I have no interest in how many uncles you have visiting you at hotels from out of town. My only solemn purpose is to get this piece of human filth and tie him up in a very uncomfortable position and leave him by the side of the road like a side of beef for little insects to nibble on." Cordway sat forward on the blue imitation leather couch and folded his hands with earnest.

She nodded with her body from the waste up and grinned with glee.

"So far I have that you arrived at room 375 at the Marriott about 11:15 PM and knocked on the door. When you walked into the room it was dark. Did you hear any sound at all?" He probed.

"No" she said with certainty.

"When he grabbed you from behind, how big did his hands feel?"

"I don't know, average size I guess."

"Are you ok if I put my hands on your shoulders so you can compare them to mine?"

"Sure"

After comparing the feel and angle and pressure of the attacker's hands to the detective's they agreed that the criminal and Cordway were very similar in size and build.

"I felt lots of strength in the attacker before I was knocked unconscious." She said with a blank stare.

They also talked about what she could remember about the inside of the car trunk when she woke up as they arrived in Jackson. Even though she was tied and inside the duffle bag she noticed the trunk to be very clean smelling like Pine Sol had been used to clean it recently. She also was able to stretch out fully

in the trunk without banging her head so it was a larger car with a big trunk. She also noticed the car seemed to ride with very few bumps before it stopped and she was put in a sleeper hold again until she passed out again.

“Thank you for your help” the detective reassured the victim in an encouraging tone. “I know it will be tough but you will get through this.” He gave her some counseling resources and encouraged her to call them for help as soon as possible.

While walking for the door, just like Columbo, he paused, turned and said, “Like I said before, I am not interested in your relationship to the person in room 375, but I do need to talk with your employer to verify some things. I promise to not get you in any trouble.”

With just a hint of flushing in Sharon’s face she handed him a card from her employer. “Former employer.” She proclaimed with soft but steely resolve as her new vindicator left her apartment.

Chapter 5

After the funeral on Saturday, Stephen Dorsey and his kids and beloved Auntie Candace went home and fought for normalcy by playing one of their favorite games Chinese checkers. The mental challenge was a welcome relief from the process of grieving which even though necessary, could wait until later.

Fudge and popcorn fit like hand in glove with the game and everyone cheered with delight at every unique long path different people used to reach their destination in the game.

“Kind of like our walk with the Lord isn’t it, it usually is not in a straight line, but He sees the whole picture.” stated Stephen with lots of usual conviction in his voice.

“There you go again dad, everything is not always material for a spiritual lesson” blurted Jessica with a twinkle in her eye.

Before the dad could get defensive with his dear daughter he saw the twinkle and realized that even though she would never say it out loud, she really did like it when her dad showed his love for her in tangible ways by being willing to actually speak the truth about what really matters in life and also back it up with his actions.

Our bloodhound of a detective Cordway, still hot on the trail headed over to Sharon’s employer to verify how she was headed to the Marriott in the first place. The name of the business on the card given by Sharon was Happy Times Party Supply. With pictures of balloons and a goofy clown face, the bold print on the card boasted about FREE DELIVERY. He knew that all connection to escorts would be squeakily sanitized from the cover business to keep the owners out of jail.

Geno was at the counter of Happy Times when the detective arrived around mid-morning. Right away his distrust of this person obviously in law enforcement making a beeline to the counter showed on his face. Tattoos and a rough exterior added to his appearance that exuded aloofness and resistance.

Seeking to catch more bees with honey, Cordway pretended to be interested in supplies for his daughter’s upcoming birthday party. Geno hesitantly obliged

and showed the detective on their in-store tablet how to place his order for all he needed right on the Happy Times web site.

The detective knew that everything listed on the legit Happy Times site corresponded in code to escort services and pricing. The names of the escorts were of course aliases listed as clowns, cowboys and various cartoon characters which could be booked for parties. If these entertainers chose to conduct themselves in illegal activities, that was their business. Only dealing in cash meant there was no paper trail of the fifteen percent that came back to Geno for protection expenses. The master key which was either given in hard copy to customers or advertised in code on other websites as provocative pop ups with a link for the prey who were hooked during those nervous mind numbing nibbling searches on the web.

“Geno, I need to know which upstanding citizen booked Bambi or Ariel or Cinderella or whatever role Sharon Favless plays, to go to the Marriott room 375 on Saturday night late for an innocent kid’s party. Can you help me out?”

Geno in silence should have won an Oscar for his portrayal of an honest businessman just trying to make kids happy who is shocked and appalled that some cop is trying to besmirch his good name.

The detective tried again. “Look, I am not interested in your little side cash revenue stream, but if you keep wasting my time in a very important investigation I will become very interested.” A menacing posture and stare accompanied these words from the detective and told Geno he better be careful how he chose his next words.

“I understand you have an important investigation and I would love to help you, but...” Before the “but” completely left Geno’s lips Cordway deftly swung his elbow and smashed the nose of the not so happy owner hard enough to cause maximum pain but minimum scarring. Dazed and beginning to bleed in gushes Geno was willing to be more cooperative. “Okay, okay give me a second!”

Holding his nose with a cloth Geno shot in back into his office and scribbled something on a piece of paper and quickly stuffed it into the detective’s hand.

“Thank you for your cooperation. Ice will help with that result of your trip and fall today. If you choose to repeat a different story for what happened here today to anyone, then I will be forced to pass on your little enterprise information to our vice unit for special scrutiny which will make the pain in your nose feel like a picnic at the beach.”

As the detective moved toward the exit he paused and exclaimed over his shoulder. “By the way, Sharon says she quits and I say, if so much as the collar on her

shirt gets wrinkled by any of your associates, the rest of your body is going to look to your nose for comfort.”

At his car Cordway looked at the name on the paper given to him by Geno and he was surprised to read ‘Hal Dorsey’. Why would he not use an alias to cover his tracks? Either this guy was very bumbling or very smart to play the part of a bumbling first time customer for these kinds of services. Either way a conversation needed to happen with Mr. Dorsey right now.

Sunday mid-morning Hal awoke with uneasy feelings. He was disappointed his potential escapades did not work out the night before, but at the same time he was kind of relieved they did not. Still adjusting to having no-one to take care of but himself except when his kids were visiting, he just kind of meandered through his weekends without much of a schedule. Hunger pounced from nowhere so he whipped up one of his famous brunches that his kids always raved about. Waffles with peanut butter and syrup, eggs over easy, crisp bacon accompanied by coffee and orange juice tasted really good until he started remembering those mornings with his whole family when the joy of being together in a shared experience tasted more sweet than the syrup.

When his doorbell rang he realized he was in a memory trance of some kind. Opening the door to his visitor was symbolic of the new turn his life was soon going to take.

“My name is detective Cordway, can I talk with you for a few minutes?” He flashed his badge as he marched into Hal’s living room before invited.

“Sure” was the short response, but Hal’s mind was soon spinning and his blood pressure was rising as he tried to anticipate why a detective was standing in his living room.

“Please have a seat. Can I get you some coffee or juice?” Hal said as he tried to gain some control again of the situation.

“Juice would be fine, thanks” was the detective’s friendly response as he settled into the comfortable brown suede couch.

While handing the detective his juice Hal failed sounding casual as he asked, “how can I help you detective?”

Feeling no need to tip toe around the subject the detective launched into a run-down of what he knew so far. “Hal, you strike me as a nice guy. I suspect your

contact with Happy Times was a first for you, but what mystifies me is why you had to assault that poor girl that came to your room at the Marriott on Saturday night? I mean I know you are recently divorced and things have been rough lately, but why put yourself in line for some real trouble?"

"What? Hold on a minute detective, you are jumping to some wild conclusions here. Yes, I admit I contacted Happy Times and I was in room 375 last night, but the delivery driver was a no show!" Hal's fight or flight biology was in full self-protection mode, but he also knew how to sell ideas so he worked hard to have a tone that communicated honest conviction and dismay at being accused.

"So what kid party supplies were you so desperate to have in your room all alone on a Saturday night late?" Cordway stood with a menacing look at he landed the question like a punch.

Hal's eyes looked down and to the left as he tried to access the creative side of his brain, he noticed the detective saw this and knew if he tried to lie the detective would catch it. Quite amazed at how quickly he found himself cornered with no way out but the truth, he sighed and blurted out that truth. "Ok, you got me, I was expecting a different kind of delivery and she did not show up, I forgot where I went to order her on line and just went to bed and came home this morning, but I swear to you I never attacked anyone!"

The detective paused to mentally check out Hal's story with the facts he knew so far. Unfortunately there was not much to tip him one way or another except that this man in front of him was in the room the same night Sharon was attacked and he just lied to him at least once. He had Hal stand in front of him and because they looked eye to eye deduced that they were about the same height and build.

"Can I look at your computer Hal?" The detective moved to the next part of his investigation whether Hal was ready or not.

Trying not to swallow hard Hal mumbled "Sure".

It did not take long for an experienced detective to access the browsing history and find what kind of web sites this man living alone had been accessing. He knew from memory which sites had under age pictures on them. As soon as he saw one, he printed the screen with the web address listed as evidence and started to ask to look at Hal's car, but was interrupted by his cell phone vibrating. It was the crime lab which had been processing the DNA from all the samples

found in room 375 at the Marriott. They found three hairs from Sharon.

Wanting a conviction that would stick, the detective pushed on. "Let's look at the car." The detective knew Hal was beaten because he did not even as for a warrant.

"Ok" Hal said as he led the detective to his garage.

The trunk was inspected and smelled clean and looked uncluttered to Cordway. A flashlight was used to look closely for any physical evidence. Cordway did not see anything inside the trunk, but when he closed the trunk the light from his flashlight glistened for a split second on some hair by the right corner of the trunk lid. "Hah" exclaimed the pit bull as he grabbed the hair and deftly placed it in the evidence baggy. "This does not look good for you my friend. Would you do me the honor of accompanying me down to the police station so we can get to know each other better"?

Chapter 6

Jeana sipped hot chocolate with whipped cream and enjoyed being settled into a back booth at Puppies. Patty had become such a supportive force and a shoulder to cry on as she continued to deal with her loss around the explosion of her marriage and the joys of single parenting. With Rose, her own mother, exhibiting her disapproval and discomfort with her struggles by distance, Patty fit just right to fill the motherly role for her younger friend. Patty listened and sipped her tea while Jeana talked about her physical therapy for her injuries from her accident.

Jeana caught herself talking too much and was eager to hear more about Patty's past adventures; she knew how to tell stories in a way that optimism shined through no matter how dire the circumstances were. "Tell me more of your stories from the old country!"

Patty smiled at the opportunity to share the circumstances that were part of shaping her life. She leaned in just a bit and twinkled to show her mentee this was the appropriate time for the significant tale to be imparted. After warning her younger friend that the story might be a little long and a little scary, she launched into the narrative with shiny eyes and dramatic tones in her fun to listen to accent.

"I grew up in Moldova and had it was very rough and tough. My alcoholic father basically sold me into prostitution at age fifteen. At age eighteen hopeless and despondent I got sick with a high fever and my pimp wanting to keep getting a return on his investment sent her to a hospital. A volunteer at the hospital named Katrina befriended me and stuck close to me while I recovered from the fever." Patty could see by Jeana's open mouth and shocked look that she was locked in until the end of the story.

"Katrina was my friend even though she was a few years older. She knew I needed a new life far away from the insanity of trying to survive and make it at a tender age on the rough and ruthless streets. Late one night even though I felt frail we snuck out of the hospital and boarded a train for freedom in another city. We underestimated the reach and motivation of the organized crime syndicate that profited from the pain and miserable bondage of thousands of young women. At the last checkpoint before safety and freedom, we were intercepted by four thugs who started to beat Katrina for her part in helping me escape. Katrina fell to her knees and started praying out loud that God would forgive these men for what they were about to do. I still remember her peaceful smile as if she was actually seeing heaven even as they beat her. Soon conviction about what

they were doing landed hard on the thugs and their hands were bound to their sides by invisible ropes. In unison they fell to their knees and started to weep for forgiveness which Katrina gave in a powerful way.” Patty paused again and let the scene play out in Jeana’s head.

“We felt so victorious and joyful as we skipped together to a mission outreach in Romania where girls in trouble could get back on their feet. True love and security and protection ushered me into a totally different way of looking at all of life. Katrina decided to stay on with me for two more years before moving back to Moldova. That is the story of where my life changed direction.” Patty sat back and looked content and peaceful.

Jeana just sat in silence for a few seconds and tears emerged without resistance. “What kept those men from attacking more?”

“Well, Jesus of course.” Patty replied with a matter of fact tone.

If East Lansing Police Department was a teenager, it would have been teeming with a severe inferiority complex compared to the larger city facilities. Located in the middle of the block with only eight parking spaces out front, the two story twenty year old architectural dinosaur uncomfortably tried to blend in to the street and not draw attention to itself. Cordway’s desk and the interrogating rooms were on the second floor. The detective respected his suspect by not putting the handcuffs on him as they walked in the front door and up the wide worn granite staircase. Hal’s face showed he was nervous he would see someone who would start asking questions as to why he was there, but they made it to the interrogation room without incident. The detective sat with the light from the window beaming in from behind him into the eyes of his suspect like a make shift interrogation light.

“Hal, I have to be honest with you, it is not looking good for you. We already have you at the scene of the attack and if that hair I found on your car trunk comes back matching the victim you are in big trouble. Why don’t you just save me the trouble of a trial and write up your confession now. Then I can meet with the D.A. and start working on your plea. It looks like this is your first offense so they should go easy on you.”

Looking cornered and desperate Hal lashed out with all his might. “I swear upon my father’s grave that I did not attack that girl.” His nostrils flared and his eyes burned holes into the face of the stern detective. The silence in between volleys of words was interrupted by Cordway’s phone.

“Yello, Cordway here, watcha got?” “Really?” “Thanks so much.”

“Well my sincere friend, that is not good news for you, the lab confirms the hair we found on your trunk belongs to the victim. Due to the overwhelming evidence I have no choice but to arrest you for the rape of Sharon Favless.” He slapped the cuffs onto Hal’s twitching wrists, read him his rights and summoned an officer to place him in custody after giving him his phone call.

Hal felt emotionally spent and docile as he was fingerprinted. He called his lawyer Sam Foster who sounded shocked but soon moved past his surprise to give sound legal advice. “I will work to get you a bail hearing as soon as possible, but unfortunately until then you will need to stay in jail.”

The door to his cell SLAMMED hard behind him and panic hit like a firm slap. Hal had been forced to exchange his respectable suburban clothes for ugly faded navy blue jail garb. He was placed in solitary as standard procedure as a sex crime offender even though the chances other jailbirds waiting for trial would find out what he was being charged with were small.

Suddenly alone with his thoughts, the loud silence except for occasional coughs and mumbles from other cells started to make him uneasy. All he knew to do was lay on his bed in a fetal position and try to block everything out. As he inhaled and exhaled deliberately he started to hear a soft mellow voice like it was from somewhere behind him in the roof maybe. “Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest.” He turned to look for the source of the voice and all he saw was the cement blocks of the ceiling and walls. ‘Where had he heard that before?’ While trying to remember he drifted into a bit more peaceful sleep.

Stephen Dorsey received the call from Hal’s attorney letting him know his brother was incarcerated. It was harder for him to adjust to the news because the attorney could not give any details except to say he was in jail. Trying to keep his imagination in check as to what thing Hal had done to land himself in trouble he did what he had learned over the years to be the most effective response to all the curve balls that life throws our way, he prayed for his brother. After a good time of prayer with lasting over twenty minutes with Candace who was home also, he called the prayer chain leader at his church and without giving damaging details asked for urgent fervent prayer for circumstances in his brother’s life.

At 7:30 AM the noise level in the jail rose with violent shouts and clanging sounds that woke Hal to his first morning behind bars. Breakfast was slung under his door absent any warning and he devoured it without prejudice. Nerves about the future tend to burn calories at high rates. At 8:15 AM on schedule the cell door clanged open and the imposing figure of a correction officer with a two inch scar on his right cheek grunted that Hal's lawyer had arrived to talk with him. In the consulting cell Sam said "Good news the bail hearing is set for three today."

While being escorted back to his cell to wait for his hearing his officer scar face was leading him by another prisoner who for no apparent reason did not like Hal so he timed a flying elbow at just the right moment and Hal went sprawling to the floor and arose with a nice shiner on his right eye. Hal held on to shreds of hope that the color around his eye would exude an aura of toughness to any future would be attackers.

Hal was grateful to make it to his bail hearing without further incident. Stephen and Candace were present and the honorable Judge Gary Werkland presided over docket number thirty seven. Attorney Sam tried to pounce with persuasion. "Your honor the evidence in this case is very circumstantial and my client has family and ties to this community. He does not have the resources to flee much of anywhere so we humbly ask for leniency on the bail amount".

Trying to sound gracious but failing, the judge set bail at \$35,000 which meant Hal and his family had to come up with \$3500 for the bail bondsmen. Hal sat like child waiting to see the principle on a bench by the court cashier until his family returned with the money. He watched Stephen hand the envelope to the cashier with some pain as Candace provided emotional support. Hal chided himself for putting his family in this trying position.

Hal had no time to enjoy the smell of temporary freedom until trial. "What did you do?" Blurted out of Stephen's mouth before he could edit his tone and insert a greater amount of compassion.

"Brother, I swear to you with all I have that I was at that hotel, but I had nothing to do with the attack on that poor girl!" Hal gestured with his right hand like he was making the pitch of his life, because he was.

"Well, why were you there then? You live in town so you did not need a place to sleep." Candace chimed in to the action.

Hal lied and mumbled. "I just needed a night in a crisp clean room to try to clear his head." He saw from Stephen's body language that he sensed something

was not right, but then decided to let it go for now.

“Let’s get outta here and go to Rusty’s for dinner.” Candace said as she looked relieved to be out of the court room.

“I will go pick up Jessica and Brehanna from their play date and meet you two over there.” Stephen said.

Rusty’s Café was close to Stephen and Candace’s home and was a favorite. Great portions and better prices kept Rusty and his staff plenty busy serving good American fare. Stephen had known Rusty for years. A good listener and sincerely joyful person, Rusty was one of the pillars Hal had observed his big brother lean on heavily during his grieving process over the loss of dear Anna.

“Good to see you all.” Sung from Rusty’s smiling mouth as he ushered his friends Candace and Hal to a comfortable corner booth and brought them their beverages for memory. “Tina will take good care of you and give you the 20% discount.” He said like he had said that line a few times before.

“Stephen and the girls will be here soon.” Candace informed.

While the hungry weary siblings waited for Tina the waitress and their brother and the girls to arrive, they chatted about how the place had not changed much in a long time. Dark green carpet hid the dirt well and varnished wood trim surrounded the dark yellow walls and booths.

Stephen and the girls arrived and food was ordered by all. “Court will start soon, does your attorney have his strategy set?” asked Stephen in between bites of the juiciest burger in town.

“My attorney says the emphasis will be on the circumstantial nature of all the evidence. Can we change the subject and talk about something lighter?” Hal pleaded.

Soon everyone was engaged in childhood memories comparisons and the girls rolled their eyes at how old their dad and his siblings were. After sharing some wonderful cheese cake with strawberries for dessert Hal made his exit with hugs and thanks for bailing him out.

After hours at ELPD was not very exciting except for the occasional disorderly conduct arrest at any of the four local watering holes. A non-descript detective from Charlotte emerged in the doorway and ascended the steps to find out the

latest gossip about what was going on in the big city. He chummed up to his usual comrades in arms that he talked with when he was in town. After sufficient time talking about the usual nonsense, our mystery detective nonchalantly probed about any new cases with juicy details. Hal's case was top of mind because of the weird way he did not cover his tracks very well so the shop talk amongst professionals easily spilled all the details of the case against poor Hal Dorsey.

Chapter 7

The two week wait for the trial to start dragged on for Hal and his siblings. Perception of time is a tricky thing. When you are doing something you enjoy time flies by, but waiting for possible bad news drags on and on. Hal and his attorney arrived early for the 10 AM trial. Tuesdays were just as busy in the courts as any other day. The rustic courtroom resembled most courtrooms which have been seen on television except for the stain glass windows which were remnants of when the room was part of a Catholic School Chapel. Anything remotely referring to religion was sanitized away, but some nice nature scenes remained to have their colors put on display by the sunlight from outside.

The Honorable Judge Smythe Turner had presided regally over courtrooms in the city for over two decades. He moved to the bench after eight years of powerful litigation fresh out of law school. He was personable and fair and nothing like the Looney Tunes judges depicted in so many television and movie courtrooms.

Stephen and Candace slipped into their seats just in time for the all too familiar all rise. Judge Smythe took his seat while keeping his shoulders square to exude authority. "May we have opening statements please?"

The state prosecutor Carla Templet jumped to her feet and looked squarely at the jury. She rattled off the mountain of evidence against the defendant. The jury of seven women and five men which had been selected earlier, listened with furrowed brows of diligence.

"In conclusion, we will establish that Hal Dorsey is proven to be at the scene of the crime, he fits the body size and type that the victim has identified, he shows history of pornography use and infidelity and most of all we found physical evidence of the victim on his car!"

Hal bristled inside at the blunt and full disclosure of the laundry list of his faults. Even though the worst of the accusations for which he was being tried was not true, he could still feel the burning stares from his siblings on the back of his neck as they heard the expanse of things that were true but did not sound too good in the light of day in front of way too many strangers.

When gestured to by the judge, Sam confidently rose from his seat and used his body language and hand gestures to calm everyone down about the highly inflated and circumstantial case being fabricated about his client by the prosecu-

tion. “We will not only prove reasonable doubt, we will certify it.” He massaged the minds off the jury towards the side of his client for three more minutes and fully earned the \$350 per hour that Hal was paying him.

Smythe boomed “If the prosecution is ready to begin calling witnesses after a short recess we can begin.”

The recess only added to the eternity of waiting that emotionally drained Hal had already endured. After a fifteen minutes the prosecution was ready to call its first witness.

“The state calls Detective Cordway to the stand.” Once sworn in with his hand firmly placed on the old leather bound Bible, the prosecutor with precision walked the detective through the process of his investigation and why he was confident that Hal was the monster that attacked that poor girl. The jury definitely perked up at the mention of the victim’s hair being found on Hal’s trunk and the fact that he admitted to being at the same location as the scene of the crime. Images found on his computer and the approximate match in height were also convincing to the case.

Not waiting for his opponent to even sit down Sam moved with purpose across the floor in his three piece navy suit and polished black shoes to cross examine Cordway.

“Detective Cordway, thank you for your years of service to our great state and congratulations on your many convictions.” Sam said, trying to get him even a little off balance.

“You are welcome.” The detective responded in a flat unmoved tone.

“Other than the hair on my client’s car that matches the victim, is there any other physical evidence to show his alleged guilt?”

Cordway squirmed just a little and said “No, but...”

Sam cut him off and moved on to his next question. “How do you feel about the victim in this case?”

“I feel NOBODY should go through what she went through regardless of their past, the trauma these victims endure is heartbreaking.” Cordway looked right at Sharon as he said this.

“This sounds like something you have thought about a lot, does the fact you have daughters yourself play into that?”

“Yes, but no it does not affect the way I investigate the crime.”

“Did you have any other suspects?”

“No, the trail to your client was rather clear and straight”

Sam plowed forward. “Detective, is it possible that someone else with a similar physical build could have been in the same location in a different room, the victim went to the wrong room and was attacked, then when leaving the attacker planted the hair on my client’s car?”

Half way through the fishing expedition for reasonable doubt Cordway was shaking his head. “Even though the security cameras were not working, the attacker did not know that, he would not risk being seen planting evidence.”

“But detective, it is possible.” prodded Sam again.

“Yes it is possible, but in my opinion not probable.” Cordway fired back.

“Your Honor, defense is done with this witness.” Cordway returned to his seat looking confident while nodding comfort to Sharon as he passed her seat on the aisle.

Templet called her next witness Sharon to the stand. Walking as if she felt all eyes upon her, which they were. Sharon navigated her way to the stand and was sworn in.

As she wiped the tears from her eyes when she was done telling her story with the help of the attorney, the prosecutor circled in for the kill.

“Sharon, the defense may try to attack your testimony by saying you are nothing but a cheap prostitute. What do you say in response to that accusation?”

“I am not trying to make excuses for my past profession. I was desperate and vulnerable and taken advantage of, but I allowed myself to believe it was my only option when I know now it was not. Still being brutally attacked is not right no matter what you do for a living. Sure there is greater risk in that profession, but there is no justification for what was done against me. I have rights to be able to say no.”

Everyone in the jury had their moist eyes glued to this very sympathetic victim and nodded encouragement as they listened to her story.

The prosecutor let those last words hang in the air for all to digest then said “Your witness.”

Sam was fast get on Sharon's side and agreed that the crime done her was a great wrong then he probed at her certainty that Hal was the one who did this crime. "You said the room was dark and you never saw the face of you attacker, so how can you be confident my client is the person who attacked you?"

"I am not 100% sure, but I am as confident as I can be. I remember the build of my attacker and your client matches that. Why was he in the same room where I was attacked and why was my hair found on the car?"

"I am the one supposed to be asking the questions here." Sam said trying not to scowl.

"Sorry, I just am tired of this whole thing and want it to be over so I can go home." Sharon sighed.

"Witness excused."

Templet rested her case and sat looking pleased with her arms folded waiting to prepare cross examinations on the defense witnesses.

Sam started by calling Stephen to the stand. He approached the stand with an interesting amount of calmness. "Being my client's older brother you have known him all his life, in your unbiased factual knowledge, is Hal capable of committing this crime?"

"No, never." The older brother appeared calm also.

"Have you ever known my client to be demeaning to women in any way?"

"No"

"Have you ever seen him view pornography?"

"No"

"Your witness." Sam looked to the prosecution's table but not at Templet.

The opposing counsel approached Stephen with an air of respect. "Do you and your brother have a good relationship?" She nodded to encourage a response.

"Sure" Stephen liked the easy question.

"You talk about deep private stuff with each other?"

"Well, no."

“So your brother could easily hide things about himself from you couldn’t he?”

“I suppose, but...”

“The witness is excused”

Sam called Jeana to the stand. She had just arrived in the courtroom and was told she could leave as soon as she testified. The defense had convinced Hal that even though there was an affair, she could still testify to the character of Hal.

“Being my client’s ex-wife, you have known he is far from perfect, but is he capable of committing this crime?”

“Absolutely not.” Jeana pressed the ends of the fingers of one hand on the railing of the witness stand for emphasis.

“To save the prosecutor on cross examination the question, if he lied to you about an affair which ended your marriage is it possible he could have lied about other things?” Sam smirked just a bit.

“Our marriage may be over, but we are still parenting two children together. One of those kids is his beautiful daughter. He adores her and I cannot see him doing anything intentionally to hurt someone who is the apple of someone else’s eye.”

“Nothing further, your witness.”

Appearing to have no stomach to badger the very innocent ex-wife the prosecutor said, “The state has no questions for this witness.”

After the defense rested the judge called for another recess before closing arguments. By the vending machines in the court hallway Hal and his siblings tried to stay positive as they sipped hot chocolate which tasted nothing like it looked on the promotional photo on the machine.

“I thought Jeana did a really nice job for you Hal” said Candace.

Hal forced a quick smile but it soon faded under the weight of worry for what might come.

Closing arguments by both the defense and prosecution deftly recapped the facts of the case and appealed for the clear result that each attorney wanted. After very specific instructions from the judge, the jury was dismissed for deliberations.

The jury wrestled back and forth for quite a while with the facts and testimony of the case. They kept being drawn back to the physical evidence on Hal's car and his being at the scene of the crime. These facts were the consistent pull which eventually unified the twelve individuals coming from various backgrounds. Only ninety minutes of deliberation by the jury raised the eye brows of the defense.

Once everyone was called back for the verdict Hal stood when he was instructed.

"Have you come to a verdict?" The judge asked. It was obvious that they would not be back in their chairs in the jury box if that had not, but procedure is procedure.

"Will the defendant rise?" Hal and his lawyer stood and in a panic his knees felt weak as dry twigs."

"In the matter of the state verses Hal Dorsey, we the jury, find the defendant guilty of Criminal Sexual Misconduct in the first degree."

A murmur rumbled through the crowd and Hal slumped in his chair in a heap like he was thrown there as a rag doll. Judge Smythe thanked the jury for its service and dismissed them. Hal had done some research of what he might get and knew the sentencing guidelines to be five years, but he hoped that the fact that the evidence was not really strong could reduce the sentence.

"Hal Dorsey, on the charge of Criminal Sexual Conduct in the first degree, I hereby sentence you to four years in minimum security prison with the opportunity for parole no sooner than three years. Bailiff, please remand the defendant to custody." When the gavel pounded for the final time, a strong discouraging mood settled in a deeper and heavier way upon the spirit of Hal and his family.

Chapter 8

Harry Connet was doing his usual reporting for the East Lansing Times and had been following the case along with many others. He quickly assembled the details for the case and verdict and submitted it to his editor who proofread it and got the story ready for printing the next day. Other internet news outlets had Hal's picture and the verdict plastered on their sites.

Being in marketing, or at least when he used to be, Hal knew the reason people love reality TV and the reason the Roman gladiator coliseums were packed is the same. Bad news travels fast and sells, sells, sells. It is so easy and addicting to use the misfortunes of others to make ourselves feel like we are not that bad, when we know deep down we are all fooling ourselves.

Stephen and Candace sniffed as they said goodbye to Hal as he was taken away. They promised to visit him soon and provide personal items that would be allowed for him to receive. He was handcuffed and taken through the doors where the public could not go. He was fingerprinted and changed into one of those orange colored jump suits that have been so glamorized by our media. Hal felt no glamour. His belongings were bagged and labeled and would accompany him to his final destination.

Hal responded and complied with all demands placed on him, but he felt like he was coming out of sedation from a surgery and everything was kind of foggy and distant and painful.

A uniformed police officer was about to put Hal in the car to transport him to Parnell Corrections Facility and detective Cordway grabbed Hal's shoulder and said "See you in 3 years punk."

Hal jerked his shoulder free and said "You are wrong about me!"

The drive to Parnell in Jackson was actually peaceful, just the sound of the tires on the road was Hal's only company. Once at Parnell he was checked in and given basic toiletries and clothes and ushered to his cell in block C second floor.

Hal's heart skipped a beat when he entered his cell. He could not miss his cell mate Floyed Smith. Floyed was 6'4 weighed 330 and all muscle, he was African American and appeared to Hal to be proud of it. He had various battle scars and

tattoos on his body. Everything about Floyed from the outside told Hal that he was in big trouble.

The door to the cell slammed behind Hal with no ceremony or introductions. Knowing his best option was to try to be friendly, Hal took a deep breath and forced a smile, stuck out his hand and said "Hello, my name is Hal."

What happened next was a surprising gift. Floyed smiled to show off his gap between his two front teeth and said "Get that hand away from me man, I need a HUG!!" Without waiting for a response his new cell mate stepped in to give the shaking new guy a comforting manly non-gay bear hug.

Hal blinked and smiled and internally took a deep breath of relief. Right away he liked his new cell mate.

"Forgive me man, take a seat, where you from?" Floyed queried.

One benefit of being in prison is time. No rat race schedule to keep you so busy you cannot really take the time to connect with another human being.

For two hours Floyed listened as Hal told his story. Formerly being in marketing Hal knew how listen and ask questions to get people to trust him and like him, but all too often it was just a game or ruse to get what he wanted. Floyed was different. He appeared to Hal to truly care about what Hal had to say. No agenda, no bull just pure friendship.

Time flew by until the friends were interrupted for supper. Floyed showed Hal where the dining area was. Hal felt eyes upon him from all angles as he was getting in line to get his food. He had heard rumors about things that happen to sex offenders in prison. He also wondered if one third of the people inside with him were sex offenders could the rumors really be true.

His answer came in the form of a resounding smack on the back of his head by a tray. He whirled around to see a snarling Latino giant filled with tattoos and scars named Pedro holding the offending tray. He heard whistles blowing and the sound of running guards rushing to break up the fight which would not be good for the new blood. In a blur of speed Floyed hit Pedro smack on the jaw so hard he left his feet and was on the floor unconscious before the guards arrived to see what the ruckus was all about. When the guards asked what happened and why Pedro was out cold as the floor, everyone said that he slipped and fell hitting his head on a table.

Floyed asked his new friend to join him at the Band of Brothers Table. Hal was no dummy, he said yes. Six men sat laughing at a table in the corner of the din-

ing area. Floyed introduced everyone to Hal. Different races seemed to have no problem hanging together at this special table. Martel and Simon were Floyed's size and color and would have jumped into the fray if Floyed had needed their help. Julio and Paulo were Latino and medium build but lightning fast. Julio had more scars and tattoos than Paulo. Sengh was Hmong and quiet most of the time, but when he spoke it was either hilarious or profound or both. He knew Tai Kwon Do so nobody messed with him. Stan was a mirror in build and color to Hal, he seemed to be newest to the group and still feeling out his new sphere of influence. Floyed kept smiling and looked right at home as he finished the intros.

The two victors from battle sat down to applause and praises for the punch that ended the threat to Hal, but never really existed in the eyes of the guards. Hal felt really safe. Soon the eight were involved in the serious business of telling stories that made each other laugh so hard they wanted to cry. Time flew until the signal to return to their cells broke up the party.

As the two conquering warriors returned to their cell Hal began to tear up with gratefulness for the protection he felt in the middle of a very scary place. While rounding the last corner to get to their cell he heard a soft clear voice from above and behind him say "He prepares a table for me in the presence of my enemies." He stopped and looked to see where the voice came from and no one was there.

"Did you hear that?" Asked Hal.

"Hear what?" replied Floyed.

"Nothing, I guess."

Back in their cell at around seven there was nothing to do except talk or read or sleep until time for lights out at ten. Both the cell mates took a nap to digest their food which actually did not taste too bad to Hal.

At about 8:15 PM Hal's curiosity about how he had the good fortune to have such a great cell mate bubbled to the surface and he had to ask Floyed about his story.

Floyed smiled at the chance to tell his story, even though it had to not be all great because here he was smack dab in the middle of a bunch of convicts at Parnell. That fact did not seem to bother him at all, which made Hal even more curious.

Floyed settled in to his bunk looked beyond his confines to tell his story. “Man I grew up in the roughest part of Atlanta. My dad was popped by a drive by when I was only six. He was great and never involved in no gangs but was just in the wrong place at the wrong time as a bystander. My mom didn’t know how to deal with the loss neither did my older brother Jayson who was nine. Mom tried to put on a strong act for us kids, but she was lost in the bottom of a bottle and soon we were basically raising ourselves. Jayson taught me how to achieve self-release of sexual tension and I was hooked from the start.”

Hal gulped at how easily this big strong man factually disclosed the exact nature of his wrongs.

“We were both ballers in high school and we could drop the dimes man. When Jayson was a senior and I was a sophomore we won the 4A state title.”

“Good for you.” Chimed in Hal.

“We were expected to do great things in the future. Girls threw themselves at us all the time so we thought he had the world by the tail. Money, fame and stardom were all in our grasp so much we could taste it.” Floyed smiled as he remembered.

“But Hal, you know what? Every night before my head hit the pillow, I felt empty.” Floyed shook his head.

“What happened?” Hal asked while trying not to sound nosy, but wanting the whole scoop.

“Our dreams as high school stars were crushed in no time flat. Jaysen had a terrible knee injury which ended his career at the ripe old age of eighteen. I finished my high school career in basketball but my grades were way too low to get any scholarships and I did not know how to control my temper so turning pro was a long shot that grew longer every day. Finally I tried to just reset and start over by getting a regular job. I was able to get jobs all right but keeping them was harder because of my angry blow ups or inappropriate comments with co-workers.”

Hal tried hard not to move to interrupt Floyed’s flow.

“My prospects for new jobs kept going down and down. I just felt like I was going crazy. Jaysen got his self into gangs and asked me to help him out with an easy job that I knew had parts of it that were wrong. Of course the job went horribly wrong and I got busted for possession with intent to sell and assaulting an officer. I was sentenced to six years here at Parnell. When I arrived here I was

scared out of my mind but somehow I was protected and helped by the Band of Brothers and invited to start learning a different way to live life.” Floyed paused to let his story settle into Hal’s thinking process.

“You see Hal, I now know that everything happens for reason because God is able to take all the junk in my life and use it as the raw materials of creating an amazing story of his great love.” Floyed nodded and smiled as he closed in for the kill.

“Oh no, now you are starting to sound like my brother, I grew up in the church and it is just a bunch of people pretending to be spiritual so they can pat themselves on the back about how great they are.” Hal said shaking his head while rubbing the back of it with his hand.

Floyed paused and took in Hal’s body language and facial expressions as his words fired back at him almost as an assault of sorts.

Floyed chose his soft and caring words with deep dependence on his personal Savior. “I agree that in lots of churches and even outside churches there are people who call themselves followers of Jesus who are just playin’ games to try to impress people, but there has to be the chance of a real faith that brings about real change because that is what has happened to me.” He tapped on his heart as he kept watching Hal’s every reaction.

Hal appeared to be partially swayed from his position, mostly by the utter peace he saw on his new friend’s face.

“Band of Brothers stood up for me and helped me thru some really hard times when I got here and because of them I know there is the possibility to have a no fake relationship with the most amazing and loving person there is, Jesus Christ the Son of God.” Floyed smiled more as he talked.

Hal felt torn between two emotions, running away screaming, and hugging Floyed. He was intrigued by this talk of a real relationship with anybody, let alone Jesus Christ God’s only Son.

Reading Hal’s face, Floyed the evangelist felt the Holy Spirit lead him to share one of his favorite verses from Colossians. “Hal, In Colossians chapter two it talks about being cheated from the reality of what we can have in Christ. Verse 8-11 says ‘beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and NOT according to Christ. For in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And you are complete in him.’ You see partner, until I accessed for myself the fullness of the Godhead bodily, I had nothing of any lasting value in my life.”

A pleasant peaceful presence started to nibble around the edges of Hal's heart. He wanted to move but couldn't. He felt his heart pulsing a little faster and extra saliva in his mouth.

Floyed kept going. "I love Colossians 2:16 and 17 which says 'So let no one judge you in food or drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ'. Hal, I suspect your life has been similar to mine. You have heard a lot of theory or shadow about how to live right and be good in your own strength, but without the substance or reality of the true pure Christ in your life, you are just as lost as I was."

Now the light bulb was starting to come on in Hal's weary heart. 'Is it really possible to have real access to the substance of the Godhead bodily? This was way past empty shallow religion.' Hal thought with his brain at a buzz.

"Dear brother Hal, I encourage you to kick the tires of the substance of the reality of God's love for you. God is big enough to win your heart if you give him a chance. I am not going to pressure you into some spiritual hyped hoopla experience. Just start talking to God and give him permission to work in your life and amazing things are gonna happen." He paused again and watched again.

"Wow, I am tired, I need to crash." With one motion the peaceful truth speaker rolled under his covers and drifted to sleep.

Hal's head whirled as he sat with just the sound of his heart beat on his bed and tried to process all of what he had heard and experienced on his first day at Parnell. As he breathed in and out in a restful way, a sweet feeling relaxed his face. In soft clear words he heard the same voice as before say "I really AM that amazing you know. Do I have permission to work in your life?"

Different kind of tears filled this broken man's eyes as he relented to the only one who could and would forgive all his sins and radically transform him into a true follower. Yahweh, the Great I AM, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords took up a new residence in another heart in a simple cell in a simple prison in the middle of the country. In heaven the best party ever was just getting warmed up.

Chapter 9

The next morning Jeana was sitting in her bay window basking in the glow and warmth of the rising sun accompanied by her favorite chai tea sweetened with honey. She had been learning so much from Patty and benefited so much from their weekly meetings to share and laugh and process life together.

Soon in her dealings with Patty she just knew she needed to start a consistent time of Bible reading and prayer, not out of some monk like obligation to garner spiritual brownie points. Rather she just loved the way Patty talked about God and his Word as if they really meant something to her and Jeana wanted the same for herself.

She felt toasty and snuggly until a flashback of how she and Hal used to snuggle on the couch early in their marriage tried to send a chill of loneliness down her spine. She shuddered a little then refocused back on her devotional from Psalms 40. 'I waited patiently on the Lord and He inclined to me and heard my cry.' It sounded really comforting that God paid attention to everything that came her way. She wondered about inclined and used the dictionary on her phone to look it up. The definition said something like 'to bend or move toward something.' Used in a sentence if a person is inclined to eat apples they are more likely to eat apples.

She thought, 'If God inclines to me and hears my cry then he must really like me.' She started to let her imagination go with the idea of how much she loved her kids and would do anything for them to have what they need. When they cried her first instinct was to bend to hug them and cup their cheeks and make it all better. Somewhere in her heart she heard the most sincere and caring voice say "You love your kids but you are flawed, I AM perfect so how much more do I incline to you and love you perfectly? ... Go visit Hal."

Jeana was surprised and pleased at the same time by this still small voice speaking to her. She remembered her Sunday school classes when she was a kid and God spoke to people all the time. She somehow just knew as long as the speaking was consistent with God's inspired Word that she could just lean in and enjoy God loving on her. She also knew not to rely on the still small voice for stock tips.

Rose interrupted her musings with a yawning "What is for breakfast mom?"

Soon the duties of prepping her kids for school took most of her attention, but

she did feel a little extra pep in her step as she loved on her kids.

Detective Cordway stopped to visit Sharon as a courtesy to make sure she felt good about the result of the trial. She had started working at Rusty's Café due to a glowing but firm recommendation from a certain well respected detective.

"How is the new job going?" He probed with pride.

"Great, thanks again for the recommendation." Sharon paused and glowed while keeping her eyes on her tables.

"My wife baked you some cookies."

"You are gonna have to stop her or I will gain ten pounds. Are all the detectives this nice to people that visited a certain room 385 at certain hotel?"

"You mean room 375 right?"

"Oh yeah, right 375"

"Anyway," Cordway said. "Glad you are doing well, please call if you need anything." He left with satisfaction on his face, feeling good that a wrong had been righted as well as could be expected.

Candace was in the home stretch of her work day at East Lansing Pet Clinic. She did not like the part of her job associated with putting down animals, but it was in the job description and provided regular reminders to the truth that life is but a vapor.

Her afternoon appointment was to assist in the putting down of Cuddles a fifteen year old Birman cat belonging to an equally cute eight year old girl with pigtails having to let go because her huggable feline friend was declining and suffering with no cure in sight.

The wide eyed girl and her mom said their goodbyes together and sniffed as the vet injected the fatal dose and the life draining like the movement in a stream to stillness could be observed and experienced. Candace was always moved at how different the cats looked and felt when there was no more breath in them. Easily she was reminded of how different her dad looked when he left this world. Holding back her tears was not an option. Simple prayers for comfort and peace

ran through her mind and did provide some soothing.

Hal awoke to the new and totally different rest of his life with a slight jolt as Floyed started his day with rigorous exercise in a rather confined space. “How did you sleep?” was grunted out of his mouth in between sit-ups.

“Good, what time do we get breakfast?” Hal asked while rubbing his eyes.

“In about an hour.”

Hal joined his friend in the work out and enjoyed the flow of sweat and good clean manly fellowship. After taking turns getting clean in the shower they enjoyed the fact that they did not have to worry about what clothes to wear to impress their peers in this alternative society. Gaudy orange had a way of equalizing all delusions of a fashion pecking order.

Clean and ready with fifteen minutes to spare until breakfast while each was sitting on their bed, Floyed grabbed his Bible and started to quietly read. Hal wanted to do the same but he did not have Bible.

“What you reading?” Hal asked while craning his neck to try and read upside down.

“Romans 15:13, May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Floyed chirped with a peaceful grin.

“Wow that sounds great, I sure feel different and peaceful since last night.”

“Really, what happened?” Floyed’s eyes danced with the anticipation that he was about to hear some great news.

“Well, it’s kind of hard to put into words, but I just felt God tapping on my heart saying he wanted to forgive me for all my sins and I said yes to him.” Hal was surprised how the words just flowed from his mouth.

Floyed’s smile grew big enough to go all the way around his large bald head and he jumped up and said “I need another hug brother.”

Tears welled up again in Hal’s eyes as he felt so respected and loved by God and one of his faithful servants in orange obscurity.

Everyone knows Billy Graham and James Dobson and God has used them

greatly in reaching many, but God has the same intense approval for all of his one on one messengers who impact people in very personal and practical ways every day.

“Let’s eat.” exclaimed Floyed as he turned to lead his new mentee to breakfast as their cell door buzzed open just as they approached it because Floyed had his internal clock finely tuned to their schedule.

At the Band of Brothers table for breakfast Floyed could not wait to spill the beans about their new member. Spirit filled respect helped him wait for just the right time to ask Hal “So Hal, you wanna share what happened last night?”

With a contented smile Hal recounted his story to the guys and everyone whooped and cheered just loud enough to not get in trouble with the guards. Then Hal was indoctrinated quickly into the favorite card game of the brotherhood.

The card game Oh Phooey was originally named something much less clean before one of the volunteers who visited Parnell changed the name while teaching the guys to play.

Soon they were engrossed in the challenge of making their bids and then laughing and groaning with each varying result. In between hands good encouraging and friendly banter reigned supreme.

Occasionally a story that just had to be told in length would delay the game for a few minutes, but they were in no hurry since they had free time until 10 AM anyway.

Simon could spin a yarn better than anyone and launched into a true tale. “I was knocking on doors selling food items trying to make ends meet near Detroit. I was still learning and a rookie in my twenties. I pulled into a driveway of a fancy house to try to make a sales call to add to my route and before I could even get out of the truck a huge black dog came barking and baring its teeth toward the truck. Behind the dog, ran a middle aged angry women still in her robe with curlers in her hair and a cigarette magically staying stuck to her bottom lip as she screamed at me to not get out or the dog would bite me.”

“That must have been scary?” Hal could not keep himself from engaging in the story even though he was the newbie.

“Oh yeah it was.” Replied Simon as he showed total ease with the question. “I was talking through the small crack in the window of the truck and still started to try my pitch. I did not get three words out and she cut me off as she spit

words and her Cigarette out of her mouth at the same time. ‘Boy, you better get off my property or I will call the cops, you hear!’ I knew better than to linger any longer so I whipped around and exited the property fast, but not too fast so she would think I was afraid.”

“Man that is crazy, how did you put up with that abuse?” Floyed vented as he shook his head.

“Just wait the story is not over.” Simon’s face showed that he could not wait for his friends to know what he knew. “I went to the next house down the road. This house was the exact opposite of where I had just come from in every way. The paint on the outside walls was faded and the roof had a slight sag to it. There was an old rusty pick-up truck in the short driveway with a proudly displayed gun rack boasting three shot guns. A bearded man in his forties stood next to his truck smiling to show off his missing tooth count so anyone could tabulate it. This man was very friendly and soon we were having fun chatting about nothing in particular. Somehow the subject of the snooty neighbor with the mean dog came up. With boyish charm the scraggly neighbor said. ‘Couple month back she had another dog that was goin’ all over the neighborhood buggin’ everybody.’ He paused to look to make sure no one could overhear his secret, spat some chewing tobacco on the dirt and leaned in to me and said, ‘I SHOT that dog and buried it out back! She came and asked me if I had seen her dog I just shook my head.’”

Every mouth at the table opened in shock as the story kept unfolding like paper maps we used to use before guidance systems on our phones made them obsolete.

Simon waited for just the right moment to land the final crowning piece of the story. “Then this humble man in front of a shack said, ‘you know what, I am just waitin’ for that other nuisance dog to come over here and I’m gonna shoot IT too!’ I just about lost it right there.”

The table erupted with good healthy clean laughter, the kind that is good for your heart and is supposed to make you live longer. Simon said with a tearful smile, “Sometimes God fights your battles for you before you even know it.”

The Band of Brothers finished up their card game and dispersed back to their rooms with smiles of contentment on their faces.

Around eleven all the inmates were involved in some kind of work for fifty cents per hour. Half the money went for restitution for victims of crimes. For the next ninety minutes Floyed and Hal worked together in the small manufacturing area that produced various small machine parts which were in high demand in

local companies. Performing repeated motion work allows one's brain to kind of settle down and enjoy the process. Time flew with amazing speed and the two workers were almost disappointed to be released to get cleaned up for lunch.

At lunch Hal was invited to join the Band for the nuts and bolts, meat and potatoes of what they were all about. From two to four they had clearance to meet together and continue the work on real life transformation.

“You see Hal, It has always amazed me that before I was here at Parnell and in high school, if someone wanted to come in to the school and share the good news about how God could change my life, they would not be allowed to do so. But now, in a government correctional facility after I tried the if it feels good do it philosophy and my life shattered, now the government has no problem with letting God have a chance to change my life. The first place we should look for real life and change is often the last place we look in our society.” Hal nodded in agreement as he felt his anticipation grow to levels that rivaled feelings related to opening gifts at Christmas as a kid, to see what would happen at two.

The Chapel at Parnell was average size seating about one hundred. Green carpet that could have worked in a psychedelic lava lounge forty years ago barely helped the space feel a little more spiritual. Equally old pews lined up in two rows with the wooden pulpit and upright, off tune piano up front. On the one side there were two meeting rooms for smaller gatherings and one of those rooms called Resurrection was the regular assigned room for the Band of Brothers meeting on Wednesdays and Thursdays every week.

Hal's palms got sweaty as he sat in his hard metal chair. Simon started things off with some introductions in case anyone forgot names learned before and went over the mutually agreed upon ground rules.

“Our main purpose is to get outside what is inside so we can be comforted, transformed and healed. Our past and present struggles are just like an infected wound which must be cleaned out otherwise the infection will kill us.” Simon nodded as he spoke words he had spoken many times.

“Basically the rules of the group are about protecting each member from anything that would make them hesitant to be real and authentic in their talking about their life.” Floyed interjected as he looked at Simon.

“No interrupting or fixing advice is allowed. We usually have plenty of time for everyone to share and get feedback so timing is rarely needed. We always pray

together at the end, of course you don't have to pray out loud." Simon continued as he picked up the mantle again. "Basically, this is not a counseling session, but rather a band of brothers doing life together."

For Hal's benefit three of the men shared their stories from the beginning cataloging the insanity of looking for life and love in all the wrong places. Some struggled with alcohol, some with drugs, some with sex and some food. "All these addictions are various shades of the same color which is trying to fill the void in life that only the real true God does and will fill in so much more of a satisfying way." Paulo summarized and finished. "You see, James chapter one is very clear. 'Do not be deceived, every good gift and every PERFECT gift comes from above.' For me learning to feast on the love of God in a way that fills my deepest longings as his dear child is the key to real living."

"So Hal, if you are comfortable, would you like to share your story?" asked Floyed in a casual, non-threatening way.

Hal hesitated as he felt his heart beat and breathing increase like lightening. Then he heard that same still peaceful personal voice say "My dear child. You are safe here. Let it all out."

Once he opened his mouth and started the truth speaking, he enjoyed a new sweet beginning of a holy addiction to getting outside what is inside and being healed in solid tangible ways that have teeth in relationships.

"I just never felt normal growing up, of course no one knows what normal is. I thought I was the only who was so aware of girls and what they thought of me so young. I remember being captivated by female beauties on the television shows which personified how I wanted to feel but never could. All through my childhood and teenage years the physical contact lines that everybody thinks about but never talked about when I was around were crossed by me and against me by others. I always wanna look and touch even though I know it is wrong and it never satisfies me. It doesn't matter whether it is looking at pictures or movies or having my head on a swivel everywhere I go I cannot stop this insanity." Tears needed no help working their way down Hal's red face. He paused expecting to see condemnation from the faces in the circle. Instead he only saw nods of understanding and support telling him to keep going. Now he was gushing like Old Faithful at Yellowstone Park.

"I lost my virginity as a teenager and it was nothing at all like the movies glamorized it to be. I stashed filth on my computer and in my home even while married. I had an affair, almost two because of my runaway ego. Because I was looking for a good time at the Marriott in East Lansing, I got framed for rape

and I am stuck here in Parnell instead of being able to see my lovely kids at least some.” He paused to rest and think how to come to a close.

“I have been deceived by all the stuff of this life and I don’t want to go there anymore because it never satisfies me.” Hal was done talking for today.

His hands were in his face and he started to sob deep sobs of regret and repentance. Most of his new brothers wiped empathetic tears from their eyes as they related to Hal’s story. After letting the silence settle in for a while, Floyed stood and walked to Hal and put his hand on his shoulder.

“Thank you for having the courage to share your story. The movies depict courage all wrong. Being honest about our lives is the most courageous thing we can ever do.” He rubbed Hal’s shoulder just a bit with manly tenderness. “Do you personally accept the complete forgiveness of Jesus Christ whom God sent to die to pay the price for all that stuff you just said?”

“I think I did yesterday, but to make sure now, yes, I do”

Sengh jumped to his feet and pumped his fists and said, “That was awesome dudes.”

Joyful and surprised laughter broke out in the group so loud it could be heard in the chapel through the door.

“True transformation is serious fun.” exclaimed Simon as he wiped his face. “Remember the process of putting to use our forgiveness in Christ has many personal applications over our lives, but I am sure Jesus is very happy he only had to die once to secure it. Applying forgiveness to our lives is a constant daily process.”

Hal felt such relief, like a huge burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He noticed his breathing had even become easier. He now realized he had always been buying into the lie that if he really disclosed all of his ugliness of character people would run from him screaming in horror. Now, in this sweetly safe sanctuary with these men he just raised the curtain on a whole bunch of filth and nobody even flinched because they had all been there too in one form or another.

Simon felt lead to share a favorite verse. “1 Corinthians 10:13 says ‘There has no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that you may be able to bear it.’ People seem to skip the common to man part. We so easily think we are the only ones who struggle with a given issue or sin, when instead knowing we are not alone

frees us up to effectively battle the temptations with God's help and the help of others.”

A few other guys shared until their time was close to an end and they bantered with each other, closed in prayer and returned to their cells. Hal knew deep down he was headed in a totally different direction.

Chapter 10

Sharon's still very free attacker whistled as if he had no cares in the world as he headed home from work at the Charlotte Police Department. He had been a detective in vice squad for eight years. The sexual abuse he endured growing up grinded to a halt at age fourteen when his step mother left his dad for greener pastures that looked exactly like a splashy oil tycoon in Texas with money to lavish her with. He always rebuked people in his thoughts when they talked in sanitary statistical terms about most abuse being from male adults against boys and girls. 'What a joke, if you only knew what happens to me!' Often crossed his mind.

Nerdy and very alone, he tried to navigate the horrific high school scene with absolutely no coolness chips to bring to the table. Every day was a battle ground of trying to push through the waves upon waves of personal value stripping assaults at every turn. Academics were no problem, but everything else was a minefield. Suicide was contemplated pretty much every day.

Physical release was the only place he felt safe so naturally he became very compulsive with all genres of porn. He was failed in epic proportions by his public school which somehow did not feel it was a health issue for women to at least give boys being formed into men the information that some documented research studies existed that showed a link between use of porn and violent crimes against women.

Even if he was exposed to these studies and tried to slow down the freight train of his lust it would not have helped, but not giving him any caution as a child was like removing the brakes completely from that train. The reality which never even reached the doorway of his mind was the truth that not one of his rape victims ever received any comfort from the fact that they were a statistic that helped somehow shape one educational philosophy or another. They just hurt.

Blooming late in college and keeping his hidden addiction safely tucked away as the reward carrot that helped him make it through each tough day, he graduated and moved through the academy with honors. Once on the force at Charlotte PD he ascended with skill to vice squad detective when a vacancy in the department became available.

Soon his secret life of lust wanted to come out and play more and more as he was around the junkies and prostitutes every day. Under the surface he envied and resented the rapists he saw being booked and printed because they had the

real power over women he yearned to be able to partake of. Rape for him was about rage and the power of taking back, not sex.

The proverbial kid in the candy store, this detective could hand pick his locations and victims and knew all the ways to cover his tracks so investigations always stayed cold from his identity and crimes.

He made it home safely with one stop for his favorite frozen pizza and six-pack of beer and latest so-called adult mag.

At the exact same time that Hal and his friends were enjoying a breakthrough at Parnell, the reason Hal was incarcerated at all was walking through the door from the garage with the bag from the store in his hands. Out of nowhere the detective rapist experienced sharp chest pain and he fell on his ceramic kitchen floor with a thud. The contents of his bag sprawled across the floor in a messy heap. The defective detective lay there for a few moments taking deep breaths and hoping for the pain to subside.

As the pain left him like a reluctant nosy house guest he stood holding his shoulder and reached to pick up the magazine and the contents of the bag. His spine chilled and tingled as he heard a firm, low booming voice from behind him say. "Be sure your sin will find you out Marty."

Hal and Floyed played some chess and chatted in their cell while they waited for supper. Soon they were back with their brothers at the table laughing and sharing their lives together. Hal remembered with joy his past mealtimes with his family when younger. For a few moments his heart ached to be with his family again. Then someone got his attention with another story and his glow of time with his brothers returned. He compared his current experience at this mealtime with his past and liked the improvements that the real presence of the real Jesus brought.

More chess followed supper and the time flew to bed time. Floyed and Hal were evenly matched in chess so the mental challenge was quite intense. The pillow felt good. Floyed prayed to himself for growth in his new friend and others who were heavy on his heart.

Hal followed old patterns of living and tried to just go to sleep. Patterns of thinking get set in deep in our spirit so retraining is not a simple or automatic process. Hal's past patterns had former images of lust he had seen through the years dancing around in his head. Soon he could not stop the inevitable physical

release and was certain he did not like the yucky feelings he had soon after.

He tossed and turned feeling terrible and trying to sleep. Soon the old accuser called Satan started to bombard his mind with lies like, “You think you had a life changing experience with some higher being, but here you are doing the same junk you did before, what is wrong with you? You might as well do it again while you are at it.” Hal could feel the shameful disdain and heaviness of the accusation.

Knowing he did not want to feel this way anymore, he had to talk with someone. “Floyed are you awake?”

“I am now.” Floyed responded with no judgment in his tone.

“I am feeling kinda slimy because I just did something I used to do and I don’t want to do it again.”

Floyed quickly sat up in his bed and said “Good for you for saying something. We are as sick as our secrets.”

In a second Floyed was sitting next to Hal on his bed and he launched into an exhortation that Hal would never forget and often repeat.

“The same thing happened to me quite a few times after I decided to follow Jesus.” Floyed spoke with an encouraging tone. “What I am going to tell you was what meant so much to me when Simon said it to me.”

Hal settled in to his folded over pillow so he could see Floyed’s face better.

“Grace is amazing, if it was not Grace, it would NOT be amazing.” Floyed looked excited and ready to burst. “Sit back and listen well to the secret to victory over all types of lust my dear friend.” Floyed’s voice tickled Hal’s ears.

“Weebles wobble but they don’t fall down.” Floyed paused for effect.

“What?” Hal was confused.

“You heard me. Because of the Amazing Grace of God we can be just like the classic ‘Weeble’ toys. They have a weighted rounded base and no matter how many times you knock them flat they ALWAYS come right back up. We need to know deeply that every time we move forward in obedience to what God is calling us into, there will be resistance from the enemy Satan who does not want us to be more and more transformed and therefore more dangerous for God.”

Now Hal nodded as the light started to go on in his mind and heart.

Floyed was just getting warmed up. “In 2 Corinthians 12:9 after Paul who was mister super early church leader had asked God three times to remove his own thorn in the flesh, he recites God’s personal intimate response. ‘My grace is sufficient for you (Paul), for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ That is enough to fry my noodle, but he says more. ‘Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.’ Hal, can you imagine anyone ever gladly boasting about their weakness?”

“You see Hal, weakness, sickness, frailty and personal pain is good. When we think we are strong we don’t ask for help and we stay stuck in our junky behavior.”

Floyed pounded away some more at self-sufficiency by quoting 1 John 1:8-10 “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.”

Hal was a sponge soaking in every word.

“The layers of our self-protective shells that we think are keeping up our appearances as good upstanding Mid-American Christians are actually a prison keeping us trapped from admitting our needs which God is more than willing and able to soak sopping wet with his Grace and totally clean them white as snow.” Floyed kept going as Hal allowed him to.

“Being a Weeble means no matter how bad I feel, or how much my pride makes me want to run and hide like Adam and Eve did in the garden of Eden, I keep coming back to God through his Grace and confessing my sin and talking with others about my sin. Every time I do that I am just like a Weeble that someone is trying to punch out. Every time they knock me down I pop right back up and give them a shiner.” Floyed swayed back and forth to illustrate his point with his body.

“Prayer is the best popping back up weapon we have. Praying for people we have harmed in the past: Praying for people we are tempted to lust after: Praying for people who have hurt us: Praying for people trapped in the drug industry, porn industry, trafficking industry and on and on.” Floyed did the counting on his fingers motion as if he could go all night.

“Every time we are tempted we battle with the truth of God’s Word and praying that Word into the lives of the very people we are having trouble forgiving, or having trouble not lusting after and so on. Whenever we do this we pop back up and discourage the enemy instead of him discouraging us.” Floyed smiled again

at the ironical turn around.

“Speaking the truth about what is really going on is the only way we break the cycles of our past. Good for you Hal because you have done that right now!”

Hal breathed easily again as he processed his friend’s words. His face began to reflect peace.

Floyed was not done. “Everyone who is a true follower of Jesus has done their own version of the Peter’s denial of Jesus before he was crucified. We are feeling so blessed and grateful from a breakthrough that God has accomplished in our lives and BAM the counter attack from Satan knocks us over and we fail and fall in some area. It hurts so bad because we want to show God our love and loyalty by following him and doing great things for him, but the truth is that in our weakest most painful place as we put to use his amazing grace, God loves our contrite broken heart so much he cries!” “Remember our weakness makes God’s Grace perfect or ‘complete’. Many people cannot get over their own ego so they follow the master ego hog, Satan, right to hell.”

Hal frowned for a few seconds and said. “It is kind of tricky, because I can so easily be proud of my humility as I compare myself to others.”

“Exactly” smiled Floyed. “The key is learning to walk step by step humbly depending on God for everything.” “Micah 6:8 says at the end, ‘what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’ We are all walking on the slipperiest ice you can see as we try to follow God, when we start running and flying high and think we got these spirituality things down pat, we can slip and slide and wipe out so easily. But when we walk humbly and lowly following God as he leads, we can take baby steps and inch by inch violently and in reality take territory for God’s kingdom and for his glory.”

“Hal, one thing we learn around here very quick is ‘ask for help and help when asked’ do I have your permission to pray with you?” Floyed probed.

“Absolutely” was Hal’s relieved response.

“Lord, thank you for your mercy and grace which is amazing. Right now in the name of Jesus Christ whose blood covers our sins, we ask that you specifically forgive what Hal just did. We claim your promises that you have removed that sin as far as the east is from the west. Help Hal and I to keep getting back up and humbly walking as your dear children. We rebuke the accusations that the enemy wants to bring from our pasts. We say because of Jesus death and resurrection for us we are pure and holy and sweetly forgiven. Help us sleep well in

your precious peace. Amen”

Hal’s wiped tears from his eyes and smiled a peaceful smile. Floyed glowed also, grateful to be humbly used by God.

They both had the best night of sleep ever as they took one more step in learning to in reality rest in the tender loving and merciful arms of the creator of their souls.

Chapter 11

Sharon was enjoying the good exercise and mental challenge of keeping five tables happy at the same time at her new employer. Rusty was a good boss who expected hard work, but knew how to keep things fun at the same time. He was always doing little extra nice things to communicate he really cared for his employees. Mistakes in the kitchen were shared equally and he made sure there were plenty of opportunities for sampling of new entrees.

Her shift finished between nine and ten at night but she stayed until about eleven to finish up the side work and roll her silverware. While rolling her silverware she sat in the front corner booth hidden from most of the dining population. Rusty sat safe across from her for a while and passed the time with pleasant banter as she worked. He rolled a few sets of silverware every once in a while and did it so fast his hands blurred like one of those super heroes.

At just the right moment of good clean friendly conversation, Rusty dropped a bomb of a question that got Sharon thinking. “Sharon, have you ever considered entering into a personal saving relationship with the Jesus Christ who loves more than is humanly possible?”

While she was trying to think of an answer to change the subject, Rusty was called back into the kitchen to answer a question. As she left the restaurant she headed for her car parked in the best lit place in the parking lot. Before she could get half way to her car Rusty came running out and provided safe escort to her care.

“Have a good night” he said as he glinted and went back inside. While letting her car idle for second before leaving, her mind drifted back to the question posed earlier by her smiling and gentle boss. As she pulled out of the parking lot the fullest brightest moon she had ever seen seemed to be playfully dangling and shining bright just for her to see.

Stephen showed up at Parnell early for visiting hours. He wanted to be the first one in the drab and depressing visiting area to maximize his time with his brother. While he waited fifteen minutes early for the 11 AM visiting time to begin, he was aware of snarly nagging shame messages in the corners of his spirit lying to him with thoughts like. ‘Everybody here knows you are the brother of a convicted rapist, they probably think you are a perverted deviant also.’

Hal's older brother shuddered and wiggled his shoulders not enough for others to notice. Due to lots of humble trial and error over the years he had learned to identify the sneaky lies in those attack thoughts and prayed to his Savior in his renewed mind right in the middle of a noisy, smelly waiting area. 'Lord help me right now to feel and enter in fully to the truth that my identity is in no way affected by anything my brother did or does or anyone in my family for that matter.'

His breathing eased as he rested in the words of Romans 8:31-32 "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?"

Small tears of thankfulness exited from the edges of his eyes as he praised his God for being so for him even though he had fallen short so many times in the past. The eternal and practical nature of amazing Grace landed on him in a fresh way.

"Visiting hours now beginning" came over the loud speaker in a flat emotionless voice and he was ushered into the area which had about eight round tables with cold folding chairs scattered around them. Guards were stationed in the corners standing with their dark uniforms contrasting against the bright white sanitary walls.

Stephen took a seat at one of the tables and did not have to wait long as the inmates filed in looking with anticipation to see the varied faces of those that came to visit them. Hal was third from the last in line and as soon as he saw his brother he beamed and started to rush to hug him. The guard closest to the brothers barked "no touching please". Though they stifled the hugging neither of the brothers let it wipe the smiles off their faces.

"So how you doing?" asked Stephen as they took their seats.

"Great!" Hal said with surprising joy.

Now Stephen was nervous and curious simultaneously. He looked at his baby brother and just took in the differences of what he remembered from when he saw him leave for Parnell.

"Ok what gives, why you so up, don't you know you are in prison?" Stephen chortled.

"Bro, you have no idea what has happened to me since I got here." Hal was ready to pop like the popcorn you pop over your camp fire.

“Well, tell me!” big brother smiled with anticipation.

Hal overflowed and recapped the emotions and facts of his life transforming time since arriving at Parnell.

Stephen listened well while smiling and was wide eyed, then moist eyed, then joyful eyed.

“Bro, I am speechless and so thankful, I wish I could give you a hug.”

The guard who had rotated to within ear shot of the gushing brothers eased over close to them and whispered, “go ahead and hug, you have ten seconds.”

Emotions of praise and peace flowed as the picture of reconciliation and the reality were united as one.

“Simon says real men hug.”

“Who is Simon?”

“He is one of the main guys in the Band of brothers I mentioned earlier.”

“Oh yea, sure.”

Stephen became aware of movement of his emotions in new uncharted territory with his brother. He locked eyes with his brother. “I am so proud of you I cannot stop smiling.” He cried small meaningful joyful tears.

“Thanks for never quitting in praying for me.” Hal swayed back and forth without knowing he was doing it and enjoyed the fruits of reconciliation.

“Visiting hours are now over, please depart through the open doors.” Came over the loud speakers in the same sanitized tone.

Stephen rejoiced as he walked through the door and did not even here the door clang behind him as he felt a small portion of what the father felt when his prodigal son came home in the Gospel of Luke. He purposed in his heart to update his church prayer chain as soon as he could with the details of the best praise report he had ever given.

In the past Hal had often cried when his brother did, but this time the tears were unified under the truth that both their hearts were secure and safe in the loving arms of the very one who invented tears.

Darla missed Hal, as hard as she tried to tell herself 'what happened was fee choices of two consenting adults' she felt in deep places in her soul that what they had done was wrong. She still missed Hal's smile and gentle listening ear. She remembered hearing somewhere that emotions are slippery and tricky to influence major decisions in life, but her cry for emotional intimacy and love from Hal was still piloting her lost ship in the morass of fog with no light. She had followed Hal's trial from afar and was convinced he did not attack that poor girl.

She tried to muddle along at work and ignore the whispers about her home wrecker status. She had stayed away from Patty's restaurant since she was involved in the discovery of her date with Hal by his wife at the time. She had heard through friends of Patty that she had been spending time with Jeana and certainly wanted to avoid an uncomfortable chance encounter with the ex-wife of the man she kind of had a relationship with.

Good food however, has a way of bridging the gaps in our lives. Darla could not hold out any longer in her deep need to eat Patty's very tasty 'Zana de Gaina' a traditional Moldovan soup. She left work early and darkened the door of 'Puppies' before the early supper crowd started to fill the place up. She quickly slipped into the same booth she and Hal had used a few times and Patty responded with the same joy and affection she always had for her familiar friend. Darla felt awkward but she could read her old friend's body language and could tell there was no judgement exuding from Patty so she chose to act in good faith that all was well.

"Sorry I have been away so long. I desperately need a fix of my favorite soup." Darla said as she ruffled her hair with her right hand and looked away from Patty's face for most of what she said.

"No problem my friend, how have you been?" Patty's regular friendly tone put Darla at ease.

They sat and chatted like old times for a while and every once in a while Patty stepped away to help the wait staff, but swooped back as soon as she could.

"I just am losing my bearings without having anyone to talk to who really knows how to listen to me. Other than you of course." Darla said while her face gave away she was thinking about Hal at Parnell and not with her at that moment.

"Of course, I know I am the best listener ever." Patty used her flat palm to cement her sarcasm.

"You know what I mean, I miss the company of a really great man in my life." Darla's chin was pointed towards the table.

“Well, what have you heard me say more than once about the best cure for loneliness?” probed Patty.

“I know... I know. There is a friend that sticks closer than a brother.” Darla said the words with a sigh like a teenager being scolded by their parent.

“I am sorry, I am not trying to bug you, but if you had cancer and I had the cure for cancer, would I be your friend if I did not at least offer it to you?” Patty said with the gentlest tone she could muster.

“No”

“Well, I think eternal life or eternal punishment is way more serious than cancer and I have found the answer not just in a bunch of theories, but in a real personal relationship with God through his son Jesus. I don’t want to hold back on you by not sharing what is working for me. I also realize I cannot make you do anything because I am not responsible for you or your choices either.” Patty kept nodding.

“I know you aren’t and I appreciate your concern.” Darla conceded.

The two friends continued to chat for another fifteen minutes and when they parted ways they hugged and Darla felt warmth she had been missing for quite some time. “I promise to keep better in touch.”

Patty smiled and prayed quietly under her breath as she watched the back of her friend’s pretty and bouncy hair disappear towards the parking lot.

Hal and Floyed and the Band continued in their close knit growth cocoon as they prayed together, and played together and laughed lots together. Many people think that being behind bars is so negative, when in reality the bars keep lots of visual temptations out while they are keeping the prisoners in. Simon said often “I feel freer on the inside with Jesus than I ever did on the outside without him.” Hal shuddered as he flashed back to his personal bars that he was captured inside of as he tried to make it through life before he came to Parnell.

The brothers were not immune from all attacks however, even though they had a great thing going and good things were happening in the Lord almost every time they were together.

News from home was tough sometimes when kids we going through milestones and their dads could not be there. Sengh got word his father who had just made it to America six months earlier died from colon cancer.

Floyed had to endure a real counter attack when he was working in the laundry area. The inmate whom Floyed had protected Hal from when he first came to Parnell was still holding a grudge so he and three of his biggest friends cornered Floyed and put him in the infirmary for a month. He almost died. Broken jaw, broken ribs, internal injuries and lots of stitches had him laid up taking nutrition through a straw for quite a while. Prayers of his brothers and their churches at home pulled him through.

While Floyed was out of commission and busy healing, Hal got a new cell mate after a couple weeks named Chuck who from the very start showed he wanted to stake his territory and show Hal he was not to be trifled with. As soon as he entered their cell and the escorting guard left, he violently flung his toiletries against the wall beside his bed and produced a very simple and ugly shiv pointed right at Hal's chest and snarled with mumbled expletives, "You wanna piece of this?"

Hal was jarred at first as he put his hands in the air, but in about three easy breaths taken in prayer he could see fear in Chuck's eyes. With calm firmness he spoke with a measured tone and exuded understanding. He knew he was not talking only on a human plane. He knew powers of darkness were pushing this man to incite actions that could cause eternal consequences that were not reversible. He sized up his would be attacker. Chuck was in his twenties, average height with blond hair, green eyes and handsome features.

"My name is Hal and I promise you I will do you no harm, what is your name?"

Chuck scowled. "Don't try to con me with that nice guy crap, I am not going to give you any info to use against me later!"

"No problem, when you feel safe you can tell me only what you want to tell me. I just want you to know that if I die today my ex-wife and kids and family are gonna be sad, but I am gonna be dancin' and rejoicing in heaven forever. As I said before I will do you no harm, so you do what you gotta do, I'll be waiting over here on my bed praying."

Without hesitating, Hal moved casually to his bed and reclined to rest his eyes. He could feel Chuck's blinking eyes following his movement all the way to his bed. Breathing easily he recited in his head. 'Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.'

Chuck stood still for a while, watching Hal's easy breathing with a slight smile and felt his own pulse slow down. Soon he appeared to feel self-conscious standing in the middle of the cell, shiv in hand, so he shrugged and sat on his bed. Then he picked up his toothpaste and towel. Hal snuck a peak and observed his

foiled attacker to be looking quite sheepish. Chuck put the shiv back into its hiding place looking like he would be ok with forgetting where it was.

With Hal being quite boring and just lying there he did not have anyone else to talk to so he just laid down on his bed and was still. Hal suspected he was pondering why his new cell mate was so calm while looking down the barrel of a knife. Hal prayed to himself ‘Lord use me to bring Chuck to you.

Thirty minutes later Chuck jerked awake with a scream, “NO, oh my God, NO.”

“What’s wrong, are you ok?” Hal jumped and stood a few feet from Chuck as he empathized.

“What? Oh it was a nightmare, wow that was freaky.” Chuck sat up looking sweaty and sat on the edge of his bed.

“What was the nightmare?” Hal had to know.

Chuck shuddered and said. “I was driving a semi at about ninety and swerving all over the road trying not to hit people. Out of nowhere a little blonde haired cutie of a girl rode her bike right in front of me and even with both feet on the break I could not stop in time. Before the impending crunching thud I woke up.”

“That sounded like no fun at all, I could tell it was a very real dream.” Probed Hal.

“Yea, very helpless feeling when you are driving a big semi all over the road and cannot stop.” Chuck was still panting in relief.

“Sounds like you are very relieved it was a dream?”

“For sure, how did you sleep?” asked Chuck without even thinking.

“Just Fine, I have never slept better since I came to Parnell.”

This statement from Hal lingered in the air for a while and his new cell-mate appearing to be struggling with whether or not to bite and ask how on earth good sleep in a place like this was even possible.

Finally he could not hold back and had to ask. “Did I hear you correctly that you are sleeping better since you came here?”

“Yep” responded the smiling Hal as he yawned and stood up to stretch. “Real peace is a rare commodity inside and outside Parnell.”

The very familiar dinner bell went off just as Hal ended his last sentence. “You want to join me and some of my friends for supper?”

Chuck’s face could not hide that he was marveling at how this perfect stranger whom he had just met, threatened with a blade and questioned his motives, still wanted to invite him to have supper with his friends and his voice tone sounded just like he was inviting him over to his house on some sunny fall afternoon for a football game. Curious was an understatement to describe the jumping jacks going on in his mind.

Chapter 12

Marty the vice detective over in Charlotte had been uneasy and fidgety for a while. Ever since he heard that voice with the chilling words of conviction he kept expecting more haunting sounds behind him every time he entered any room that reminded him of his kitchen.

“Snap out of it you idiot” he scolded himself. “You know there is no god or right or wrong, remember your college philosophy class!” He was driving to work while he was giving himself a good talking to.

At a stop light he felt a little embarrassed when he noticed the driver of the car next to him was watching his self-directed tirade with an open mouth. He tried and failed to act natural and pretend he was singing along with some music until his unwanted audience moved ahead and turned left at the next intersection.

“Just breath, everything is going to be ok. You are just fine. You are smarter than everyone else and will never get caught.” His confident smile returned as the messages that he thought were his own started to take the edge off his scattered mindset.

As he got up to speed on a four lane undivided highway He decided to in reality listen to the radio since that was what he was faking before. His usual head-banging stations were all programmed into his digital system so all he had to do was turn it on and the familiar tones of rage and violence and sex without love would take him away to his own personal happy place.

Marty bit a huge hole into his own tongue as at top volume he heard from his radio. “GOD IS NOT MOCKED, WHATEVER YOU SOW, THAT YOU WILL REAP!” He winced in pain and swerved into oncoming traffic, just barely missing a semi before jerking his car back into the correct lane.

Before he could find out what radio station his system had mysteriously been changed to, all he could here was AC/DC screaming “highway to hell”. Beads of sweat started to appear on his forehead and he knew it was going to be a very long day at work.

Stephen had been walking with extra pep in his step and a wider smile than usual ever since he got back from visiting Hal at Parnell. Candace had read the

prayer chain e-mail from church praising God for the change in Hal. All week she had been wanting to pick Stephen's brain about what happened, but the usual busyness of work and life had kept getting in the way of their catching up session. Finally on the second Saturday after Stephen had returned from seeing Hal, Candace and Stephen and the kids carved out some time together to digest what had happened along with some yummy food at Rusty's Café.

"Can I get you some Coke or a Hot Chocolate to start?" smiled Sharon.

Stephen could not miss Jessica and Brehannas' eyes sparkling at the thought of hot chocolate with whipped cream.

"Two Hot Chocolates for these two adorable faces full of glee that always make it so hard for me to say 'no' and coffee for myself and my sister."

Stephen was just as eager to share what happened at Parnell as Candace and the girls appeared to be jumping for joy to hear the details on the transformation of uncle Hal. All fulfillment of anticipations would have to wait a little longer because Sharon just happened to be their server that day.

As Sharon left to get the drinks Stephen began to puzzle 'I have seen her somewhere before.'

He wanted to wait for the uninterrupted time between when the food is ordered and when it is delivered before he gave all the juicy details but none of the three most important ladies in his life let him wait that long.

As he finished his version of what happened when he visited Hal at Parnell, he exclaimed with passion. "It was so great to feel that Hal and I were totally unified in our love for the Lord."

A CRASH startled all at the table and Sharon said "So sorry." For dropping one of the Hot Chocolates a few feet from their table and returned urgency with another one and cleaned up the floor.

Stephen noticed some unusual rattled emotions in Sharon that were not proportionate to a simple mistake of dropping a customer's drink.

"Are you ok?" Stephen asked with sincerity.

Before answering Sharon scanned the restaurant to make sure she had a couple minutes to talk with no immediate needs to be met for her other tables.

"I do not mean to be too forward, but when you mentioned Hal, it was hard for me because I was the person he attacked!" She instantly felt self-conscious and

regretted even starting this conversation in the middle of her shift. She started to pull away and retreat to the kitchen.

The understanding tone from Stephen put her at ease. "I thought I recognized you from somewhere. Please accept my deepest apology for what happened to you."

Sharon believed him about eighty percent. The section in the café where they were sitting was isolated so she relaxed even more. She remembered seeing how well Stephen and Candace stood by their brother at the trial in spite of what he had done. This impressed her.

"I accept your apology, I know that you are not responsible for what your family does even though it feels that way some times." replied Sharon.

"You are very right there, but I was just going to fill my three favorite ladies in on the amazing things that have happened to Hal since he has been in prison. You want to have a seat and I will include you?"

Now Sharon was curious at high levels and felt drawn to sit down. She knew to clear it with her boss Rusty. She got his attention across the restaurant and mimed a sitting down action. When Rusty saw she would be talking to Stephen he smiled a little inside and prayerfully nodded his approval.

As Sharon sat down she started to feel a little tingling on the back of her neck that she could not explain.

With his audience one person larger than expected Stephen was still fired up to share the best thing that had happened to him in quite some time. With arms flailing and tears of joy streaming down his peaceful face he shared his experience at Parnell visiting his long lost brother who now was so very found.

As he spoke he saw Sharon reacting to every word as if she could see the scene in her mind. Candace and the girls bounced up and down with excitement as they listened also.

"I am very glad we bumped into you here because I know Hal will want to talk to you himself to make things right." Stephen said.

"You keep him away from me, I am sure you are confident he is a changed man, but I need to keep a safe distance for my mental and physical health." Sharon warned.

"No problem," replied Stephen. "Just know that he is for sure praying for you and the person that really attacked you."

Sharon recoiled in a way noticed by everyone as if physically nudged by someone. “What did you just say?”

“I said he is praying for you and the person who attacked you.” restated Stephen.

After another pause, the waitress said, “You mean to tell me even after being convicted and spending months inside Parnell he still holds to his innocence?”

“Exactly,” responded the proud older brother. “Sharon, there is no pressure here for you to forgive our brother. Hal is at peace with his current circumstances because he is personally at peace with God. He may not have attacked you but he has done plenty of sinful dirty things and every one of them is covered by the shed blood of Jesus which cleanses all sin if we let him.”

Sharon showed her head was spinning with confusion all over her face and decided to go back to what was familiar to kind of change the subject. As she stood she said, “I will think on what you have said for a bit, in the meantime what can I get you all to eat tonight?”

The four rejoicing faces took the hint and gave her their orders for food including an appetizer which they all shared. They enjoyed their food and planned a future visit to Parnell as a family as soon as Candace could get time off requested from the pet clinic.

When leaving the restaurant they thanked Sharon and Rusty in a robust manner and made sure to give Sharon a thirty percent tip.

After they left and Sharon saw the amount of the tip she was pleased and warmed in her heart. In her short time working for Rusty she had been the brunt of religious people praying long prayers for their food while she was trying to deliver the meals to the table, then having their Bible Study so loud half the restaurant could hear them, then leaving her a minimal tip or none at all. These experiences so easily and naturally turned her stomach and her heart away from a true relationship with a true and generous Father God. Thankfully the interaction with Stephen and his family was turning the tide back in the other direction.

Hal and Chuck made their way to dinner at the usual table with the Band. Hal walked with ease through the various glares of those who did not like what the

Band of Brothers stood for. Chuck followed close behind keeping his head down and gaze on Hal. He showed expressions of awe and thankfulness to not be alone. Hal felt doubly safe because number one his God who was very mighty was very able to protect him one way or another whether he made it safely to his meal or safely to heaven. Number two he had some very large and extremely close friends waiting for him to share food and fellowship and

everyone at Parnell knew there would be painful consequences for messin' with any of the Band.

Smiles and fun chatter greeted the new cell mate as introductions were made all around at the table in between mouthfuls of food being scarfed.

“So Chuck, where are you from?” Simon asked in an innocent and curious tone.

Chuck looked to be calculating whether to answer a simple question. Hal remembered how he was accused after asking something similar and resisted the urge to intervene. Chuck showed his decision to take a new course of action and just answer the question.

“Australia originally even though I don't have an accent.” Chuck said while reading the six faces of his listeners for sincerity.

“Oh, down under eh?” Paulo smiled.

Chuck showed he needed no more encouragement to wade in deeper into the unfamiliar waters of real and authentic friendship. He plowed ahead with a brief life story. Intense but relaxed faces looking back at him with anticipation and hanging on his every word compelled him to venture forth.

“My family moved to New York when I was eleven. At that awkward age I found entering into a totally different culture so intimidating it was hard to breathe some days. My parents found it difficult to communicate affection and any emotion for that matter. At thirteen I ran away from home and surfaced in San Francisco where the gay lifestyle quickly became my only ticket to survival.” When he said the word gay he spoke softer and watched the faces of his new friends for any negative reactions or uncomfortable looks or eye raises.

The Band did not flinch an eye lash and kept looking directly in his eyes or on his face.

Chuck had to finish now. “Feeling used and exploited by various lovers I escaped at age nineteen to a whole new life in Charlotte MI. I connected with an Uncle and his wife who always seemed to be safe to talk to whenever they would visit

while I was still at home. They took me in and helped me get a job at the local Kwik Trip where I really started to find my niche keeping customers happy and coming back at a local convenience store. I also liked working in a smut free work environment.” Again he made sure only his new friends could hear those last words.

“I still struggled with bad thoughts on occasion, but who doesn’t? Still, overall I was turning a corner toward sanity. Just when I thought things were going really well the police came into the store one day and out of nowhere arrested me for sexual assault. Despite my adamant claims of innocence they had my hair at the scene of a rape just a few blocks from my work and there was no other logical reason for my hair to be there. The courts made quick work of convicting me as the outcries for justice against sex criminals are always louder than concerns about circumstantial evidence. So here I am telling the same sad yarn that everyone tells when they first get into prison, I am innocent!” Chuck shook his head with conviction while eyeing the dirt spots on the floor.

“Chuck, you would be surprised how many truly innocent people are behind these bars and how many truly guilty people are outside them.” Simon spoke in calm and peaceful tones.

“Yea, somehow hair ended up on my car and that put me here too as an innocent man.” Hal said with empathy.

Sengh said in his usual calm but succinct broken English, “Me believe YOU.”

The relief reflected all over Chuck’s face spoke volumes that were he standing he would have fallen over in surprise at the total lack of judgement from the Band. What a total surprise to enter the snake pit of Parnell with the expectation of being attacked and taken advantage of and instead experiencing the most love and support he had ever felt in his life. Surprise is the gap between what is expected and what really happens.

Paulo said, “Now let’s play some serious cards and you can join us tomorrow from two to four in the chapel if you would like to talk some more.”

“I look forward to whatever you guys got cooked up, where else am I gonna go?” Chuck’s smile was bigger than ever.

Jeana had been growing leaps and bounds as she kept spending time with Patty Puppina and her personal Savior in prayer. The kids had good and bad days as they dodged the bullets of the stigma attached to being the children of a convict-

ed rapist. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending how you look at it, our society is so full of heinous crimes happening all the time. The next big scandal quickly comes along to be the thing that everyone is talking about. Since Hal's conviction, child support was non-existent so Stephen and his church had been helping her with a monthly amount and Jeana had gone back to work thirty hours per week in collections with a small company close enough to her house so she could ride bicycle to work except on the really cold days.

Stephen stopped by to drop off the check of help and share his latest news about Hal.

"So I have heard rumblings of good news about Hal?" Jeana said as she escorted her ex brother-in-law into the living room for a chat.

"Yes indeed" was the smiling response from Stephen.

"All I can say is when Hal came through that door in the visiting area at Parnell, he looked so different I thought someone else was in his clothes."

As Stephen recounted the miraculous story again, he actually felt he was getting better at giving all the facts and emotions in a concise manner. When he reached the climax Jeana felt such a rush of relief, kind of like the first bite of good food when someone is starving to death. Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes and she just kind of sat there while Stephen respectfully let her allow the whole scenario to sink in.

"I feel strongly we should pray in thanks to God for what he has done." Jeana said as she dabbed the inside of her left eye with the tip of her pinkie.

Stephen like the surprise of Jeana's ease in talking to her creator. "Sure" he replied.

Jeana did not wait for her guest to start. She chimed with the boldness of a lion like she had seen her friend Patty, do so often. "God, thanks that we can talk to you about anything anytime and in anyway because the shed blood of Jesus your son has cleansed us from all our sins. Thank you for saving Hal. Protect him and help him as he grows up into all you want him to be. We know he has many battles to fight so you can finish your work in him, so help him to keep resting in your loving arms every step of the way, Amen."

Stephen was ready to chime in with his own thanksgiving, but the Holy Spirit led him to just sit in silence and let the sweet and tender moment rest on them

for a while. They chatted for a little longer about the kiddos and how they were doing and parted ways with smiles on their faces and smudged moistness on their cheeks.

Chapter 13

Murphy Smith was a third generation farmer knocking on the door of retirement who was enjoying the benefits of inflated corn prices due to the recent Ethanol mania. He enjoyed the simplicity of farming and felt proud to be helping feed America. Every job however had its chores that he would rather put off doing as long as possible. Cleaning out the fire pit was his least favorite duty. It was about noon and the sun was beating down. He was glad he did not live in Florida or the south where you can sweat just sitting still in the shade.

Good ashes were what he used to help his crops grow better even though he only got enough from the fire for small parts of his soil. Waste not, want not. He had to use his pitch fork to sort out any pieces of metal or wood that did not burn up completely to discard them before sprinkling the rest on a part of the field not yet sprinkled. While working the ashes with the pitch fork a glove stuck on one of the tines. He picked it up and it was quite charred but still had all its fingers. He was the only one who did the burning and he for sure would not try to burn a glove. He was curious and started looking for other things that did not belong in his fire pit. He found a metal clasp for a bag of some kind as well.

Murphy was no ordinary farmer. He loved mysteries and always could spot the killers well before they were revealed at the end of all the mystery type shows. He had an eye for details and what did not fit. He had picked up most of this from time spent with his sister's son who was a detective. Murphy and his wife never had any kids, but really enjoyed investing in the lives of their two nieces and one nephew.

Detective Cordway was sitting at his desk looking at new crime scene photos and he got a call.

"Uncle Murphy how are you doing"? Cordway recognized the number on his caller ID.

"Well sonny boy, I think I have come upon something interesting. If you are free I think you should swing by the farm to take a look at it."

Cordway loved his 'Uncle Murph' and trusted his instincts, but he also was a top rate detective with a full case load which he had to prioritize, so he had to ask some questions to assess the importance of making a trip.

"Whatcha got Uncle?"

“Well, I am the only one who burns anything in my fire pit and today when I was emptying out the ashes I came across a glove and a metal clasp from a bag of some sort that I know I did not burn in my fire pit. I cannot think of any reason someone would put something in a fire that was not their own unless they were trying to cover something up, am I right?”

“I agree sir, this doesn’t add up, can you bag them up for me and I will be down this week to pick them up.” Cordway stared at his picture of his favorite golf hole on the wall without seeing it and moved his gaze back and forth only a little as his computer-like mind processed this new information and which case it might be related to.

“Already did.” Replied the smartest farmer in the whole state.

Anticipation for the next day grew hour by hour for Chuck and Hal alike but for different reasons. When the entire Band entered their special meeting place at 2pm sharp, they all were aghast with surprise as Floyed was sitting in a chair trying to look casual even though he still had signs that further healing was needed in various places that were visible to his great friends who were sticking closer to him than brothers.

“Floyed” several exclaimed at once with a gasp. “When did they let you out of the infirmary?”

“Just in time to make it here.” He replied while trying not to be too muffled because everyone was ginger in their attempts to gently hug him at the same time.

Hal introduced Chuck to Floyed as the one God used greatly in his life when he first came to Parnell.

“So you are the one to blame for Hal being so infuriatingly calm all the time huh?” Jabbed Chuck in a teasing tone.

“Well we all have our special talents in life, I guess.” Floyed grinned and answered as he rubbed the back of his finger nails of his right hand on his fancy prison garb and then inspected them before blowing on them with a twinkle in his eye.

“Ok men we better get started.” Simon said to keep things on track.

They prayed together and then explained to Chuck he could just be a fly on the wall the first time or if he wanted to share or ask questions after everyone else

had shared he would have that opportunity.

Two shared their stories for Chuck's benefit. Hal was the second to share. During the sharing portion Julio talked about some anger he had to let go about a situation regarding his family at home. Martel was honest about three or four temptations to lust based on memories of past images. Hal talked about missing Jeana and his kids. Simon gave praise for losing three pounds due to releasing the right to indulge in dessert. Singh chose to pass and just listen.

Chuck listened with an intense gaze unable to hide that he was impressed with the matter of fact way that these very real men confessed their lives to each other and received strength from each other and God.

"So Chuck do you have any questions about what we do, or have anything you want to share?" Simon asked in a nonchalant tone.

"What you want me to say?" responded Chuck who appeared to be a little defensive.

"No pressure here, you can share only if you want to, we just want to give you the opportunity." replied Hal.

Chuck sat still for a second like someone looking to approach cold water for a swim. He decided to tip toe in because his new friends had so openly shared their struggles, why not do it himself?

"I know the right things to do and most of the time I do them, I think nobody is perfect and God helps those who help themselves. I just keep trying to get better every day."

"Thanks for sharing" was chimed in by a few of the other men.

Hal felt a little disappointed that Chuck's first meeting was not as earth shattering as his own. He felt better as he lifted these feelings up to God and received the encouragement to be patient.

Great manly hugs were exchanged all around and everyone headed back to their cells. Supper was filled with more laughter and card playing. After one volley of laughter Simon reflected on Psalms 23:5 "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows." He said, "Here we are in the middle of a bunch of people who want to do us harm and God is protecting us while we rejoice in him and each other."

Everyone paused and sighed with smiles on their faces. Chuck won the game with a bold blind bid on the last hand and everyone gave him praise. His face

reflected that he was catching the bug of real community and fellowship.

Floyed needed a new cell mate. For a few days he enjoyed having his cell to himself and worked hard at resting to recover. The doors clanged in a familiar way and in walked Hafid absent of any fanfare as was the norm. He looked to be an average sized Muslim and Floyed almost right away was looking forward to a new conversion process challenge.

“Hi there, my name is Floyed.” He reached out his hand as he was not sure how the Muslim culture is about hugging strangers.

“Hafid is my name.” He said as he bowed with respect and a smile.

Floyed was not sure how to proceed so he just smiled and prayed inside his clear mind for direction.

Hafid turned the tables of surprise on Floyed and took the initiative. “Can I share my story with you first so you can wipe that silly goofy grin off your face and stop trying to figure me out?”

Floyed just sat down and said “Sure”

“I was raised Radical Muslim. I was very fanatical. I grew up in Syria and was involved in various attacks on churches. One night I had a dream that was so vivid I felt I could touch the images I was seeing.” He flailed his hands and Floyed showed he was hooked into the story already.

“I saw Jesus reaching out to me with his nail pieced hands and he looked so deep into my eyes I was afraid my heart was going to melt. With the most loving voice I have ever heard, He said to me ‘why are you persecuting me Hafid, I am the only one who can really save you?’ I awoke with a shudder, covered in sweat and could not get that dream out of his head.”

“What happened then?” Floyed was smiling, happy to be letting this stranger becoming a friend at lightening speed talk.

Hafid continued. “The same day I was ordered to interrogate a small frail elderly lady as to the whereabouts of other members of her underground church. The supposed questioning involved getting a cardio work-out beating on her so she would talk. When I was panting and resting before going another round, this bloody, swollen and shaking lady reached over and put her trembling wiry hand on my shoulder and said the words I never will forget.”

“No way, what did she say?” Floyed was now jumping up and down on his toes ignoring his need to keep healing various parts of his body.

Hafid crinkled his face and started to gush tears out both sides of each eye. “She said ‘Sir you have a tough task ahead of you, because your superiors want you to get information out of me that I will not give to you. I want you to know I am praying to Jesus for you.’ I started to shake without any control of my body and gushed just like this.” He pointed to his face.

Floyed looked wide eyed hoping for more.

Hafid obliged. “I said to this very powerful petite spiritual giant. ‘How can this Jesus forgive me for all the things I have done?’ She responded with words that pounded on my heart like a wrecking ball. ‘I don’t know why, I am just glad he did, because the power of that forgiveness is helping me forgive you right now.’ That day I became a new man.”

“Finish it my friend.” Floyed said from his knees in worship on that hard cement floor even though he was still in pain.

Wild horses could not stop Hafid from bringing it home. “On my knees I received personally the wonderful sweet forgiveness of God through his Son, Jesus Christ and snuck that wonderful woman out the back of the police station where they were interrogating people. I got her help to escape and started helping the churches in Syria and came to America for schooling with the intention to go back and serve in the very area where I had persecuted churches.”

How are you here at Parnell then? Floyed asked.

“Factions of the radical Muslim faith in America received orders from Syria to discredit me. Evidence was fabricated and I was arrested at Great Lakes Christian College for sexual assault of a fellow student. The walk of shame out of the college was hard, but I held strong to the truth that my sweet Savior knew the truth about what really happened. America needs to wake up to the reality that suffering and serving Jesus are a package deal.” Hafid ended as if the words were a current prayer.

“Man, I am so glad you just happened to be my new cell mate, weez gonna reek some awesome Godly havoc against the devil in this here cell. You gotta to meet my friends!” His grin seemed to go all the way around his face.

Jeana could not wait to share the good news about Hal's changed heart with her mentor Patty, she could not free her schedule to see her for two whole days and the time just seemed to drag along like rush hour traffic in LA. Finally her time freed up to be able to scoot over to "Puppies" for some good grub and great fellowship. Every time she came into that parking lot she would shiver just a little with the flashback to the pain of the day she found out about the affair that ended her marriage. She now was seeing how God with great love had woven so much good through that initially disastrous fork in the road.

She almost skipped a little as she approached the door, already envisioning the expressions of joy and shock that were soon to come on her great friend's face. In the foyer she just was beginning to adjust her eyes to the light and starting to look for Patty when WHAM she was almost run over by a sobbing young lady who was upset at the highest level possible.

Patty saw the collision and was right there to make sure everyone was not injured.

"I am just fine, so can I please go" blurted Darla as she inched toward the door but was drawn for reasons she could not define to this person she just ran into.

"Darla, I feel we still have more good work to do in talking things out" said Patty.

Jeana felt half the air go right out of her lungs and her head started spinning involuntarily. "This is Darla, the reason my marriage ended?!" Again Jeana was quick to be aware of her volume and that others were within ear-shot.

All three women turned various shades of red for very different reasons. There was a brief verbal lull while each contemplated a gracious exit strategy. Prompted by the Holy Spirit Patty decided to do to the exact opposite of what most people do in embarrassing situations. She moved closer to these two women whom she had known for a long time and decided to broker the reconciliation.

"Hey, can we all sit down for just a bit, I love both of you and know we can bring some healing into this situation with God's help."

Again, some silence blanketed them for a few moments. Patty read both of her friends' body language and took a risk that deep down they did want to talk. While walking with purpose, over her shoulder she chimed "Let's get a corner table and I'll get you some nice hot tea."

She secured the perfect spot expecting and praying her two friends would follow. With a slight smile Jeana let Darla go first and soon the three ladies of different

ages and cultures were sitting equal distances from each other in a triangle at a round table. Once each of their teas had the exact right amount of sweetener and cream, Patty asked “Can I pray for wisdom and just the right words for each of us?”

Jeana nodded just enough to be seen and Darla showed nervousness but still approved.

“Dear Jesus, thank you that you are in the reconciliation business. You love it when wounds are healed and relationships are restored. I pray that right now as we talk you would do just that. Amen.” Patty smiled with peace as she lifted her head.

All three as if on cue touched tiny moistness from the inside of their right eye with their right pinky in a surprising synchronized fashion.

Patty started in like she had done this before, “Jeana, could you share what it was like to walk in your shoes through divorce?”

“Shocking is the first word that comes to mind.” responded Jeana. “Don’t get me wrong, there were some struggles in our relationship, but I always felt we would sooner or later come out of the deep dark woods of miscommunication and enter the sunny fields of mutual understanding.”

Jeana leaned towards Darla with restored calm and chose her soft words carefully. “Darla, I want you to know that as I have had time to look back on things I did in our marriage, I failed my husband because I was trying to love him on my own. My love alone always falls short. What you did with Hal was wrong. Yes, but you did not break up our marriage.”

Jeana leaned back again as if to make a kind of proclamation. “Darla, I forgive you for all of it and hope you can receive my forgiveness and God’s forgiveness personally and forgive yourself because he is the only one who has the power to help people forgive each other in the first place!”

Chapter 14

Darla blinked tears out of her thin layer of mascara. Her face showed good signs of relief in progress. She felt a huge burden starting to lift gently like a slow motion film of a butterfly taking off. Her shoulders started to straighten more.

Patty looked with love at Darla and said with passion. “You see, Darla, as I know you have heard me say before, forgiveness is such a sweet and precious gift, but it is just like air and food. If we do not take it in, eat it; partake of it, we die spiritually and eventually physically because we never put it to use. “Do you right now receive the forgiveness that Jeana is offering you?”

“Yes” came Darla’s timid but firm toned reply.

“Do you right now receive the forgiveness that God is offering you through the death of his Son Jesus on the cross for you as an individual?”

Darla’s face started to light up in a way Patty had never seen it before. “Yes” was her joyful reply with tears, glinting in the reflection of the lights overhead.

Now it was Darla’s turn to flush and gush. “Ever since I was a little girl I always felt like I was on the outside looking in, everyone else was laughing and smiling and being loved. I never felt loved. I thought based on what TV showed me the only people being loved were the beautiful, sexy and successful people.”

Darla angled herself in closer toward Jeana. “I know now, that was a lie. I cannot believe you would forgive me for my sin with Hal even before I asked for your forgiveness. I truly am sorry for any pain I caused you. Your marriage may have had its troubles, but I was wrong to insert myself into that mix.”

Now Jeana and Patty both looked at each other and started to spew more tears of praise. After a wonderful group hug, Patty led Darla in prayer to personally receive the matchless forgiveness given from God based on the inconceivable sacrificing death of Jesus Christ on the cross for her.

The three new very unlikely companions on the same journey lingered in their hallowed corner that Darla knew she would never forget, for another hour. They shared stories, laughed so hard they cried and prayed together again before leaving. In wrapping things up they decided to meet together every two weeks for more femalship.

“I feel so safe with you two.” Darla said.

“Me too!” Smiled Patty.

“Me three.” Twinkled Jeana with a mischievous grin.

The hole in Marty’s tongue healed at the normal painful rate but as it healed it was a constant reminder of the feeling that the ground of his life was soon going to be shaken to its core. He decided to try again to live his life between the lines of what was legal and normal because he had much to lose. He shuddered and thought. ‘How could I even try to survive as a convicted multiple rapist; detective, in a federal prison?’

The drudgery of chasing down scum bags whom he craved emulate like a child with their nose pressed against a candy store window wore on him hour after hour like the constant tapping of the drip from a leaky roof on a cement floor. The nagging assault was easy to endure for a few minutes, but hard to resist for a lifetime.

Marty lasted two weeks: Soon the salivation increased in his mouth as he started doing recon for a new victim in Albion, MI which he felt was a safe distance from his home and locations of past attacks. He was doing just fine appearing to be an innocent swimmer at the local YMCA after paying his \$10 entry to the pool. He swam just long enough to put in an appearance that he was actually there to swim not gawk at anything wearing a bikini.

Soon he was in his favorite spot on an extended pool chair wearing reflective sunglasses that the poker players wear. Since the pool had lots of glass in the ceiling to let in the natural light from the heavens he really did need the shades, but his real selfish taking motives fired fast to feast on and take advantage of the planned chance for looking and lusting after everything that moved like a lion eyeing gazelles in the wild.

The lie of lust, that Marty was not even aware of, is that there are certain objects of lust that are so attractive physically that the person lusting is required to lust after them and take from them in any way possible. This false rationalization sounded like this in Marty’s wounded mind often. ‘If nature didn’t want me to look, why did they evolve to be so sexy and why was I born always wanting to look and look and look some more until I take?’

The accelerator of his lustometer went from three to ten in an instant when a nineteen year old bombshell named Carlotta made the mistake of being drop dead gorgeous and walking by his chair. His mouth opened just a little in awe

and his mind's eye flashed to the future encounter which would make every prior encounter pale by comparison. He tried not to rubber neck and stare but he was dramatically drawn. He consumed like a line of cocaine with his eyes as she swam and frolicked with her friends for thirty minutes and all his patience was gone for meticulous cautious planning. In his heart he plunged into the commitment that wherever she was going when she left, he would be following and stalking on the sly.

Before he knew it she was leaving with her friends and he had to follow. He waited an agonizing extra minute to not be suspicious before leaving the pool and showering. He paused at the drinking fountain as the group of joy filled talking teens passed him by unaware he even existed, and he followed at a safe distance. It was so easy to follow the bobbing puffs of hair and happy giddy conversation from a distance in the parking lot and know the make and model of the car the blissful oblivious friends piled into.

Following the car at a safe distance Marty prayed the girls would quickly disband so he could get alone with his new fleeting obsession to cure all his problems. His prayers must not have been going to an effective true god because the bubbly blonds went straight to the biggest mall in town. When they parked, their unknown observer should have bided his time for their return and been smart, but the smart train left the station a long time ago. Patience was a virtue that was wearing thinner and thinner in this man who was circling the sink hole of sinful cycles faster and faster.

In the mall the giggling girls who had routinely been chided by their parents. "Be safe and stay together." Went right to the music store on the second floor to listen to music samples of the newest One Direction release. Marty lingered with his back to the music store and his elbows on the guard rail and looked down to see who was walking below like goldfish swimming in a bowl for the amusement of the cat.

"Can I see some ID please?" came from over his shoulder in a stern tone.

Marty turned with goose bumps on his neck to see the massive frame of Clyde the best security guard at the mall, standing with his feet spread for balance and arms at his side where his gun was visible and menacing.

"Excuse me sir is there something wrong?" Marty fought to sound natural and casual and not like he really felt which was that there was a huge neon sign on his forehead saying "busted".

"Well, sir it may be a coincidence but ever since you entered this mall you have mysteriously gone everywhere those attractive young ladies in the store right

behind us have gone.”

“What is your name sir?” deflected Marty.

“My name is Clyde and that matches what you can clearly read on this here name tag pinned to my very large chest. Please do not make me repeat myself. I need to see some ID.”

“Sorry Clyde here is my ID. I am in sales and old habits are hard to break.” He handed Clyde his best fake ID and kept right on talking assuming Clyde was going to buy the line of lies he was going to shovel with such ease and sincerity while maintaining complete eye contact that even the best detective with an eye for lying could not spot them.

“I promise you Clyde, I am here to meet my wife for an early supper at that restaurant right over there and my path to get here matching the path of some young ladies is purely a coincidence.”

Partially convinced, Clyde still wanted to probe. “Carl Swenson, what time are you meeting your wife?”

“4:30” Replied Marty.

Clyde looked at his watch to see it was 4:25 and said what he suspected Marty would not anticipate him to say so he could check his reaction. “I would be happy to wait here with you and make sure your wife makes it here safely. You would be surprised at the number of perverts hanging around in shopping malls these days.”

Marty was stung inside by the pervert crack but also knew saying no would be suspicious so he forced a smile and said, “Sure, no problem.”

The unlikely pair stood and tried to pass the time while waiting for the fictitious wife to arrive. Marty knew Clyde was watching him in silence to see where and how he looked at shoppers as they ambled by. He kept his gaze high and away from any young females as best he could and tried to remain calm.

At 4:35 Marty’s phone vibrated in his pocket and he grabbed it from his pocket with his moist palm. “Hello” he said while thinking hard how to make the conversation sound like he actually was the persona he had just told this mass of humanity standing and watching his every move that he was.

“Marty, I miss you, when can you come over so I can fix you your favorite sandwich?” The voice of Paige, his mom came through his phone with conviction and a little poutiness.

Marty, relieved the call just happened to come in time to give him an escape turned as if it was hard to hear in the mall, but in truth he wanted space between himself and nosy Clyde so he could not overhear any tidbits of lies he was spitting out like sunflower seed shells from the mouth of a southerner. “There you are, sorry for the delay. I have been slowed a bit here at the mall.” He glared at the rent a cop while he spoke.

With Clyde looking uncertain Marty took full advantage. Operating his phone with speed and touch as efficient and soft as kitten hair he hung up the phone while pretending to still chat with his fictitious wife who had to cancel because she was held up at work. He was prepared to show the number to Clyde on his phone and a female name would be displayed. ‘I could even explain she kept her name when they got married if I need to go that far.’ He thought.

Clyde got a call on his radio asking for help elsewhere. He looked to Marty to almost be relieved to be called away. “Have a nice day sir.” He uttered as he handed back the fake ID and retreated.

Marty walked in a way as not to draw any further suspicion into the mall and pretended to window shop for a bit while calling his step mom back to say the reception on his phone was interrupted.

Inside his mind while strolling he chided himself with screams for his stupidity and impatience. Exiting the mall on the opposite side of where his car was parked he meandered his retreat outside the mall back to his car. ‘I am pathetic.’ Bounced around in his head over and over while he left the area knowing never to return since someone had looked at his face and seen his fake ID. ‘What if I run out of areas that are safe to be?’ crossed his mind, but he dismissed it with ease.

Innocent and naïve Carlotta blissfully went on with her life not knowing how priceless a protection it was to follow and obey simple words of caution from her parents.

Panic struck Sharon like a scalding long needle as she flashed back to her attack in a dream state as she fought to wake up after working until the middle of the night. She had been asked to stay late by Rusty because the 10PM to 3AM server had called in sick. She was thankful for the extra cash, but sleeping from four to eight in the morning gives one a very different kind of sleep. She found herself kind of looping in the same nightmare over and over again. Her breathing heightened each time the shock of the attack and the taste of wet wipes

revisited her with the laughing sneering accusation of a thief who was getting away with murder.

Finally after a fourth loop in the nightmare she jumped awake and ran into the bathroom and started splashing water on her face. She brushed her teeth while in a kind of trance and showered to start her day off. While drying herself off she heard a voice from outside the bathroom in the hallway saying, “Go talk to Rusty, now”. Sick of being scared she flung the door to the bathroom open and saw no one was there. “Well, I have flung open one door, might as well fling open some more.” She said out loud as she determined to go see Rusty.

Rusty was as usual at the restaurant, he did not overwork himself but knew how to train excellent people and pay them well enough to keep customers happy and coming back. He was always available to pitch in when things got crazy as they often do in the restaurant business, but his primary focus was following the Holy Spirit in starting faith conversations to draw people closer to his dear Savior.

It was mid-morning on a non-descript Thursday morning and he saw Sharon making her way in from her midsize economy car in casual clothes. In his heart Rusty hoped she was there for a real conversation not just the usual surface fluff that employees so easily talk about when they stop by for a meal or to pick up their checks.

His hopes were fulfilled when her first words to him were “Can we talk?” They found a spot where they could be seen by the other employees for both of their safety and reputation, but not heard for their privacy.

“I keep flashing back to my attack when I sleep and even sometimes when I am awake, how can I get past this?” She pronounced with a sense of relief as she finally said what was bugging her.

“First of all”, Rusty replied. “I am not a counselor, but I encourage you to start seeing someone who helped me years ago when I had to deal with my own regrets and pain from the past.”

“What have you had to deal with?” Sharon probed with a curious look on her face. Rusty had been so amazing to work for she found it hard to mention his name and struggle in the same sentence.

“Are you open to me sharing a part of my story with you, I think it will help?”

“Sure, go ahead.” Sharon said as she settled in for a story which she hoped would give her more hope.

“I was born in 1946 so in my teens I experimented with free love like I thought everyone was doing. The movement popularized by the Beatles and many other bands fueled the perception that sex is just sex, no strings or consequences. I met my wife at age eighteen and we soon realized as we started raising a family that being rebellious does not provide a whole lot of security and structure for kids who are trying to find their way in a wicked world which is pulling at them from every direction. Our family grew quickly to four kids and we had a great life watching our kids grow up and excel. We did a good job of painting vivid pictures of the consequences of certain behaviors so our smart kids stayed pretty clear of crazy dangerous behavior.”

“I am thinking a big but is coming soon. Am I right?” Sharon enjoyed teasing Rusty.

“Well, I guess, yes. When our youngest child Emma was a senior in high school, she was popular and attractive, a cheerleader and smart in practical ways not just book smart. We just knew she was going places. Emma had a steady boyfriend, Spencer since she was a junior and we loved him like a son while fully expecting him to be a son in law someday.” Rusty hesitated just a bit, but knew he needed to keep going forward with the story for Sharon’s benefit.

“Prom was almost more special to us parents than the couple as we waved them off with tears of pride and joy to an anticipated enchanted evening ahead. Sad to say, the evening was nothing close to enchanting.”

“What happened?” Sharon did not want Rusty to stop the story.

“Horror stories about crazy things happening at proms and after proms are a dime a dozen. The lie that anything goes has caused so much pain to so many people that they carry with them the rest of their lives. My sweet Emma and Spencer were planning to be safe and enjoy a nice evening without doing anything they would regret later. Unfortunately people who have wholesome values and simple joy with talent and natural beauty become easy targets for resentments, lust and violence of others.” Rusty looked at the floor for a second.

Chapter 15

Sharon swallowed hoping the story would not end like hers did.

“Jealousy and lust burned and churned away in the bellies of three of Emma’s classmates Stan, Swen and Tom. They all excelled on the wrestling team but expected that their prowess in sports assured and guaranteed them success in relationships with the ladies. They could not grasp the fact that inflated egos are more unattractive than acne, even to teenagers. Tom had made hard, clumsy and unsuccessful overtures toward Emma before she started dating Spencer.” Rusty sipped some water and rubbed the sweat off his glass with his thumb.

Sharon held her breath and wished for a happy ending in vain.

“The three boys with the strength of men were smoking pot in the parking lot trying to muster courage to enter the prom without dates when guess who parked right in their view but Emma and Spencer? Tom snapped and the other two followed along in their fuzzy, foggy minded high state.” Rusty paused again.

Sharon just waited for Rusty to power through what she needed to hear but knew they both did not want to experience.

“While Spencer was opening the passenger door for his lovely lady to get out, Tom pounced on him with full force causing his right eye socket to hit the top corner of the car door. Dear Spencer was unconscious like a sack of potatoes in no time. Tom snarled into the car while the other two rolled Spencer under the car to their right. Emma was screaming at the top of her voice and scratching at Tom’s face with all her might. He fought back with all his might and smashed her head against the window ripping any piece of clothing he could get his hands on. Tom’s buddies tried to act nonchalant in the secluded area of the parking lot, but soon they wanted to get in on the action as well. When they opened the door one solitary shrill scream escaped and pierced the crisp night air.” His face showed he had imagined what that scream from his little girl’s lungs sounded like many times.

“Spencer’s friends who had just arrived and were walking towards the prom heard the scream and came running. Soon the three thugs were experiencing whole new levels of pain while the authorities and ambulance were summoned to the messy melee.” Rusty looked Sharon square in the face.

“Sometimes the fear of what could have happened is more terrifying to deal with than what actually did. When we got the call to come quick to the hospital

to see what some animals had done to our pure angel and her man, the twenty minute drive to the hospital was the longest ride of their lives.”

“Spencer actually had it the worst because his eye would never work again without a corneal transplant. Emma had lots of bumps and bruises, but her ferocious fighting had kept the possibilities of an assault at bay. Later when she shared her story to encourage other girls her age she said, ‘Never, ever let fear stop you from fighting anyway you can if attacked’. Love my girl.” He clinched and unclenched his right fist.

Sharon smiled and nodded.

“The three attackers’ sentence to two years lasted less time than the prison that I was in as I saw my precious princess and her knight in shining armor suffer to overcome the aftermath of the violence against them that they never deserved.” Rusty sighed.

Sharon now looked nowhere in particular.

“I raged into the night and into the bottle. I could not get out of my mind the terror that my sweet baby must have felt as she was being attacked. Emma and Spencer battled through their pain and loss bravely for the first year but it was exhausting work. College was put on hold and they still got married while deciding to wait a while to have kids.”

“A friend from work invited Emma to an informal Bible study at her house and her world exploded in a totally different and new way. Suddenly she was introduced to the good news that God wanted to not only heal her pain from the past based on what others had done, He wanted to heal and forgive her pain from the things she had done wrong. With tears shining on her face she said to me, ‘I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders dad!’ This impacted me.” Rusty could tell his story was affecting Sharon.

“Changed lives inside and outside are the greatest witness and proof of a world view. Two weeks later I was on my knees with my dear daughter letting Jesus wash me clean of all of the filth from my past, present and future.” He smiled thinking of ways he could make his story shorter, but decided it was just fine as it was.

“You see Sharon, forgiveness must be personally received before it can be given away, but when we do, amazing things happen.” Rusty leaned back ready to listen to questions that he hoped would come.

Sharon tried not to open her mouth in awe but she could not help herself. Every

part of Rusty's story related to hers. How was it even possible that she just happened to be attacked and the detective assigned to her case just happened to have a friend who had a job for her and the boss at that new job just happened to have a daughter who just happened to also be attacked and his life was changed by the way she dealt with her pain by receiving this forgiveness thing. The odds against that happening were so large they made the Titanic look like a dingy.

"Rusty, let's do this thing." She stated with resolve and purpose as she reached out and took his big gentle hand and rested it on her head with calm.

With tears in his eyes Rusty lead Sharon down the same prayerful path that had changed his life so dramatically from dark to bright light. He ended with "Thank you sweet Jesus Christ for the sweetest gift of forgiveness, Amen."

Hal and Chuck eased into a good rhythm of friendship and felt good to be like a bi-pod in a larger organism which was the Band. Each day felt like camp, sure they had work to do and they had to watch each other's backs in all the usual places, but as far as the relationship temperature they just got along so well together. They shared stories and laughed together and with every nod of the head that Hal listened with, Chuck wanted to talk more and more about his life. The more he talked about his life the more he felt at ease to talk to God about his life as well. The third weekly meeting of the Band since Chuck came to Parnell he had a joy filled similar experience to what Hal had on his first meeting. Hal was careful to say "It is not important how long it takes someone to come to Jesus, just as long as they do." He then smiled mischievously and said "I know God is just a little more proud of me because I got saved at my first meeting."

To this without missing a beat Chuck responded with a smirk "Well we all can see God is still helping you grow in healthy humility can't we?"

The presence of the Holy Spirit was so thick during the weekly meetings that they could feel it like dew on their skin. Hafid and Floyed continued to reach out to others in their area of cells. All the Band of brothers started to be even bolder in reaching out to others with the goodness that true forgiveness can bring. The sweetest and most powerful times were when they spent time praying together to God, their Abba (daddy) father for repentance and revival to come to every person at Parnell, every person in America, and every person in the world.

Hal thought about Jeana about once a week and was confident his brother had shared what God was doing in his life with her. He had prayerfully let her processing of his betrayal go into God's hands. What he had done was a huge pill to swallow regardless of how much religion somebody has found. Newspapers are filled with people who find God when their lives hit bottom, but as soon as things are ok and the crisis is over they go right back to their old ways of coping with life.

In his personal private prayer times he often told God, "Lord I really would love another shot with Jeana, but if that doesn't work out I still want to follow you no matter what. You are the only one who has forgiven my sin and given me a new way of looking at things. Help me follow you till the day I die!"

Knowing the course of his future above and beyond all his circumstances helped him stay calm at Parnell safely surrounded by his support system, but when he was called to the visitors area and saw his ex-wife standing there in the flesh smiling and looking more fetching than ever, his heart took a leap and his mouth felt like it had ten cotton balls in it.

His expectation that Jeana would be skeptical of his conversion did not account for the fact that she trusted his brother more than pretty much anyone. If Stephen was certain that his life had really changed, then she would be also.

Hal swallowed hard and prayed as he tried to glide across the cold cement to sit across the table from his warm hearted ex-wife. He tripped four feet from the table and caught himself on a chair.

"Well, so much for a grand entrance." Hal chuckled as he sat down. He noticed his voice was quivering just a bit but could not stop it. "I am so happy to see you!"

"I did not have a choice, somebody much bigger than me made it very clear I should come." Jeana blushed in a nice pink hue and showed her imperfect but still cute teeth.

"I have pictured what I would say to you if you ever came here to see me thousands of times, but right now all I can think to say is I am so sorry for sinning against you with Darla and destroying our marriage, will you forgive me?" Hal looked away with tears in his eyes. He could not bear it if Jeana would thank him for the apology but still keep a polite distance even though that is what he expected.

"Well Mr. Hal Dorsey, lots of things have happened to me while you have been here at Parnell. Most of those things have been very healthy while not being very

easy. One thing that happened recently was with God's amazing help I forgave Darla for what she did with you and we are friends now." Jeana swaggered just a bit, quite proud of herself.

Hal exhaled like he just got done doing a hold your breath contest and stood up wanting to run four directions at the same time. "Did I hear you correctly that you and Darla are friends?"

"Honey Hal, you still have to learn to listen better and let your wife finish when she is making a very important point. As I was saying, if I have forgiven Darla for what she did with you, it would be unfair for me to not forgive you, wouldn't it?" Jeana was enjoying bantering with this man who looked and acted totally different than when she saw him last.

"Did you call yourself my wife?" Hal's head was spinning like a merry go round as he sat back down.

"Well at our wedding the pastor told me 'What God puts together let no man tear asunder.' I do not care what the courts of earth say about our marriage. If we keep growing closer and closer to God who made us and loves us so much how can we not grow closer together?" Jeana started to enjoy some of the same tingling she experienced when she first met Hal and they fell in love.

Hal felt his tears materialize around his eyes. He was of course happy that the future looked good for himself and Jeana even if he was still at Parnell, but what made him want to wail and bawl like a newborn baby was that the creator of everything loved him, loved Jeana, loved his kids, loved his brother, loved his sister and everyone so much He was willing to go to such drastic measures to draw them and all humanity back to himself. What an amazing scandalous life-changing truth.

Hal let the tears trickle down his cheeks so Jeana could see them and enjoy them. After a beautiful, meaningful pause he said "I promise to never lie to you, ever, so honestly I want you to know that right now in my mind I am kissing you with the softest, sweetest kisses you have ever experienced." Hal twinkled and just looked at this new person in his ex-wife's body.

Now Jeana had some tears of her own to show off as she turned a darker shade of red.

Chapter 16

Cordway got the call from the forensics lab which had analyzed the glove and metal clasp. He had visited his dear smart uncle and enjoyed their brief conversation as he picked up the remnants from the fire that did not belong. Marjorie had worked in forensics for many years and knew her stuff even though she needed some finesse when one was talking with her. The detective knew this and had used this knowledge many times to get maximum results in his dealings with her.

“Cordway, why are you wasting my precious time with this so called evidence found in the middle of nowhere by some hick farmer?” Marjorie droned on while chomping her gum.

Ignoring the jab at his blood, Cordway smiled as he talked on the phone and said. “Marjorie thanks for calling me back anyway even though I know this is a long shot to providing us with anything we can use. Just give me what you got and I will let you get back to your other more pressing issues.”

“Uh, well. Thanks for understanding my work load’s quite full.” replied Marjorie. “No prints were found on anything, but I am sure you suspected that. The glove material is Nappa Lamb leather which is quite high end and only sold in specialty stores. The clasp is from the handle of a Nike Brasilia small charcoal duffel bag which they stopped making about two years ago.”

Cordway started to frown and rubbed the back of his head soon afraid that the forensics where going to be another dead end which he was used to running into in his profession.

Marjorie continued, “Inside the hollow of the clasp we found some plastic that had not melted in the fire as it was cut off from oxygen being in a very small space. Somehow the very small piece of plastic we have has part of a logo on it that appears to be a customer of the plastic manufacturer that put their client’s own logo on everything but did it in an understated way. People using this plastic would probably not even notice the logo. Do you want to know which customer that logo is for in my expert opinion?” She could not hide she was a little intrigued.

“Sure!” was Cordway’s response while he bit his tongue to not say. “Let’s get to the point already!”

Marjorie droned on in a matter of fact tone “Merrit-Tammy Specialty Surgeons

over in Charlotte.”

Cordway sat up and his brain started to buzz. He started thinking about why plastic from a surgeon in Charlotte ended up in some mysterious remains of a fire on his uncle’s farm near Albion.

“Is that all you need?” questioned Marjorie as she noticed a prolonged silence.

“Oh, sorry, yes that is great. Thanks for your help. Please make sure that evidence is logged under miscellaneous. Have a great day.” He stared straight ahead as he hung up the phone.

Cordway was glad to have his case load not quite as busy as it had been in recent weeks so he thought he would do some digging over at Merritt-Tammy and see what he could find out. He used the thirty five minute drive to Charlotte MI to still his mind while looking at nature and to reflect on some of the sick and twisted cases he had been assigned over the years.

He tried hard to fight back the despair that often surfaced as he tried to explain the depraved ways humans who are supposed to be evolving into higher beings seem to keep devolving into sicker and sicker beings in their treatment of each other. Pundits and musicians all plead with us to just get along because all we need is love. This detective however had seen way too much evidence of society’s tragic inability to do anything close to those ideals.

He found Merritt-Tammy easily and introduced himself to the receptionist who was pretty and nice and introduced him to the supplies manager named Stan Scofield.

“What does a detective from East Lansing want with our supplies?” Asked Stan.

“Well, it may be nothing but I think some of this plastic with your company logo on it was in some evidence that could be linked to a crime of some sort. Can I see how many different types of plastic packing materials you have with your logo on them?” Probed Cordway.

“Only One”

“Really” Now Cordway was encouraged.

“Really, we tried to use the manufacturer for more projects but their costs kept going up for this very unique service where we try to keep our name in front of people even in subtle ways while people open up a package with their physical therapy supplies and instructions after surgery. We are just using up what we have left and will be discontinuing the process as soon as we run out.” Stan

seemed to be enjoying explaining the challenges of the struggle between marketing efforts and the affordability and results of those same efforts.

Now a very curious Cordway asked, “When did you start using the logoed packing plastic?”

“About 6 months ago” replied Stan.

“So is it accurate to say that only patients who had surgery at your facility would have gotten this plastic with your logo on it in the last six months?” Probed Cordway.

“Very accurate” Stan marveled at the efficiency with which the detective picked up the details and narrowed the focus of his questions.

“Can I?” before Cordway could finish the question Stan finished it for him. “Get a list of all patients from the last six months that got stuff from that one facility?” “Of course” Stan smiled as he walked to his computer to print the list of patients.

Jeana was floating for quite a while after her conversation with her incarcerated life partner. She knew there were obstacles ahead, but felt so encouraged that the future was looking brighter than the promise of sunrise on a spring day.

One of the harsh realities of our lives following God is that even though our future victory is more secure than anything ever, the enemy of our souls who grinds his teeth when we worship and give God praise, is very adept at counter attacks in the here and now which seek to discourage us and push our focus down to trying to fix things ourselves.

Three days after her visit to Hal she met with Stephen and Candace for a great time of prayer and fellowship over food at Rusty’s for lunch. They all smiled and giggled as Jeana re-enacted her conversation at Parnell with Hal. Visiting opportunities came every two weeks so she said “I am so looking forward to my next visit”

On her way home she felt like she was driving two feet off the ground. She happened to drive by a part of town that reminded her of when she was rear ended and discovered Hal’s affair. She felt a dark slithery shadow on her shoulder and an accusatory voice thought cast a web over her mind. ‘How can you be sure Hal will not stray again if things work out for you to get back together?’

For a few seconds her mind rushed through the agony of what a second betrayal

from someone who supposedly found God would mean to her and the kids. She

started to breathe a little heavier as extra weight descended like a dark cloud on her mood.

Thankfully her mind raced to the wonderful things she had been learning from Patty about her authority as a chosen loved one of Christ. She knew that she had to speak out loud against the lies of the enemy of her soul.

“Listen up Satan and all you spirits of fear and control, my Bible tells me that my God shall supply all my needs according to his riches in glory. If Hal falls again that has nothing to do with my value as a person. Jesus loves me so much he died for my sins and nothing can separate me from his love so you can take your lies and your fears about the future and things I cannot control and take them with you to hell where you belong and one day will be forever!” She held onto the steering wheel with a vice grip grasp and swayed forward and back.

As Jeana said the last rebukes she felt a peace and calm come over her and caught someone in the car next to her looking at her like she was a crazy person talking into the air. She simply smiled with peace and joy, waved at the person, looked ahead and kept on driving. She thought of the verse that says, “If God is for us who can be against us?” She also knew she would have to repeat this process often as God continued to work in every area of her life.

She discovered that counter attacks from our enemy usually come in pairs when a few minutes later she received a call from Rose’s school with a command not a request for her presence.

“Please report to the principal’s office as soon as possible.” The flat voice ordered her over her smart phone.

When she arrived at Rose’s school she was ushered into the principal’s office without ceremony. Rose was crammed into the side of her chair that was farthest from her enemy principal and the chair where she knew her mom would soon be sitting.

Reading the situation to be not ideal Jeana breathed a prayer for help and strength and patient calmness and slid into her seat by her daughter in front of Principal Stephanie Howard.

Ms. Howard had been principal for eight years and looked to be closing in on retirement. She was known to be fair but firm. This reputation made Jeana

suspect the blame for why her daughter was in the principal's office fell mostly on Rose's shoulders.

As the principal started to go into the offenses that Rose was being charged with, Jeana got a Spirit filled idea to consult with her daughter first instead of getting the color of the situation from the principal's eyes.

"Excuse me principal Howard may I briefly talk with my daughter alone before we get into discussing this situation?"

"Mrs Dorsey (Jeana had always kept her married name for the sake of her kids) let me advise you of how we do things around here. We discuss the situations that arise with the parents and the students involved then after a decision is reached you are allowed to discuss things on your own time with your child." She tapped her pen on her desk for emphasis.

With calm firmness and without moving her gaze from the principal Jeana re-established the balance of power in the room. "Dear Stephanie, I understand you have established a protocol of dealing with situations that works for you, however I am my daughter's parent and the primary responsibility of discipline falls squarely on my shoulders first. This school is meant to come along side me in that responsibility, NOT seek to try to come in between that responsibility."

Jeana looked to console her dear daughter with loving eyes and spoke to the fast wilting principal at the same time. "Please give us the room for five to seven minutes and I will call you back in." She kept looking at Rose and waited for the exit of the principal.

Principal Stephanie Howard blinked and paused in shock. She tried to think of some smart intellectual retort, but somehow nothing came to her mind. She felt a little flushed and wisely decided to exit her own office with body language that projected the perception that her departure was her own idea.

Jeana took her daughter's hand and invited her into honest conversation. "Ok, what happened?" She said in a calm and patient tone.

Rose wiped some new tears that were coming from her eyes and did not hesitate to reveal all because over the past months she had entered into a sweet new place of trust with her mom. She had seen how her mom's patience with crazy circumstances like, her ex-husband going to prison for rape after an affair had not been easy. Her mom had been messy for sure, but she kept on coming back as her faith in the reality of God's love kept being the rock that her life was built on. Bottom line, Rose trusted her mom because her mom was real with her.

“Mom, Ginny Mascot and all her friends have been all over Facebook and Twitter saying that I am nothing but white trash because my dad is in prison for rape and because I don’t wear the newest trend in clothing. I have been ignoring all the stuff as you have told me to do and I was staying below the radar pretty well. Then Ginny’s boyfriend made the mistake of holding the door for me along with others one day after class. Ginny is so controlling and fearful she invents things to worry about. The next day at recess out of nowhere she came up to me and started kicking me. I restrained myself for the first two kicks, but soon I knew she was not going to stop. I just kicked her back on the leg she was using for support while kicking me. She went down hard just at the time the principal must have been looking at us. I tried to explain that she started it to the principal but she did not believe me. I know now I should have just walked away and asked for a teacher.” Rose wiped her tears from her face with passion.

Jeana paused to soak in the situation. She endured a few flashbacks to various persecutions she had encountered before and after being a divorced single mom. She wanted to fight for her daughter as being 100% wronged in the situation, but experience had taught her there is always blame to share in every situation.

“Do you like Ginny’s boyfriend?”

“No” “You always tell me 5th grade is way too early to start dating but our media keeps ramming the search for true love down our throats so we cannot just enjoy being kids!” Rose waved her hands just like her mom when she talked.

“Glad you have been listening.” Jeana smiled with satisfaction. “Have you forgiven Ginny?”

“Mom, I have tried, but it is so hard since I am here in trouble and she is out there laughing with her friends.”

Jeana nodded with understanding. “I know it is hard, but with God all things are possible, have you asked God to help you forgive Ginny?”

“Yes, right now.” Rose smiled with the relief of being understood. She also was glad prayer can be so practical when it flows from an honest heartfelt need. “I will apologize for my wrong in kicking Ginny back.”

Jeana started to pray in a natural way with her daughter as they had done many times. “Lord, thank you for forgiving us for all our sins. You know Ginny and everything she needs. We pray you help us forgive Ginny. We pray you convict her of any wrong so she can bring it to you for forgiveness. We pray you bring all the truth to light in this situation, but we promise to serve you and obey you even if nobody believes us but you.” Jeana rubbed her daughter’s shoulder in

silence for thirty seconds. “Ok you ready?”

“Sure” responded Rose.

Exactly five minutes and forty seconds from the time that the principal was expelled from her own office for a season Jeana opened the door and invited her back in.

Principal Howard agreed to look into things further with Ginny and Rose happily agreed to two weeks of detention. As the principal shook hands with the mom at the end of the meeting she felt a charge that was way past the power of physical connection. Mutual respect was thick in the room.

Chapter 17

Hal had a bad dream. It started out as a great dream. He was back at home with Jeana and the kids and they were celebrating Brian's birthday. All of the happy birthday stereotypes were in play that get overplayed in the movies to show that happily ever after syndrome which is actually a lie. Jeana and himself were finishing up last minute details in the kitchen for the meal. Jeana was bustling with joy not knowing her husband was watching her from afar marveling at her beauty on the inside and the outside. She noticed he was not making any work noise on his list of duties and looked at him to see what was wrong. She glowed when he turned a little red like a pre-teen boy caught looking at his first crush.

She scanned the room from her over her shoulder and everyone else was busy yapping and ignoring the renewed remarried lovers in the kitchen. She loosened the strings on her apron and started sauntering toward Hal with her eyes locked on his. Hal knew as only married people who have been together for quite some time know, something good was about to happen. Something ordained by God; something that is worth protecting; something that points to the immense power and imagination of God; something so powerful that God created marriage to protect it because left alone it is a wildfire that cannot be tamed.

Six inches from his lovely wife's face the nightmare began. An actress from one of his past porn binges jumped in between himself and his bride and tackled him to the ground and started kissing him in an over emphasized and tacky manner getting lipstick all over his shirt. Jeana screamed "not again" and started to run from the house. Suddenly half the house was gone and people were falling out into a black space looking atmosphere flailing their arms and legs in desperation.

"No!" cried Hal so loud it was heard three cells down their row. Chuck hopped out of his bed and shook Hal awake.

"Man I had a freaky dream." Hal said,

"It must have been since you yelled 'no' pretty loud." replied Chuck.

"It was so real." Hal whispered as he started to feel his breathing slow down.

"I have had those kinds of dreams too, what was yours about?" probed Chuck.

Hal and Chuck had grown close as brothers so Hal took no offense to the gentle probing of his friend. He replayed the dream blow by blow and Chuck's eyes got bigger at the part where it turned into a nightmare.

“Have I blown it forever? Is my past going to never let me free to love Jeana like she deserves to be loved? Hal’s shoulders were slumped in dejection.

The great thing about all relationships that honor God is that the longer the relationship is seasoned with time, the lines of who is the mentor or parent and who is the mentee or child shift and change where soon you have mutual respect and support where encouragement is given and received. Counsel is given and received. Debate is enjoyed freely without fear of resentment. This is the kind of relationship that Hal and Chuck had.

“My dear brother and friend, someone whom I really respect and value once told me that Romans 8:31 says; ‘If God is for us who can be against us.’ God is the judge and he made everything and he says your past is forgiven forever. Satan is just trying to discourage you by bringing up your past and throwing it in your face.” Chuck waved his hands emphatically as spoke.

Hal started to perk up as felt he was looking in the mirror and remembered saying those very words to his friend many times.

“Thanks brother for the reminder, I know I need to do some more imitating of the widow who kept going back to the wicked judge and finally he worked on her behalf. Would you pray for me?” Hal started to bow his head even before Chuck answered.

“Nope, I got some other important stuff I gotta do at 2:30 AM in a prison cell.” Chuck chortled as he teased his friend.

“Lord, thanks so much for my friend Hal, thank you for what you have done in his life and for what you will continue to do. Thanks for how you have used him in my life. Right now the enemy is trying to use fear of his past robbing his future to discourage him. We together rebuke the enemy and all his lies. We say everything from Hal’s past is washed in the precious blood of Jesus. We say all things work together for good for us because we have given you our lives, our sin and everything. We say that nothing can separate us from your love and we are so safe and hugged in you right now.” Chuck rubbed Hal’s shoulder.

Hal started sobbing. He gushed and rested in the love of his Lord.

Chuck just sat there with his friend.

“Where would we be without this amazing personal God who takes all of our pain and selfishness and pride of our lives and turns it into something so beautiful? Hal sighed.

“The goodness of God is not tied to our circumstances. It is bolted with the most secure bolts ever to the reality of real and perfect love. How can God take our simple prayers of desperation as we hang onto the last thread of the end of the rope with our teeth and answer those prayers with forgiveness of all our sin? Not only forgiveness of all sin, but restoration of healthy relationships; not only restoration, but the chance to taste real joy and peace and strength to endure crazy hard circumstances?” Chuck showed his clinched teeth to illustrate his point.

Hal prayed as he sniffled, “Holy Father, thank you for taking the junk of my life and not only using it to bring me to you, but using it to help my dear friend Chuck come to you also. I know now how Paul could glory in his infirmities because it created a dependence on you. We depend on you. Please remove from me the images from my dream that are trying to rob me of my present joy by reminding me of past sin. Satan I rebuke you and your lies about what defines me. The truth is that God is on my side, not because of anything I have done to earn it, but squarely because he decided to do so. If things work out for me and Jeana that is fine, if things don’t that is fine also because my God has told me over and over again that nothing can separate me from his love. Satan and spirits of fear and control, you can take your worries of what might happen and shame about what has happened and you can leave right now. Jesus, thanks again for your peace that passes understanding. Amen.”

Chuck wiped the tears from his cheeks with purpose as the two friends chuckled sighed and smiled all at the same time.

The next day the entire band of brothers got together again for their usual meeting of sharing and praying for each other followed by supper which was way less memorable than their fellowship and fun playing cards together. The depth of the trust and the bond between these men kept growing.

After one bout of uncontrollable laughter which resulted in tears for some, Hal commented about home much everyone meant to him. Everyone paused and nodded their similar sentiments.

Marty was cracking under the weight and burden of his past and present sin. It is as true as the sun is bright that we reap what we sow. Deep down in the recesses of his fractured heart he knew he had done many things wrong, he also knew that if he was ever discovered and disgraced, he would not last one week as a convicted rapist cop in any type of prison. His belief in Karmic reincarnation tried to be a salve for his sullied soul. Death by cop was his only option if he was ever discovered, followed by re-starting his ascent to humanness all over again as

a frog trying to have fun while having flies. He knew this was a logical leap and the odds were long it would work out, but he had to have some shot to come back from all he had done. There simply were no other options.

Marty tried to keep clear of his mother most of the time because he felt so belittled by her like the Amazing Shrinking Man movie, but she did cook some amazing comfort food and he was in need of some serious comfort.

Paige Williford was passing the time with her book club of four other medium society ladies who were working their second husbands hard to become high society ladies. The book club meeting was just finishing up as Marty Cotley stepped into the sparkled hallway and removed his shoes in fear of making a mess.

Paige was sincerely happy to see her son even though sometimes she struggled knowing how to show it. Divorced from Marty's father when Marty was ten she kept in touch annually until moving back to Charlotte where the relationship was getting a little better.

"Marty come in and meet my friends." Paige said with a smile.

She completed the customary introductions while Marty knew he would never remember the names of these women whom his mom was trying to impress using her super cool detective son.

After the friends left and mom Paige was pulling leftover meat loaf out of the fridge and making from memory the best meat loaf sandwich her son had ever tasted, she said. "So how have you been? Have you solved any new big cases lately?"

"No, not really, just the same old boring vice cases." Responded Marty with his eyes glued to the sandwich manufacturing project.

Marty flashed back to many interchanges with his mom as a child in the kitchen. Everything was normal and boring middle class stuff. He could not help himself from thinking, 'what will people think of this normal broken family if I am caught? Was I abused? Was I neglected?'

These questions had crossed his mind many times as he busted people for all kinds of crimes of deviance. What he learned soon and often is that looks can be deceiving. Even though society and television stereotypes would make us believe that those with good work ethics and socioeconomic status are immune to decadence and loss of control in any given area. What he found is that perver-

sion crosses all boundaries of society because it is a hidden torture of both the victims and the perpetrators whom have at one time been victims themselves in some way.

Marty's victimization came from a fellow student. It can come from anywhere, anytime but perversion always reproduces itself when allowed to incubate in the cold, wet darkness of secrecy.

"Are you not hungry?" Paige repeated as it seemed as if her son did not hear her.

"Oh, sure, of course I am hungry." Marty blinked as if just waking up and sat down at the kitchen table to enjoy his favorite sandwich.

His enjoyment of that amazing sandwich only lasted five bites when the doorbell rang.

While his mom was talking at the door Marty ignored the distant voices as way less important than what was going on in his mouth.

When detective Cordway stepped into his mom's kitchen something inside him wanted to spew everything out his mouth and run for the door.

"Here is my son Marty who also works in law enforcement." Paige tried not to sound too proud but she failed greatly as she sat next to her son at the table to eaves drop as her son and a fellow public servant talked shop.

Marty purposely slowed his breathing and stood, looking Cordway right in the eyes, reached out and shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you detective what brings you to this neck of the woods?" Marty motioned for Cordway to join them at the table.

"Well", Cordway responded as he sat down. "This is the longest of shots and I know you are gonna laugh but my uncle owns a farm a little south of here and he found some things in his fire pit that just did not fit. One of those things had some plastic that somehow was not burned up and that plastic had promotional printing on it that was only used for a short period of time by a company that your mom received some products from in follow up from her surgery. I am just working my way down the list of the people to check for associations with unsavory characters that may have potential in solving unsolved cases."

Marty kept his gaze directly on Cordway. "You are right, that is the longest of shots, have you had any luck finding anyone associated with your list that has a record or bad associations?"

“No.” “Your mom is the last one on my list so clearly this is a dead end.” “Where do you serve our fine state?” Cordway probed.

“I am in vice here in Charlotte” Marty new better than to try to probe too much into what Cordway had. He knew that innocent people don’t care about things that do not pertain to them.

“How do you like it over there in vice?” Cordway was making small talk as a professional courtesy.

“It’s not too bad. Sometimes the crazies wear on you after a while.” Marty said.

“Well, my case load is full so I cannot invest any more time on this goose chase. It was nice to meet you both. I can see myself out.” Cordway left the house.

As Cordway walked towards his car something prompted the smart detective to look back and he saw two fingers slightly moving the blinds so someone inside could look at him as he left. When Marty realized his fingers were seen he quickly removed them and scolded himself inside. He knew what Cordway knew. Only people with something to hide watch a detective leave the scene of a questioning. Cordway decided to do some digging into the past of a certain Charlotte vice detective.

The speed of the changes in Sharon’s life was increasing in positive ways. Every time she reflected on her conversion and conversation with Rusty she could not help but smile. She reflected on her past brushes with so-called religion and her strong hesitance to take the leap. Now having come through the door to the other side, she wondered why anyone would delay one second.

In her follow up talks with Rusty he explained the power of the fear of the unknown which keeps millions of people trapped in the misery of a hopeless reality under the illusion that they are the master of their own ship conquering life. “The truth is, running my life myself never did me any good, so I had nothing to lose to give it over to God.” Rusty glowed as he shared.

Clearing up the junk from her past was the first assignment that Rusty had commissioned her with. She invited Stephen and Candace and the kids to lunch after her morning shift on a mid-week day.

“I apologize for accusations I made about your family in my hurt and anger.” She looked nervous as she waited for a response.

“Of course I forgive you. Thank you for having the courage to clean up messes from the past.” Stephen almost giggled as he talked.

“Me too, I forgive you. You look so different to me since I saw you last.” Candace radiated as she gave Sharon a shoulder squeeze.

“I feel different.” Sharon looked relieved. “Now kids I hear you like Hot Chocolate is that a rumor?”

“Oh yes, we like apologies that taste like hot chocolate!” Said the girls almost in unison.

After they enjoyed good food and fellowship and said goodbye Sharon did not want to let moss grow under the changes she was letting God make in her life. Facing Hal was next in line and she was struggling how to forgive him. She remembered what Rusty always said. “If you need to do something and cannot do it. That is what you are supposed to ask God for help with. This of course means everything.”

She stepped outside and looked at the sky while she walked to her car. She got in, still deep in prayer and said, “Well Lord, Rusty says I can ask you about anything anytime. I need to forgive Hal for what he did to me and I cannot do that unless you help me. Amen.”

Gradually over the next few minutes she felt a release of something in her heart similar to the relief you feel when you start breathing again after holding your breath. She got a picture in her mind’s eye of Jesus smiling at her with this huge playful and joyful grin with sparkly eyes and he said, “I am so proud of you for asking me for help!”

The next day Sharon was walking into Parnell to visit and forgive her attacker. When she was checking in the person recognized her from the court case coverage and was visibly shocked to see her put Hal Dorsey down as the person she wanted to visit.

“No, it is no mistake.” Responded Sharon to the question being asked by the eyes of the person manning the sign in sheet.

Hal was curious when he was summoned for a visitor because letters from Stephen and Candace and Jeana all did not point to possible visits on this day. As he approached the table and realized it was Sharon, he paused only slightly in his steps but his mind was racing through possible things that he might have to listen to or say.

Soon the unlikely pair were seated opposite each other at the table without a word. Small talk seemed pointless in these surroundings.

Sharon charged ahead while she had the nerve. “I forgive you for all of it.” She blurted with an exhale of relief.

Hal paused, not wanting to rush in. He prayed a quick prayer for help. Then he said, “Sharon, thank you for having the courage to come and say what you needed to say: I want you to know I am very sorry for the pain you have felt, not only on that night but also for the many hurtful things that have been put on you over the years.”

Hal continued, “I do not want to minimize the effort it has taken for you to be here or my guilt in being at the location where you were attacked, but with God as the one who sees everything and is my personal Savior as my witness, I did not attack you.”

Sharon had heard Hal’s version of that night in court and suspected he would repeat it, but the fact that Hal in such a matter of fact way proclaimed God as his personal Savior was music to her ears.

“You mean you know Jesus’ forgiveness also?” She smiled as she asked.

“Of course” said Hal as if it was old news.

“For me it has been very recent, but it changes everything doesn’t it?” Sharon said with growing ease.

Like the change in light when one flings open a window to let the light in, the tenor of the entire conversation changed from dutiful rehashing of the past to the giddy joy of sharing about how great it feels to be really forgiven.

“Yep, I had to be locked up to be really free. I remember kids saying spiritual sounding words at Church Camp just so their parents could breathe easy because their kids were in the club and not going to hell, but then going back to school and life as if nothing changed.” Hal shook his head.

“Me too. Why is everyone so good at talking about following Jesus instead of actually doing it?” Sharon’s face showed urgency in wanting an answer to her question.

“The reality of forgiveness needs to be like a fine wine, the more it ages and matures in us it makes us sweeter and sweeter to be around. Angry, bitter people inside the church and outside the church have never really experienced the reality of true forgiveness.” Hal nodded and showed peace on his face.

“How do you keep following Jesus?” Sharon asked as she puzzled how the conversation was going so different than her expectations.

“I have a Band of Brothers. A small group of people whom I trust and can be ruthlessly honest with about my life. As we confess our sins to each other over and over we ARE being healed.” Hal appeared to Sharon as one having a secret that was so great it changed everything.

“I know, I have a similar thing starting with your brother and sister, they are so real to talk with. She picked some lint from her sweater out of habit.

“So Hal, I believe you when you say that you did not attack me, but I cannot remember from the trial why you were in room 385 and why they found my hair on your car and all that junk on your computer?” Sharon probed.

Hal had told his story many times and each time it was healthy, but he had not told it to a woman before. He knew the only way out was through the truth.

“Sharon, what God has forgiven me for was a long standing addiction to lust manifested in various ways. That is why I was there and called Happy Times to be my first foray into a new way. The junk on my computer was all me. But the hair on my car and how someone attacked you in my room without me knowing about it is a mystery to me?” Hal again showed relief.

“That does not make any sense to me.” Sharon thought out loud. “I thought you were there the whole time? If I was supposed to come see you then where did I go?”

“I was in room 375, which room were you supposed to go to?” Now Hal was curious also.

“Room 375” Sharon said with a confused look.

Hal had an idea. “Let’s not focus on the room number because our minds remember things in different ways. Can you picture the hallway at the hotel?”

“Yes”

“How far down did you walk from the elevator before you got to the room?”

“It was the third to last door from the end on the right.” Sharon said with assured confidence with her eyes closed as she replayed her walk in her mind.

Hal closed his eyes and pictured his walk from the elevator to his room.

“Sharon, I am confident that when I put my key in my door there were definitely more than two doors between me and the end of the hall.”

In Sharon’s mind she heard a voice as clear as the clearest stereo sound. A voice that was sweeter than the sweetest honey. A voice that sounded like home personified. This voice said one profound thing.

“385”

Chapter 18

Rusty was faithfully plugging away running his business and loving his friends, family and employees in a way that would honor God. Almost daily there were little jabs that he had to endure from the enemy because of what he stood for. The jabs were things like customers looking for ways to find a mistake with their food or service so they could get free food. The jabs were employees getting distracted with things other than doing their very best for each customer. Texting distractions, gossiping distractions and many others were usual for his day.

Rusty found the only solution to these jabs was to be vigilant to recognize where they were coming from and not let his perfectionism get him in the whining and controlling mode. With guests he breathed in the Holy Spirit deeply and smiled and made things right. With employees he relied on the Holy Spirit to be joyful and respectful yet authentic as he would remind them of the correct actions based on policy.

A haymaker punch from the enemy happened on an unusually busy day when a sewer line from the neighboring business broke and the net effect was the worst smell possible permeating a large section of the restaurant. It took about four hours for the issue to be resolved. Rusty turned the negative into a positive like a farmer turns manure into fertilizer by acknowledging the issue with each customer and giving them the option to come back for a free meal later or stay for a free meal. Logic of this crooked earth screamed that in the face of loss of business, one should cut costs and save the bottom line. Rusty followed a different logic squarely from Heaven which says that when people receive lavish compensation for a problem whether it is their own or someone else's fault, this builds loyalty.

Lavish grace really received equals lavish loyalty.

Rusty's business continued to thrive because amazing grace is such a practical teacher for all areas of life.

Saturday night at dinner time when Rusty saw Sharon come into work with her new smile bought and paid for by the lavish grace of a loving God he could not help but smile. In his heart he said to the enemy of all souls. 'Go ahead and jab and punch all you want to, this young lady is not only going to heaven, but she is going to bring many others with her.'

"Hi sunshine how you doing today?" Rusty greeted Sharon as she entered with a

father like warmth.

Sharon lit up and replied. "So thankful, how are you?"

"Something extra good happen?" Rusty queried.

"Oh yea, I got to patch things up with Stephen and Candace and the girls and also went to see Hal!"

"Really, that is great!" Rusty just beamed and pushed out his chest a little like a proud papa.

"We will talk soon, I better punch in or my slave driver boss will ream me out!" Sharon scooted toward the time clock back in the kitchen.

"You better do that, I hear he is a real piece of work." Rusty smiled as he chuckled at the banter.

Jerry Stormy had been a regular customer of Rusty's for about six months and was sitting in ear shot of the conversation between the friends who also were boss and employee. He had related to Rusty's story in a similar way that Sharon had and given his heart to Jesus also. Before coming to Christ he had lost his marriage and then his ex-wife died of ovarian cancer shortly after. His daughter Julie at age four kept him busy as a single dad working as a plumber while parenting for two on his own.

Jerry had noticed Sharon for a while, but he really perked up as he just happened to overhear her story of forgiveness as it related to Hal. He knew he had to say something to Sharon. Jerry was three years older than Sharon. He had brown wavy hair, blue eyes and a wiry build. He was not overly handsome, but had an ease about him that made him gentle to talk to.

When Sharon emerged from the kitchen to start her shift Jerry said, "Sharon, you seem extra joyful today!" He hoped for a few volleys back and forth of a playful conversation to commence.

"Yes I am." Said Sharon with a slight smile and shimmy of her hair.

Then she turned without another word and went into the kitchen to run some food to one of her co-worker's tables.

Jerry looked a little blushed like he thought everyone was looking at him and he was out on the dreaded plank of awkward silence with imagined swords of gazes poking at his rump.

Rusty, observing from a slight distance could not help but smile. He went into the kitchen and helped Sharon tray up the food. After she ran the food to a co-workers table he pulled her aside and said. "You know Jerry was trying to start a conversation with you to possibly ask you out don't you?"

"Really, I thought he was just making an observation?" Sharon said with a puzzled look that was turning into thoughts of possibilities.

"Go out there and talk to him some more." Rusty said teasingly as he pushed her out the door of the kitchen.

When she looked for Jerry at his table she realized he had left the building. She snuck out into the parking lot at a pace that said she was interested but not desperate. Jerry was half way to his company plumbing vehicle.

"Thanks for coming out today, did you need anything else?" Sharon's voice cracked just a little as she finished and she did not know if he heard the crackle.

Jerry turned and smiled with just his eyes and said. "No, everything was just fine. I will be back tomorrow."

"What about the day after tomorrow, I am off that day?" Sharon kept walking toward Jerry with determination.

"You will be fine without seeing me for one twenty four our period." Jerry was teasing and catching on fast, but still started to turn again for his truck.

"If you would man up and ask me to dinner you could keep the run of days you have seen me going. Only if you want to of course. Sharon swiveled her shoulders and flipped her hair for Jerry's benefit.

"Great, I'll ask you tomorrow then, if your pretty little schedule is still free." Jerry finished his turn and his completion of his trek to his truck had extra swagger in his hips for Sharon's benefit.

Sharon glowed and bit her bottom lip as she re-entered the store. Rusty tried to look like he had not been watching the whole conversation from the window.

"I think we are gonna go out!" Sharon curtsied and fanned herself with an imaginary fan.

Rusty did his best silent golf clap imitation and smiled from ear to ear.

Stephen and Candace walked in right behind Sharon and got in on the end of the inside joke with joy.

Rusty smiled and said. “Well, there are some of my favorite people. Sharon, do you think you could find a section to put them in where they would be helped by an awesome server?”

Sharon chuckled and grabbed two menus all in one motion and escorted them to a table chatting all the way. Once she delivered their food and she had a few minutes to chat again, she remembered what happened in her visit to Hal and knew she had to fill his family in on the developments.

“You two are never going to guess whom I just visited yesterday?” The anticipation of their reaction was literally making Sharon tremble just a bit.

“Who” Stephen asked: He barely looked up because he was concentrating on getting the exact correct placement of butter on his pancakes so when he poured the warm syrup on it the buttery syrupy goodness lasted evenly throughout consumption.

“Hal Dorsey, your brother.”

Both of Hal’s siblings paused and looked at each other in disbelief.

“You went to see Hal, really?” Candace said sheepishly while Stephen kept trying to think of words to say and nothing came.

“Yep, we had a great talk and I am convinced he did not attack me.” Right after Sharon said these words she became quite aware of where she was and momentarily embarrassed about talking about such private things in public. Then she remembered most everyone in the restaurant not only knew her well, but knew her story from the public trial that had happened. Then she thought, ‘if anyone does think bad things about me because of what I just said, my God has forgiven me for everything in my past and if he is for me, I don’t care who else is against me.’

“How are you so sure he did not attack you?” Stephen finally found some words with which he tried to disguise the shock and only partially succeeded.

“We retraced the events of that night based on our memories and I went to a completely different room than the one Hal was in. I must have gotten mixed around with my numbers.” Sharon had such peace as the pieces of what really happened started to unfold.

As Stephen and Candace and Sharon rejoiced and discussed plans of giving this new evidence to detective Cordway at the table where Stephen and Candace were seated, totally out of their sight and consciousness, just one table away a

man sat looking out the window pretending to be deep in thought about some far off personal problem while he was actually locked in and listening to the conversation.

This man had carefully altered his appearance to fade into the woodwork of everyone's remembrance of him ever even being at Rusty's.

This man has taken care to keep his eye on Sharon and Stephen and Candace and their movements on a regular basis in case they ever started to figure things out about what really happened that night that caused their lives to meld.

This man, Marty, knew these three happy people, that very night could not even have the opportunity to have a conversation with one detective Cordway.

Marty knew that kidnapping three people would most likely create more of a fire storm of attention, but he knew Cordway to be smart and once he found out the room number was wrong, he would be quick to start snooping around for other suspects. 'Why did that blasted little piece of plastic with writing not burn up in a fire?' He bemoaned.

Marty knew he had to nip this thing in the bud and hope that as the missing person case went cold, Cordway's attention would shift elsewhere. He had been as careful as an antelope in the wild to make sure Cordway was not following him to the restaurant.

Marty left Rusty's without incident, he was happy one of the other servers cashed him out at the register. He left from his parking spot which he had pre-scouted as being out of video surveillance range. He knew Sharon would be at work until eleven and had trackers on both her car and Stephen's car.

Marty laid in wait for Stephen and Candace at their house. He parked down the street as to not have his car be seen. When the joyful chattering brother and sister arrived home he walked casually to the front door and rang the bell in a matter of fact way. He scoured the street with his intelligent gaze to make sure he was not seen, but in a way to not show he was doing so.

When Stephen came to the door he did not recognize Marty from the restaurant. "Can I help you?" was his pleasant greeting.

"Yes, my name is detective Daniels from ELPD and detective Cordway asked me to follow up with you regarding a case that was closed a while back regarding your brother Hal Dorsey." While delivering this lie Marty flashed his badge and

walked past Stephen and sat in a chair in a smooth manner to portray he had done this kind of thing before. He knew that lying about his name and wearing a disguise would not keep these relatives of his patsy from identifying him, he was just looking to buy time with the kidnapping so he could plan his disappearance to a tropical island filled with sun and sexy bikinis.

“Yes, we were just happy to learn that Sharon had the wrong room number in her mind at the trial. We plan to meet with Cordway tomorrow to pass this info on. Stephen was still smiling as he looked forward to the freedom of his brother.

“Oh, that is great, I can do that for you first thing Monday and we will meet with Sharon to tie up any loose ends quickly. Is it just the two of you here today? I don’t want to interrupt your sharing this happy news with the kids.” Marty kept his eyes steady on Stephen with Candace in the periphery.

“No, Jessica and Brehanna are over at a friend’s house helping plan a surprise birthday party. They should be home later tonight. Stephen thought the question was a little weird, but dismissed it as over friendly ELPD community service.

Marty knew his window was closing fast so he pounced. While producing a gun from his right coat pocket and waving it with a menacing action, he commanded in a low but firm tone. “Please, both of you, put your hands behind you and lay on the floor on your stomachs.” When he saw their puzzled faces slowing their movement he barked, “NOW.”

Feeling hurt and betrayed the two did as they were told while trying to control the sudden rush of adrenaline they were experiencing. They also started praying.

Marty used zip ties to restrain their hands like he had done it before while keeping them far enough from each other so they could not surprise him, but close enough so they were always in his sight.

“This situation is going to go as smoothly as you two allow it to go. Know this, if I wanted you dead you would already be floating in acid right now. I am not a murderer, but if either of you tries to run or draw attention to us or attacks me someone is gonna die for sure.” Marty waved the gun with authority as reminder.

Stephen calmly said, “We will be just fine and give you no trouble.”

“You have any nanny cams or surveillance cameras in this house?”

“No” replied Candace as she suddenly regretted the fact that they did not.

“Any medications you taking that you cannot be without?”

“None” Said Stephen.

“Ok, let’s go for a ride, it will be a little like camp.” Marty ushered his two captives into Stephen’s car and then drove them away with the appearance of just another hum drum errand taken by a non-descript car down an average street in the middle of average town USA.

In a section of East Lansing that Marty had no ties to. He had purchased a few years back a small house with alley access in a neighborhood where everyone kept to themselves. He purchased the house in the name of one of his fake identifications. Marty pulled Stephen’s car into the garage of the house which also faced the alley and marched the two through the internal door from the garage into the bathroom by the kitchen which had no outside window. It had the smell of not being used for quite a while.

“Don’t worry, I will get you into a different secure place in a jiffy.” He said almost cheerfully as he locked the door.

Stephen and Candace had about four square feet of space to stand without sitting on the divan or the toilet. “My lady may I offer you a seat on the throne?” Stephen bowed slightly and waved an imaginary hat across his midsection.

“Sir you are the true gentlemen.” Candace smiled and sat down as she wondered how long they had to wait in these confined quarters.

“Well, sis, I am so glad we can use this time wisely in prayer.” Stephen had experienced many times like this where the obstacles of the enemy had tried to discourage him and it always turned out for good, even if the only good was extra time spent in prayer about any and every situation.

The pair turned their unlikely confined waiting room into a sweet little sanctuary as they sang a few of their favorite worship choruses and then spent an hour praying for their captor, his family, his friends, their family who would be missing them, Stephen’s kids, their country, their church, specific needs from their prayer chain’s prayer list and other things that the Holy Spirit revealed to them as they prayed.

Ninety minutes after going into the small bathroom the door opened and Marty ushered them into an interior bedroom that he had used plywood to completely cover the wall where the window was. There was a couple folding chairs and old 1970s carpet on the floor. There was a folding table and with a water jug on it and some fruit and crackers and some miscellaneous bags of chips.

“Make yourselves comfortable. No one can hear you outside because this house is double insulated. Hopefully it will not be more than a few days. I will check on you at random times and I do have this room wired for video which I can watch from my phone at all times. Remember, doing anything to draw attention to this room will bring unfortunate consequences so just sit tight and keep singing that Kumbaya crap you were singing in the bathroom.” Marty spit the words out quickly as he left and slammed the door. He locked the door as well as the pad lock on the outside.

Marty looked at his watch as he left and realized he had about an hour to get back to Rusty’s and collect Sharon at eleven when she was done. He cursed under his breath as he walked a safe distance from the house before he emerged on a main road to hail a taxi.

He walked for fifteen minutes in the direction of Rusty’s and did not see a taxi at all. He did not want to improvise and involve another car or use Uber since there is always a record of Uber trips. He was frustrated with the truth that it does not matter how well you plan things, there always seems to be things that go wrong. Like the fact that Sharon came to room 385 before the other girl he had called for. If she would have not been so stupid and number challenged, he would not have to escalate things in this very manner at this very time. He swore again and then chided himself to get a grip and deal with the present situation at hand because he could not go back and could not change the past.

Out of nowhere a taxi slowed right next to him and the driver said, “You look like you need a ride?”

“Yes I do.” Marty exhaled as he hopped in the back seat.

He had the cab drop him three doors down from Rusty’s as to not attract attention. He walked casually past the parking lot and was relieved to see Sharon’s car was still where it was when he left. It was 11:15 PM. He walked into the restaurant as if he was coming from his car in the parking lot. When the door beeped as he went through the first door, he turned around and left again as if he forgot something in his car. He walked past her car by two cars and entered a stranger’s vehicle illegally so smoothly and casually a bystander would not even consider something was amiss.

He simply waited for Sharon to walk out as he sat looking at his phone as if nothing at all that was wrong was about to happen. At 11:27 pm Sharon walked out into the parking lot yawning and rubbing her back looking forward with joy to the softness of her bed once she had sipped some nice hot tea. Marty let her leave and waited a few seconds taking note of which way she left the parking lot.

Confident he had waited long enough to hide the fact he was following her he eased out of the parking lot and easily caught up to Sharon as she fought sleep to get home as soon as possible. At Sharon's apartment Marty knew she had understandably installed every security precaution known to women. Her apartment building had single stall parking garages in rows with numbers matching apartments.

He knew he had to time things perfectly. With his hood pulled up again and wearing gloves just in case he touched anything he would fail to wipe down, he parked the stolen car at the end of Sharon's row so she could not see him. He walked quiet as a cat but with purpose to Sharon's garage just as her garage door was closing and she was gathering her purse and phone from her seat. When she turned to get out of the car she felt electric pain in her chest at 50,000 volts from a Taser zapping her unconscious.

Marty just scooted her over into the passenger seat so she would look like someone sleeping. He was tempted to take advantage just a little bit of an attractive young lady helpless in her car, but he stayed focused on the task at hand while inside applauding himself for his restraint. From over his left shoulder in a booming sweet clear voice he heard. "So you are a disciplined serial rapist huh?" He snapped his head in the direction of the voice and saw nothing. "Stop it, shut up and leave me alone!" He whispered in a scream directed at nobody in particular.

He shook his head and shuddered for a second, then backed Sharon's car at normal speed into the parking lot and drove to the other side of the block. He injected her with a strong sedative and snuck through the yards in the middle of that block and cut a hole in the fence surrounding the apartment complex lot and emerged by the car he had stolen. He moved the car to the other block and parked it amongst other cars on the street and locked the doors. He knew it would take quite a while for a stolen car to be found. He just wanted to make sure the address where it was found did not have the same street name as where Sharon lived.

As he exited the stolen car he wiped it down and looked to make sure no fibers were left behind to incriminate him. He returned with no incident to Sharon and her car and eased out into the night confident he had gone undetected.

Stephen and Candace had enjoyed a little more singing and nodded off into uncomfortable sleep as they were praying and admiring random patterns in the plywood that decorated their walls similar to what we often do when we look

into the clouds. The door opened without warning and Marty deposited a still unconscious Sharon on the floor with a thump, then slammed the door and locked it. Candace recognized Sharon right away and fought back fears that she was dead.

“Oh Stephen is she ok?” she murmured as she put her head in her hands.

“Nope she is fine, just knocked out with something. He said after checking her vitals.

Sharon started the uncomfortable process of waking up out of a sedative. As her vision cleared she recognized her once thought as enemies transformed into friends and smiled. She noticed the plywood on the walls and deduced they were captives. After a deep breath of acceptance she said, “Well if I had my wish of who I would like to be held captive with, you two are right near the top.”

“Oh really who is higher on your fancy list than us?” Stephen smiled teasingly as he gave Sharon a brotherly shoulder hug. She smiled back and said, “You keep lobbying for a higher ranking and you only go lower.” They all chuckled.

The unlikely temporary roommates settled in for a night of uncomfortable sleep after a good session of prayer for their captor and their families as they would be worrying about where they might be.

Marty drove Sharon’s car 15 miles in a random direction and parked it on a dimly lit side street with other cars. He walked through the crisp night air until he could catch a cab back to his car.

Chapter 19

A little bit after 10 PM Jessica and Brehanna returned home driven by their friend's mom, Gina. They continued to chatter with joy as they pulled into the driveway of the home they knew so well. Gina walked them to the door while scanning for any signs Stephen and Candace would be home. They were surprised to see no one was home even though the doors were unlocked.

Gina said, "I will stay with you for a bit to make sure that your dad and auntie make it home ok."

They relaxed for a bit as they re-hashed the fun they had that evening then the girls asked to play their favorite video game. "Ok for a little bit, but when they get home no whining about stopping ok?"

After 11 PM Gina knew something was wrong because if Stephen and Candace were running late they would have called to apologize for doing so. She knew they were tenacious about common courtesy not because of people pleasing but because they had received and were receiving the love of Jesus more and more, and loving consideration flows from what we had received.

Gina was intuitive and called with urgency the cell phones for Stephen and Candace which went to voice mail right away. She suspected they went to Rusty's and called there. The overnight server said, "They're not here."

Based on even the most generous travel time calculations the two should have been home at least 20 minutes. Gina knew missing persons statements were not taken until people were missing for over 24 hours and she knew they could have had any number of things come up that made less dramatic sense. Dealing with the current issue at hand she simply hung out with the girls for another hour and when Stephen and Candace still did not return, she took the girls back to her place for more fun leaving a note for their dad to call as soon as they got home.

The next day Gina got the girls up for church and had them wear the clothes she had them bring the night before. She checked her phone and the girls' phones and no messages had been left from Stephen and Candace. They arrived at Shiloh Christian Fellowship a few minutes late at settled into some seats while worship was into the second song. Gina kept expecting Stephen and Candace to show up any minute gasping for air and grasping for Stephen's kids. No such thing happened. The girls went to children's church and chatted with their friends oblivious to the fact that something could be really wrong.

Pastor Jenkins preached a moving sermon on Matthew 5:12-15 and how we should not be surprised by persecution but instead expect it and count it joy when we receive it. Occasionally he asked people from the congregation of about a hundred to share their thoughts in response to his sermon. This Sunday he felt extra lead to encourage someone to share their thoughts on what he had just said. After some awkward silence, he thought to close the service, but he heard an audible voice say, "Just wait a little longer."

In obedience the pastor settled in for some more silence.

"I need prayer." Gina's voice pierced the silence as she walked to the front and grabbed the microphone.

"Stephen and Candace are missing and something is wrong." Tears started to flow from Gina's eyes and she was nodding and shaking from her shoulders to emphasize she knew what she was talking about. Everyone knew Stephen and Candace in this small church. Gina had been a wreck ten years earlier before Candace led her to the Lord and discipleship had flowed with joy in Gina's direction.

Hushed tones of concern cascaded across the congregation like dominoes completing a complicated pattern as they fall.

"Thank you for sharing Gina, we may not know where they are right now but God does. Let's pray right now for their safe return." Pastor Jenkins started the congregation in prayer and then let some elders chime in as well. Extended prayer was a way of life for this church, not out of some spiritual show, but instead from hearts of true gratitude that knew in reality the only place to go with all of their problems was the wonderful feet of Jesus.

As the prayer time was wrapping up Sharon's neighbor grabbed the pastor's arm and told him Sharon had not come that Sunday either. She usually carpooled with Sharon and she rarely missed a Sunday. She never cancelled and was not answering her phone either.

"Listen up my friends, has anybody seen Sharon or Stephen or Candace since last night?" Now Pastor Jenkins was showing some concern on his face.

"I saw them last night at the restaurant" said Rusty.

"Did anybody else see them?" The pastor probed.

This time the pastor did not wait for silence.

"Listen up friends, we all are aware that 24 hours is required before the police

will let us file a missing person's report, but we have a source that is way more powerful than any police force, we have God and we have each other. If you are able to take some time this afternoon please do one of two things. Either stay here and pray for the quick and safe return of our friends or get out in the community where you know these three may have been last and start asking everybody you see if they have seen them. We can make copies of their photos for you right now.”

With calm urgency everyone did as they felt the Holy Spirit leading them. There was no fear or explanation if some had to go to other engagements, they just left. About twenty stayed in one corner of the sanctuary and started praying earnestly. About forty five others went to their cars including Rusty and the pastor and started their informal search for three people they loved and wanted returned home safe.

Detective Cordway had been up late working on his cases at home. He often would be sitting trying to live his normal life and something he saw on TV or heard would spark an idea about one of his unsolved cases and he would not be able to restrain himself from reading old files over again that he had scanned to his tablet. At about 2:30 AM on Sunday he awoke with a stiff neck on his couch and realized his tablet had fallen to the ground. He scolded himself for pushing too hard and went to bed. He woke at eleven and tried to settle into his Sunday morning routine of watching news shows but he just felt restless and turned his TV off and decided to simplify things and sit on his couch and try to breathe easy and not reflect on the faces of thousands of victims he had tried so hard to bring justice for.

“You cannot carry these burdens yourself, let me help you.” Came from his left side where he knew no person was sitting since his girls were with their mother for the weekend. He reeled to his right and looked instinctively to his left trying to not be startled by a strange voice on his couch. He shook his head a bit and tried to settle back into his breathing and he heard his phone buzzing on his comfortable large foot rest which too easily became a catch all for everything pending filing or throwing away.

“Hello” Cordway responded as he rubbed his eyes, not taking the time to see who was calling, but expecting it to be a non-work call.

“Hi Cordway, this is Rusty, Sharon and Hal's brother and sister, Stephen and Candace are missing.”

Cordway had been Rusty's friend for a while and was certain of one thing, he was grounded and logical, if he said something was wrong, Cordway believed him.

"Where are you?" Cordway asked as he started grabbing the first change of clothes he could find to get out the door quickly.

"We are at Stephen and Candace's place"

"Text their address and I will be there in twenty."

Jeremy Collins had been at Parnell for about a year and had done his job well of keeping his eyes on Hal as ordered by Marty. He was cold and calculating and ruthless to do whatever it took to survive. The message from Marty came via one of the crooked guards to Jeremy that his orders had changed. He was promised an even sooner release and more money in his untraceable Swiss bank account if he ended Hal's life sooner than planned.

The common perception is that killing someone in prison is as easy as going to the store for groceries. It is not even close to as easy as the movies make it seem. People are in lock down in their cells most of the time and when they are out they are with their allies and there are guards keeping sharp eyes out. In the movies, the guards are buffoons oblivious to schemes of the inmates. In real life the guards are trained professionals who keep ears and eyes open all the time for evil actions that could be planned. Not to mention every inch of the place is under high quality surveillance monitored day and night.

Jeremy knew that stealth was the key to killing someone in prison, and nothing was more stealth than poison. He could not help but notice how annoyingly consistent Hal and the rest of the band were attending the chapel service and taking communion. Getting enough poison in Hal's communion cup was not hard, but making sure only Hal drank it was going to be tricky.

At Parnell Sundays were simply the best of days for Hal. The morning church service at ten was the only scheduled activity except for meals of course. The chaplain beamed with the joy of the Lord as he led fifty eight men in wonderful boisterous praise using old hymns and new worship songs equally. Hal loved the sound of male voices lifted in praise together.

Of course the entire band of brothers sat together. Guest speakers were fairly frequent and greatly appreciated. This Sunday the volunteer speaker was a seminary student getting some practice preaching in. He faltered a few times in

his presentation but seemed to be emboldened when he stumbled and no-one seemed to care, they just kept saying “Amen” and encouraging him.

They did communion at the end of the service and Jeremy with the persuasion of a politician had been able to become volunteer as an usher and help with it since he had been playing the good Christian role the whole time he had been tailing Hal. He placed the poison in a single cup on a tray, kept it out of sight and monitored with care to calculate how many men were coming forward pew by pew on Hal’s side.

He put the exact right amount on one tray so it would run out just before Hal got there and he could produce the one with the poison by itself as a straggler. His plan worked to the perfection of a fine symphony. The tray ran out just before Hal stepped up and he nonchalantly produced the poison filled death giving cup which Hal took and raised to his lips looking quite distracted.

What Hal had been thinking the whole time as he ambled up to get communion was a minor tiff that just happened with Floyed. Friends who are close still have squabbles from time to time. Floyed had said something that Hal totally misinterpreted and he had pounced and been unfair in his reply. Hal was still learning how to navigate relationships with Jesus’ help and work things out instead of letting them smolder and fester. The words before communion were clear that if he knew something was wrong with someone else he needed to resolve it before taking communion.

As Hal started to raise the crimson plastic cup to his mouth he knew he could not partake and must fix things with Floyed. He placed with purpose the still full cup back on the tray in Jeremy’s sad looking view, he did it with extra emphasis and prayed. ‘Lord, I choose be obedient and fix things with my brother before I partake.’

The force caused the poison and the juice to spill harmlessly on the tray which was removed and washed and the cup discarded by other ushers.

Jeremy swore in his mind and started to hatch another plan of action. Hal unaware how his obedience had saved his frail life sought out Floyed and right then and there they restored their friendship over something Floyed had already forgotten about.

After lunch Hal was resting peacefully in his cell when he got a note given to him from the assistant to the warden. He knew the note was important because usually Parnell required letters and visits to be the primary means of communication to inmates from the outside world.

The note was short and to the point. STEPHEN AND CANDACE AND SHARON ARE MISSING PLEASE PRAY.

Hal felt Closter phobic and trapped. He bemoaned one of the many draw backs to being incarcerated, limited ability to communicate with the outside world. After a few minutes of fearful thinking about what could be happening to his family, Chuck walked in and he got his spiritual bearings.

“Chuck, we need to spread the word to everyone to pray for by brother and sister and the lady who is now convinced I did not attack her. It seems odd that these people connected to me went missing at the same time doesn't it?”

“It sure does.” Chuck responded as he gestured to Hal to follow him as them assembled the Band of Brothers to pray and anyone else they could bring along.

Jeana and Patty had been worshipping together at Patty's church, Shiloh Christian Fellowship, for some time. They were sharing a luscious lunch at Jeana's house with the kids when she got an urgent call from Darla.

“Jeana, I have a prayer SOS for you.” Darla said with urgency and familiarity since she had been going to Shiloh with her old friend and new friend for a while and felt at ease.

“What is it?” Jeana said as she waved to get the attention of Patty and her kids with her left hand and motioned for them to gather in a circle.

“You know I have been going to a Bible study with my new friend at Mcleod right?”

“Sure”

“She just happens to go to the same church that the Dorsey's go to and she told me they announced that Stephen and Candace AND Sharon are all missing!”

“Missing, what? How long? Have we involved the police?” Jeana spat out her questions so fast Darla had no chance to respond.

“Just call Rusty, he and detective Cordway are spearheading the search. I am here for you! Call everyone you know and get them praying.”

As hung she up the phone she looked at a familiar spot on her dining room wall and thought. ‘God how good and loving you are that you have so transformed my relationship with the supposed ender of my marriage over a few short

months that she is calling me to pray for my ex in-laws.’

Jeana caressed small tears from her face as called Rusty for all the details. Once she got all the most current details she gathered her kids and Patty into a totally natural and powerful prayer circle. Both Jeana and Patty smiled with joy a little as Rose prayed, “Jesus, if bad people are trying to do bad things to my Uncle Stephen and Auntie Candace you stop em now!”

Cordway got to Stephen and Candace’s place in eighteen minutes, breaking the speed limits would be dismissed by any fellow officers if he was pulled over. He was encouraged to see about fifteen people out on the street looking concerned and wanting something to do so they could feel like they were helping. He hoped not too many were inside destroying evidence.

“Hi folks my name is detective Cordway. The biggest help you can be is scouring this neighborhood for any person who saw anything that did not fit last night from about 8:30 PM to 10 PM. No detail is insignificant. Get the name and phone number of anyone who gives you information and make sure the details are recorded accurately.”

The eager volunteers perked up with some direction on how to be of help and scurried off to start canvassing. Inside the house Cordway found Rusty and a few other people who seemed to be sensitive that anything they touched could destroy evidence.

“Do you have people over at Sharon’s apartment also?” Cordway asked Rusty without the need for time wasting pleasantries.

“We have eight over there.” Rusty replied.

“Good, please call the leader over there and have them canvas everywhere surrounding that apartment by two blocks asking and looking for anything that does not fit. Have them stay out of her apartment until I can get there.”

After Rusty followed the orders to the letter without questions he and Cordway discussed the last time he saw the three missing persons.

“So Sharon waited on Stephen and Candace last night at about 7 PM?” Cordway clarified.

“Yep” replied Rusty as he rubbed his chin with concern and stared.

“Do you have any idea what they talked about?”

“No, but I do know Sharon was in a very good mood, almost as if another big burden had been lifted from her mind. I did see her talk with Stephen and Candace for quite some time and they seemed to share her good mood as they left. I was curious to ask her what was going on but then we had a late rush of customers and I forgot to ask Sharon before she left.”

“Rusty, I suspect what they were talking about might have something to do with why they are all three missing. Do you have hidden cameras in the restaurant?”

“Regretfully no: It is on the to-do list though.” Rusty shook his head as he chided himself.

“You still have credit card receipts from customers from 7PM to 8PM last night?” Cordway pressed on not concerned about regrets of the past because every second of the present was precious.

“Sure.” Rusty looked puzzled.

“Go back to the store and give me the names of everyone who paid with credit card between 7PM and 8:30PM they may have witnessed something or heard something.” Cordway turned to inspect the house expecting not to see Rusty again until he had a list of names from the store to call.

Chapter 20

Cordway gathered very little evidence at Sharon's apartment as he suspected. Very clean crime scenes at both residences of the victims pointed like a neon huge arrow to the fact that they were taken or worse by the same person. He was impressed by the calmness and tenacity of the people from their church. He had about four pages of notes of suspicious things seen in both neighborhoods. It was 5 pm and he knew they had about three hours before they got missing persons involved. All the volunteer blood hounds with two feet had gone home after telling him they had canvassed as hard as they could and asked everything that moved if they remembered any details from when they last saw the three vanished friends.

Cordway was sitting with Rusty and his pastor at a corner booth at the restaurant where he knew the three were together last.

"Where were Stephen and Candace sitting when Sharon waited on them?"

Rusty pointed to a booth in the back corner separated from the window booths by a makeshift aisle. Cordway looked at the booths and tables that would be in earshot of their booth. He numbered with notebook paper each booth and table that would be close enough.

"As the people arrive that purchased with credit cards during our time period, if they were not near those tables, they can go." Again Cordway had no time for soft tones. Keeping people hopping was deathly necessary.

"Ok" Rusty acquiesced without a blink.

Over the next hour people filed in and were filtered through to see if they possibly saw something in that section. Four people remained after the painstaking process.

He addressed his potential witnesses with urgency. "Hi folks; my name is detective Cordway and you could be very helpful to me today. Please sit now exactly where you sat when you were here last night."

Two of the four had sat at the same booth at different times so of the five tables or booths within ear shot of where the three had talked there were two booths on the far wall which either had no one sitting there or they paid with cash. These two booths had only one row of tables between them and the important table.

“One at a time could each of you tell me anything and everything you can remember about who you saw sitting at either of these booths. No detail is too small.” Cordway looked with longing for responses.

There was a deafening silence for a few minutes as each of the four appeared to be replaying in their minds what they saw on the periphery of their attention in a distant memory of an average meal.

Cordway started to show visible concern because he really did not want more bad stuff to happen to Sharon. Rusty read his face and stood up to talk.

“Hi there, my name is Rusty and you probably know me as the owner of the restaurant, but my best title is I am a child of God because I have let him forgive me for my sins. Don’t worry I am not going to preach at you, but one thing I do believe in with all my heart is the power of prayer to the God of the Bible. Are you all ok with me praying that God would help you remember what you saw or heard last night?”

Everyone nodded and Cordway tried hard not to roll his eyes.

Rust simply prayed. “Lord, in Jesus name we know you know exactly where Stephen and Candace and Sharon are. Please help each of these dear people who have come to help to remember what they saw or heard last night. Amen.”

“Now”, continued Rusty. “Close your eyes and remember what you had to eat and what you talked about while eating. Breath deep and replay the tape in your head slowly.”

Witness number two said, “I only saw one person on that side by the wall is that what others saw?” They all nodded.

“Ok that is great,” Cordway encouraged. “Was it a man or women?”

Two witnesses said, “Man” at the same time.

“What color hair?”

“Brown, but he had a Pacers hat on which he did not take off.” Witness number one said with a look of being encouraged to be a help.

“Wait a minute.” Witness number three chimed in excitedly. She had told Cordway earlier that she had been sitting in a booth so as she faced her husband the man in the Pacers hat could be seen over her husband’s left shoulder as he faced her and Stephen and Candace were sitting behind her over her right shoulder at a forty five degree angle.

“This guy with the Pacers hat was looking out the window most of the time while he ate his supper but based on his facial expressions he was listening and reacting to conversations in the restaurant. One time he glanced towards this table you are talking about and then tried to cover up the fact that he did so.” She looked very pleased with herself.

Cordway jumped out of his seat. “That is our guy! Give me as full a description as you can of everything you can remember about that slime ball.”

After recording every miniscule detail the witnesses could remember about this mystery man in the booth with a Pacers hat on, Cordway said. “Thank you so much for your help!”

Rusty observed a look of gratefulness and relief on the detective’s face. As the witnesses were leaving with free muffins as thanks from Rusty, witness number three paused for another second and said. “There is something else that keeps bugging me about what I saw. I remember getting a quick and blinding reflection off of something shiny in the same booth where this man was sitting.”

Cordway perked up. “How big was the spot where the light was coming from?”

“About a dime size,” the witness replied.

“But it was really bright right?”

“Yes”

“Was it from the waste area of the man?”

“Yes”

Cordway had an inspiration. He put his badge on his belt on his left side and sat where the man was sitting.

“Now you move around until you get a reflection off this badge and you tell me if the reflection is similar to what you saw.”

“That’s it!” Shouted the witness who showed she soon felt self-conscious about her over enthusiasm until she saw others slapping hands as well.

“So we can be confident our man had some type of badge. That greatly narrows our search. Thank you for speaking up even though the detail could have easily been discarded as not important.” Cordway showed again he was encouraged.

On Sunday night at 8:30 PM well past visiting hours at Parnell Hal and Chuck were involved in a rousing game of chess with plenty of good natured trash talking going on. A guard stopped by to interrupt the fun and summon Hal to the warden's office.

Hal for a second was concerned he was in some kind of trouble, but as he took a deep breath in prayer and asked Jesus for help, he felt a peace that was beyond whatever circumstances he was walking into in the wardens office.

Clive Boden was the warden of Parnell and he had not received any complaints about Hal or any of the Band of Brothers. In his office he was sitting with detective Cordway when Hal entered the room.

When Hal saw a face from his dark past which had been erased by the blood of Jesus, his memories of when Cordway arrested him came flooding back. He did re-feel the shock and shame but it did feel more distant.

"Take a seat." Cordway said, again with urgency.

"Sure" Hal sat so he faced the detective and the warden at the same distance.

Cordway was surprised Hal did not reel back in fear when their eyes met, but rather he looked him in the eyes with the calm of a secure child as he smiled and nodded in respect.

Hal was quite sure the warden and the detective had been talking about him before he arrived. He knew not to press with silly questions about what was going on. Obviously they called him into a meeting so they would tell him in due time. He sat exuding peace and waited to see what unfolded.

"Hal, I believe you have already been advised that Sharon and Stephen and Candace are missing and it appears they went missing shortly after speaking together over at Rusty's where Sharon now works and Stephen and Candace go often." Cordway took a breath, preparing to keep going.

"Oh, I know Rusty's, I still am having withdrawals not being able to enjoy his awesome pancakes." Hal chuckled as he missed his times with family at their favorite restaurant.

Cordway showed some teeth that needed better brushing in a smile and said. "Yes they are very good."

"I would have had Sharon bring me some when she came to visit me if I had known she was coming. Of course that was the longest shot out there that the person I was accused of attacking came to visit me in prison." Hal shook his

head smiling and looking to the floor as if replaying his visit with Sharon as something he thought would never happen.

“Sharon visited you? When did she do that?” Cordway probed.

“Friday afternoon, did she not talk with you yet?” Hal fought disappointment.

“No, what was she going to talk with me about?” Now Cordway’s something is fishy meter was spouting out the top.

Hal recapped for Cordway his entire conversation with Sharon. Now it was Cordway’s turn to try to not open his mouth in shock. “So you and Sharon are both certain you were in different rooms that night?”

“Absolutely” Hal responded looking Cordway straight in the eyes and nodding.

“She was most likely going to talk with me first thing Monday about your conversation. Rusty told me she worked Friday night and Saturday night till around eleven so she would not have any time to talk with me until Monday. It does not take much deducing to figure out that whoever did attack Sharon did not want her talking to me about the wrong room number.”

“Should I be calling my lawyer for an appeal?” Hal said in peace.

“I cannot give legal advice, but I think you are a smart guy and you can figure out what to do. You sure seem different since the last time we talked while I arrested you. Please tell me you haven’t drunk that religion Kool-aid have you?” Cordway was smiling with a teasing smile.

“I pray that is something that I am more and more guilty of.” Hal smiled back like a victorious warrior returning from battle. “Although it’s more like the best relationship ever than religion;”

“Hmm, that sounds better.” Cordway mumbled as he stood to dismiss the prisoner.

As Cordway left the warden’s office he resolved to be a pit bull to get these people home safe because he wanted to get to know them more and this relationship thing Hal was talking about.

Marty visited his favorite prostitute at 10 am on Sunday morning, he loved to feel rebellious and sacrilegious worshipping his god of feeling good with someone he could touch in the flesh while others worshipped a God you cannot

even see.

'I will be rich and free as a bird someday.' He thought as he tried hard to act liberated and totally free as he checked on his prisoners around lunch time. He gave them fresh water and food and a basin with a cloth and towel so they could give themselves sponge baths. He let them use the restroom one at a time under gun point.

While escorting Stephen back to the room from his turn in the bathroom, Stephen just started praying just for Marty in a natural, soft and firm tone, but so he could hear. "Lord I pray for this man that he would know how much you love him and want to forgive him for all of his past."

Before Marty could object or hit him on the head with the gun to make him stop, he was done. The words just kind of hung in the air like dryer sheets wafting as they walked the final five steps to the one room prison. The three prisoners were growing moment by moment in appreciation for what Hal endured daily, even though all would agree that at least right now they each had it worse.

Marty left the house jail without incident and went to his bank to liquidate all his accounts to prepare to disappear no later than Tuesday morning. The bank Marty used housed all of his retirement accounts as well as a separate account he has used to deposit cash he had lifted from crime scenes or profited from the sale of confiscated items on the sly in his dealings with criminals that he was somehow superior to.

One of the draw backs to being out all hours of the night getting sexual fixes of varying kinds and still trying to work fifty hours per week was that Marty really did not know how much real money he had available to him to liquidate and disappear with to a beach somewhere tropical. Marty also had blown more cash than he was aware of while having his so called innocent harmless fun at strip clubs.

Marty expected the amount of his nest egg to disappear with to be lower than he wanted, but when the bank manager told him a final figure after early withdrawal fees and taxes of \$45,000, Marty almost sprayed his Cappuccino all over the poor man. He was about to let the manager have it with both barrels with a profanity filled indictment of being a swindler, but stopped himself as he realized taking out 45k in cash was suspicious enough. He mumbled some made up some story about a sick relative needing his help who had no insurance and left the bank for the last time with a large duffle bag full of cash.

Marty knew that surviving overseas under a new identity would take way more than a measly 45k. New ID and passport would cost him at least 5k. He had to

get creative and fast.

One benefit of working in vice was Marty knew where all the drug dealers and pimps hung out and where their hubs of operation were. He needed to do some different kinds of withdrawals from the immense cash economy that no one is paying taxes in our country.

Marty selected two medium size operations that were furthest from his house. He figured he could get 50k from each and that would make things work better for early vanishing into retirement.

Criminals use intimidation to keep people silent and scared of robbing them. This feeling of strength however can lull dealers to sleep with the intoxication of feeling invincible.

The first dealer Marty robbed did not even have anyone guarding the door and there were no security cameras outside because that would show they had something to protect and draw attention. Marty blended in as he slid on his mask after he entered the two level small average looking run down home along with others who were coming and going for various illegal reasons.

He pointed his gun at the first person he saw and demanded to know where the hub of operations was. The adult male hardly even flinched at having a gun in his face and pointed upstairs with a detached look on his face. The so called employees dispensing all kinds of mood altering substances were often sluggish due to side effects of their own sampling of the merchandise.

Marty sprang into the room and demanded. "Everyone, up against the wall with hands behind your backs." He used zip ties to secure the hands of all three young men.

"Gentleman, the first smart man to tell me where all the money is does not die today;" Marty growled with a menacing voice.

All three started talking at once and pointed to the freezer. Marty locked the door to what appeared to be the kitchen on that floor and quickly grabbed three large zip locked bags of cold hard cash from the freezer and put them in his back pack. He knew better than to even try and count anything. He strolled to the door and said. "Once I close this door the bomb I have installed outside will be armed. If you value your lives, just sit tight and you will be just fine for now, but if you can get out of town and away from this business you may live past puberty."

Before leaving the house for the street Marty took off his mask. He walked as

normal as possible to his car knowing that rushing only draws attention. When he was at a safe distance he counted his booty and it was around 37k. He smiled and was confident if he completed one more withdrawal of about the same amount he would be able to make it work as he disappeared. He hid the money bags under his spare tire in the trunk.

Marty drove fifteen minutes to another rundown neighborhood that was still a safe distance from his usual circle of doing life. As he did his recon on this location his mind went ahead to what early retirement was going to look like. He pictured himself sitting on a beach like the one he saw in all the beer commercials sipping a cocktail with waitresses with very plunging neck lines at his beck and call posing on either side of him like they were being photographed.

His daydream and plans were shattered forever by a pesky random stray bullet. The fast slug projectile which lodged among screaming nerves in his left shoulder shattered two bones in his shoulder and all his thoughts of bliss on a bouncing bikini beach.

Marty grabbed his crimson throbbing shoulder and looked without even trying to see where the rude bullet came from. He suspected the bullet came from a gun of one of the employees of the dealer he was looking to rob and they missed their intended target. He cursed under his gasps for breath, the reality that employees of drug dealers do not have weapons training so accuracy is limited and innocent victims often pay the price.

“You are in no way innocent Marty” Came from the back seat where Marty knew no one was sitting in that same booming soft still voice.

“Now you wanna mess with me some more, really? Come on.” Marty yelled into his mirror looking at where the voice came from.

“Excuse me sir, I promise I only want to help you.” Came from a police officer glaring in Marty’s window at the bloody mess.

“Oh, sorry officer, I know you are here to help, I am just a bit out of it for obvious reasons.” Marty knew he was going nowhere but to the ICU then the hospital.

His life blood was leaving him at a fast rate. The panic that he had been shot and may be dying paled in comparison to the fear of what would happen if he was caught while being treated.

Marty knew that once he was treated for his wounds if he survived, questions would be asked about why he was in that area. He was grateful he had hidden

the money in his trunk, but knew if he was away from the car for a long time it would be searched in every nook and cranny.

Getting away from this scene was now not possible or realistic. The sirens and lights of the ambulance told him exactly where he was going next. Soon the entire street was filled with the sirens of governmental overkill to emergency situations to pad the pockets and budgets of so called civil servants whose only goal is to use up tax dollars so fast each year they get more the next.

Chapter 21

Officer James O'Malley had been with the force for two years and was slowly building the trust in the community he served. He just happened to be at the end of the same block that Marty was shot on and was doing a routine traffic stop. He knew what gun fire sounded like and followed the sound and stopped; blocking Marty into his parking spot as soon as he saw the blood and a shattered driver's side window. The call for shots fired was made immediately along with the request to dispatch an ambulance to the scene.

"Sir, please remain still and keep pressure on the wound it looks like the ambulance is here, what is your name?" James said with empathy.

Marty felt his consciousness waning like a flickering light bulb so he could not manufacture a lie which would hold up. He blurted the shorter simpler truth. "Marty Cotley"

"Marty, did you see who shot you or where it came from?"

As Marty started to point back over his left shoulder his bloody hand started to shake and he passed out. The ambulance whisked Marty away to the ICU at Mcleod. His car was processed by the detectives on the scene and canvassing did not help because shootings of this kind were way too common place in that particular neighborhood. Marty's car was towed to the police station and stored for him to retrieve when able.

Monday morning Marty awoke from painful groggy pain reliever induced sleep. He heard voices so he decided to keep his eyes closed and feign sleep in case he could glean any information that would be useful. His doctor was updating the detective assigned to the shooting on his condition. "He is lucky that bullet was not two inches higher or he would be dead."

'Lucky?' Marty thought to himself, 'How about being lucky enough to not get shot at all?'

Marty heard a little more annoying small talk between his doctor and the detective. He heard the detective sit down and assumed he was waiting for him to wake up. Feeling trapped he had no option but to appear to wake up. He just opened his eyes and yawned artificially and tried to win an Oscar for his acting surprised that there was a detective sitting by his bed.

"Marty, my name is detective Stevens and since you are a detective yourself, I was

hoping you could help me catch the person who shot you and send a message that all shootings are important and should be stopped. Why were you in that neighborhood, it is out of your jurisdiction and I do not see any ties to your personal life in that area either?”

“Well, you have done your homework detective.” Marty fake smiled with admiration. “I just started collecting vintage vinyl albums and was told there was a cool store in that neighborhood. I was lost and pulled over looking for someone to ask for directions.”

The detective probed further. “It is funny because several witnesses to the shooting put your car there for over ten minutes, does it take that long to ask for directions?”

“Well sir, I was a little nervous to ask most of the passersby because I felt they were all staring at me. I decided to check my directions on my phone and that is when I was shot.” Marty kept his eyes right on the detective as he skillfully fashioned a lie that was hard to fact check.

Now the silence was working in reverse on the detective and he decided that solving this case was literally a needle in a huge hay stack. “So you have no idea who shot you and why?”

“I sincerely wish I did, but this feels very random to me.” Marty was happy he could at least say that phrase in truth.

About the same time on Monday Darla and Patty and Jeana were huddled together at Puppies for an unscheduled time of support in light of the disappearance of Jeana’s ex in-laws. They had been involved in doing some canvassing near Stephen and Candace’s place and were now hoping for new things to do to help. Unfortunately they were advised by Cordway that they had to let missing persons do their work, even though he was going to keep working every angle he had. Darla had taken a day off work and wanted to be close to her real support system. Jeana never had to work on Mondays and liked to start her work week tying up loose ends. Patty of course was on site at her restaurant but had flexibility to attend to emergency matters.

“Well, I guess there is comfort in knowing we have done all we can do up to this point.” Darla said.

“Except for us doing what is the most effective thing there is, prayer.” Patty responded with an aura of wisdom.

“Yes” Jeana wriggled with enthusiasm because she had come to love so much their prayer times together. “Let’s invest an hour bathing this entire situation in prayer just like we know others are doing who are aware of the problem.”

The three lady warriors were fierce in ways that mattered. They pressed into the Lord with mighty humble hearts and honest words; not religious platitudes reserved for pious, lifeless liturgy. They prayed interchangeably as things came to their minds led by the gentle Holy Spirit. There were times where they just sat in silence and the sweet presence of Jesus grew thicker and thicker around them as they knew in every fiber of their beings that their most mighty creator who knew everything about them knew exactly where their loved ones were and was keeping them safe.

During one of the periods of silent soaking in the presence of Jesus all three ladies heard in their own mind a loud and clear voice say “2114B”.

They each stopped breathing and opened their eyes to check and see if they were alone in hearing what they heard.

In thirty seconds of silence looking at each other, the three were confident they heard the same thing. Patty led the way, “Did you both just hear something just now?”

Both Jeana and Darla nodded.

“So the men in white coats don’t come running to lock us up, let’s each write down what we heard on a piece of paper and we will compare notes.” Patty said as she grabbed paper and pens.

“Ok give your papers to me.” Darla chimed in because she wanted to see the results up close and personal.

The other two complied. Darla mixed the pieces of paper up which was really not necessary because she knew the others’ handwriting. She opened each piece of paper with her eyes closed and put them under her hand in the middle of the table. When she lifted her hand all three gasped as they saw the same number, 2114B.

All three sat in silence again for a few moments as they felt tingling goose bumps on the backs of their necks.

Patty again took the lead. “Well friends I think it is safe to say this number is significant and in some way is related to what we have been praying about.”

Darla said, “It must be a hospital or office suite number since most hotel rooms

are only three digits. Since I work at a hospital, why don't we start there? Since we all agree this number is from God and he knows everything about us and would give us just enough information to lead us in the right direction."

Jeana shrugged like she was deciding whether to go to the store or not and said, "Why not, I got nothing but time to hang out with my gal pals on a short road trip."

Patty showed her countenance to light up a room and said, "Let's go."

As they walked toward the door Patty gave instructions to her staff that she was going to be gone for a few hours. The three drove in Jeana's car and Patty called Rusty on the way over to McLeod to fill him in on what they had been given.

"2114B huh, that is specific and exciting at the same time. Let me call detective Cordway and he can meet us there also." Rusty replied as he wondered what they would find in that room. "Was this just a wild goose chase?" He thought.

Cordway got Rusty's call while he was trying to not worry in the waiting for more info from missing persons. The sandwich he could not finish was sitting on his desk holding down and hiding simultaneously the other cases that he should have been working on.

"Cordway are you open to long shots?" Rusty knew how to build anticipation in his longtime friend.

"At this point Rusty, I am open to anything." Cordway shook his head like a bobble head doll and rubbed his temples with his non-phone hand as he waited for more bad news.

"We have a confirmed word from the Lord that something significant to this case is in room 2114B at McLeod." Rusty spoke these words in a matter of fact and certain tone. He spoke just the same way as he would tell someone where he lived.

Cordway stopped the eye roll of doubt before it even started, he decided that he had just said he was open to anything and had no other options. "Well friend we have nothing to lose but time. I will meet you there."

Time was something that Stephen and Candace and Sharon were starting to be-

lieve might become the enemy of their comfort and even their lives. Their captor had not returned to let them take bathroom breaks for over twenty four hours and they were completely out of food and water. Less food and water limited the need to eliminate but did not completely remove this basic function. They made do as best they could, using the bucket and keeping it as far away from themselves as possible, but there was no escaping it. They were in a smelly and hot room, hungry and tired and sick of being in the same clothes into the second full day. The lack of a visit from their captor was the most troubling. ‘What if he never came back, who would find them?’ Crossed their minds more than they talked about.

Sharon was struggling most with the tough physical challenges. She started pounding on the plywood and screaming as loud as she could, “HELP”.

Stephen stepped in to help as he fought the desire in himself to do the same thing. “Sharon, I understand this is a tough situation and I kind of want to join you in pounding on these walls, but here, right here in this smelly mess we can find joy in God who is way beyond our circumstances but not distant from our pain IN those circumstances.”

“I know I should count it as joy to be persecuted, but it is hard.” Sharon pushed her bottom lip out just a bit like kids do when they don’t get their way.

“I know it is hard.” Chimed in Candace, “but learning to count things as joy is a process, just like working out at the gym. I promise you when you lift weights your muscles are saying ‘stop, you are killing me’ but later as you sleep they grow back stronger. Until we go through hard times in reality and find the love of God to be more than enough for us we will never grow strong for him.”

“Let’s ask God for help right now to bear up under this very trial in a way that He will get the glory regardless of what happens.” Stephen concentrated on his breathing as he felt God’s smile on himself and his sisters, one by blood and the other by the precious blood of Jesus.

“Sharon, do you want to start?” Candace asked. “Just talk like you would to another person.”

“Ok, but is it ok if I say I am angry?”

“Of course, God is big enough to handle our anger” Stephen chortled and Candace nodded.

“Alright, here goes,” Sharon straightened her shoulders, closed her eyes and looked upward while working to imagine God listening to her with a loving face.

“Jesus, I am struggling with this stinky prison we are in. We need your help to not lose our minds during this time. Could you get us out of here now? But if you choose to bring us to heaven with you, then I want to say that I am so glad there is no stinky refuse in heaven, or if there is it does not smell this bad. Amen” She leaned back and rested against the wall.

“That was a great prayer, because it was honest. God gets so excited about honest real prayer.” Stephen was beaming like a proud papa.

“You know something ladies; the mess of this room we are in is a perfect picture of where all of us are without the love and forgiveness of Jesus. When I tried to live life on my own in my own power it was way smellier than this room and I was trapped from the inside by the door which I used to keep everyone else out. The door however was locked from the inside, all God needed was for me to give him permission to come into my stink and clean it up.”

Stephen walked to their locked door to illustrate. “You see, all I had to do in prayer was to open the door and invite God in and he would clean up the mess. I thought I was trapped but I had trapped myself. In this case the door is locked from the outside and will not open.” He grabbed the handle of the room door and turned it to illustrate. The door clicked and opened like a video game door. Stephen was so focused on his teaching he did not see it open and turned to face his soon to be free captive audience and said. “You see, spiritually the worst prisons are self-inflicted.”

“Oh thank you Jesus!” Sharon squealed with joy and hopped up and ran right past Stephen out the door. Candace was right on her heels. Stephen scratched his head puzzled as to where the ladies were running off to when he was just getting rolling on his impromptu sermon. He looked behind himself expecting them to be standing by the door pounding and instead the gaping open door with no ladies in sight told him church was over and it was time to leave the building post haste.

Outside the house Stephen walked sheepishly as a result of being the last to catch on to the miracle. Sharon was already two hundred yards down the street walking like a speed walker and waving like a crazy person at any car that she saw. The second car she flagged down pulled over and said they could not give a ride but would call the police for them.

“Tell them we will be way down this road.” Said Sharon, wanting to keep moving and be as far away from that smelly house as possible. The wind changed direction and she realized why the person did not want to give them a ride as she caught a good whiff of how she smelled.

The three victorious escapees triumphantly walked down the road not caring what they looked like or smelled like. They were free physically and spiritually. Being free of odors would happen as soon as they found a nice hot shower.

First thing Monday morning Hal called his attorney as soon as he was allowed access to the phone. Calls were limited to three minutes so he could not go into the full details. All he had to say was that Sharon was convinced she did not go to his room on that fateful night. His attorney paused for a while in shock and then sprang to action in filing appeal paperwork for the case.

“When can we get a deposition from Sharon about the room number?” The lawyer thought this was a routine question.

“Well, unfortunately Sharon is missing right now along with my brother and sister. You can talk with detective Cordway for progress on the search. I am out of time so keep me posted.” Hal hung up.

Chuck and Hal hung out during the morning playing Chess and Rummy 500 in between times of prayer for the safe return of three very important people in his life for different reasons. Floyed along with the others in the Band of Brothers were duplicating Chuck and Hal’s actions as soon as they found out about the crisis. They also had reached out to their own support networks and had them praying.

Waiting is difficult for everyone. It does not matter if they are inside a prison made by others or self-made prisons. Learning to wait for God to work in situations both personal and in society is not easy but all through the Bible God talks about waiting on him. Hal and his friends had learned the lesson inside man made walls which would benefit them no matter when they would go free. They had learned to rest and wait patiently knowing that God knew exactly what he was doing. Their prayers kept them calm and filled with the Holy Spirit to stay locked in to trusting God regardless whether he answered their prayers related to circumstances at the speed of the tortoise or the hare. They kept growing in accessing in person that peace that surpasses understanding because it surpasses all circumstances.

Chapter 22

Marty needed to get out of Mcleod like puss needs to leave a pimple. He needed to get back to his car to get that money in a safe place. He also knew he had to go with feigned humble innocence through the process of being medically cleared and discharged because just disappearing would cause major red flags which would only make him stand out even more. He also was smart enough to not believe all of those movies and dramas where the heroes check themselves out early from major injuries and then thirty minutes later they are doing all kinds of physical activity to save the day. Marty liked living. He was going to do what his doctor told him. He would hang on to his freedom as long as he could, but he was going to be smart about it.

The removing of the bullet from his shoulder had been somewhat routine, but the bullet still made a hole in his flesh about two inches deep. Some small broken pieces of bone in the shoulder had to be removed as well. A doctor does not just slap a Band-aid on that kind of a wound and tell you to walk out like nothing happened. The pain was the worst pain he had ever experienced in his life and the button that he could push for relief from that pain was not something he was going to just run away from on a whim.

Marty's nurse checked on him every two hours and she was sweet, gorgeous and flirted with him. She even laughed with cheer at most of what he said and he was starting to have hopeful thoughts that a real relationship could possibly evolve out of this mess. He chose to believe she treated him differently than all her patients. She soared to first place as the star of his fantasy scenarios which plagued his mind way more than he even realized. Lulled in by the opiate of accessible pain meds and nice nursing he found himself less in a hurry to leave.

Marty's near Nirvana experience screeched to a halt when Darla and Jeana and Patty walked into his room. They smiled with the joy of simple obedience following clear direction they were given from the Lord but they did not know what they were going to find in room 2114B. They were oblivious to possible danger because they were following Jesus one step at a time.

Marty wondered how three strangers were allowed to just walk into his room, but then he remembered that hospitals are required to keep patient information private, but they are not like a mental health facility where you have to sign in to see people. Hospitals are way too big to secure in that fashion.

Patty was the leader so she did the talking with the other two behind each of her

shoulders trying hard not to look nervous.

“Good afternoon sir. My name is Patty and these are my friends Jeana and Darla.” Patty continued to say some other introductory remarks but Marty suddenly could not hear her because he recognized Jeana from when he kept an eye on the progress of Hal’s trial. He knew she was associated with Hal in some fashion.

‘How did these three find me? What do I do now?’ Marty thought to himself.

Marty played back in his mind other times where he had to stay calm in the face of being discovered. He forced himself to breath slow and deep through his nose. Then he realized Patty had stopped talking and was waiting for him to respond to something she said of which he had no clue.

“I apologize, these pain meds they have me on have got me spacing out a little, would you repeat that last part for me?” Marty forced a warm smile.

Patty did not miss a beat to say they were given that room as a clue to finding their friends, but she was a better than average reader of people because of what God had brought her through. She knew something was wrong and this man was covering up something. She knew she needed to get him talking with sincere empathy.

“We are not sure why we have been led here but one thing we know for sure is that you are obviously hurt. Are you willing to tell us what happened to you? It looks pretty serious.” Patty nodded encouragingly as she probed to get Marty talking.

Marty knew what she was doing, but he could not help himself. He needed some sincere empathy. Everyone needs that. He could share just a little. They obviously had no clue of his identity.

“Well, I was shot in a drive by shooting while doing nothing at all.” Marty dipped his head in sadness.

“Oh you poor thing, we are so sorry.” Patty said with all the compassion of a great mom as the other two nodded in agreement.

“Well we were led here for a reason, can we pray for you for quick recovery and that they would catch the person who shot you?” All three ladies were smiling and nodding with genuine love.

Marty squirmed like a python inside, but hoped he covered it well so the pretty pit bulls from heaven would not notice. He had no option but to play along and let these religious wackos do their thing so they could feel better that they

did some goody two shoes act of kindness and pat their selves on the back. The sooner he got this over with the sooner they would leave.

“Sure, that would be great, thanks.” Marty forced a smile as he nodded.

Quite giddy the three surrounded his bed and laid hands on him expecting great things from God. They were oblivious to what lurked in the past and in the mind of the man they were touching. As each lady warrior placed their hand on his shoulder or arm he felt a slight charge like a static shock you give someone after walking on the carpet with your socks on.

“What is your name?” Patty probed as pierced his heart with her eyes.

“Marty”

Patty started praying. “Lord, we thank you for Marty, we know he is hurt and needs to recover quickly. We pray you touch his body with your amazing power. We pray you help the authorities find the person who shot him. We pray also that Marty would know deep in his heart how much you love him and that you know everything about him. You know all the hairs on his head. You know all his pain. You know all his anger. You know all the evil he has done just like you know all the evil I have done and you forgave me. I pray you touch Marty in a way that is personal and special so that he knows it is you and you alone who are speaking to him. Amen”

Marty heard every word Patty said and each word pounded on his heart like a two ton hammer. He wanted the prayer to stop, but at the same time he did not want it to end. When Patty was done he hoped to procrastinate his pondering of her words until he was sipping champagne on a beach somewhere.

Then Jeana had to take her turn praying. “What is wrong with these ladies?” he thought.

As Jeana started to pray, Marty started to feel warmth creeping into his nasal cavity. He started to feel his breathing slow to a peaceful rhythm. Then he heard a growl in his spirit and flashes of all the women he had attacked and objectified flashed across his mind’s eye and pure evil said to him. ‘If these women knew what you really have done they would run from this room like you had leprosy!’

Jeana felt a jolt in her spirit. She continued to pray over Marty, but this is what she felt the Lord leading her to pray. “Lord, I pray that Marty knows deep in his heart that there is nothing you will not forgive. I know this because you have forgiven me for all the junk I have done and thought.”

In a flash the brightest light Marty had ever seen filled the room. His eyes were gushing tears out of every side. Now instead of hearing Jeana's voice, he heard the voice and saw the glory shining from the face of God. The voice was the same he had heard in his kitchen, in his car and in Sharon's car.

Marty heard God say this. "Marty, you know I know everything don't you?"

Marty nodded his head. Darla had opened her eyes while praying along with Jeana and was observing Marty's facial responses to what Jeana was saying.

"Do you accept my forgiveness for your sins based on what my son Jesus did on the cross for you?" The words boomed with lavish love in Marty's mind.

"Yes I do!" Marty screamed at the top of his lungs as if he was talking to someone at the end of the hall.

Now Patty knew Marty was getting a vision from the Lord so she signaled Jeana to stop praying.

"Marty, can you tell me what you see right now?" she probed.

"I see Jesus smiling and dancing as he looks at my face." Marty beamed as he wiped the tears from his eyes with the palms of his hands.

"Marty, I feel that right now your life just changed complete direction. Am I correct?"

"Lady you have no idea." Marty chuckled as he anticipated their reaction to his full story.

Marty looked at Jeana and said. "I am so sorry that your ex-husband went to prison for what I did."

While Jeana was blinking hard getting ready to say "What did you just say?"

Cordway and Rusty walked into room 2114B to witness a confession that would increase the number of believers in the power of God to transform lives in that room on that day to two.

The police found the three stinky escapees not far from where the person who said they would send someone had told the cops they would be.

While being driven home to their respective homes by the police they started the

huge task of letting everyone know they were free. Stephen and Candace were dropped off first and the kids chirped in glee as they received them home with a few friends that had already gathered as the good news traveled fast.

Sharon had less fanfare at her apartment, but the type of fanfare was best to not be witnessed by too many people. Jerry waited shaking the tension out of his hands by her door. He was first on Sharon's list to call and had been one of the most ferocious workers on the search parties and canvassing.

As Sharon rounded the corner toward her apartment and saw the sweet face of Jerry. She squeaked and ran to him for a hug. One yard away from him she became practical and considerate and asked him to come inside and wait patiently while she showered and primped the appropriate amount for a storybook reunion hug and kiss. As she fumbled with joy to open the door to her apartment, Jerry got a good whiff of her and secretly thanked God for her consideration.

As Sharon let the crystal clean water wash the grime from her body and spirit, she could not help but think back on how her life had changed since that fateful night when she was attacked. How had God taken that terrible painful thing and turned it into what her life was like now? Of course she had struggles and moments of pain in remembering. But how could this God forgive her for not only all of her past and present sins, but also help her forgive others for their sins against her and help her not repeat the same mistakes again.

The sweetest gift that made her cry with joy was the fact that while she showered to get clean from the physical grime and stench, the spiritual stench that God cleaned her up from was way worse and he was doing the cleaning not just once a day like a shower, He did it thousands of times a day. This constant cleaning of forgiveness gave her the great gift of anticipation that a really great guy who loved God and respected her was waiting outside the shower in her apartment. He was waiting for a spiritually and physically clean hug instead of inside the shower with her giving her a physically clean hug that would stink to high heaven spiritually.

Sharon emerged with grace and flair from the bathroom with a hint of steam behind her, no make-up; no frills. She just wore comfortable jeans and sparkly shirt. Her hair was held back by a rubber band.

"How do I look, more importantly how do I smell?" She fished for a compliment.

Jerry stood and blushed. "Me lady the answer to both questions is but one word, beautiful" He bowed like a knight from the round table.

With safe, gentle joy they hugged and Jerry kissed Sharon with a sweetness made even sweeter because the kiss was the end not the beginning of something. That day Jerry plotted ways to ask Sharon if she wanted another shiny jewelry accessory on a specific finger.

Hal cried when he received word via a note that all three missing persons were safely home. He spread the word like lightening to the rest of his support network and they all rejoiced.

Not long after getting this great news he prepared for possibly more great news as he got a note about his appeal from his attorney. A hearing was scheduled in two weeks and arrangements would be made for him to be able to attend.

“Well it looks like the blessings are just raining down right now.” He smiled and shared with Chuck.

Chuck had become such a close friend and he was sad to be aware he soon might be experiencing loss of time with his friend and mentor.

“Man if you get out of here I am gonna miss you, but I will be so happy for you also. Just remember what you always say to me. ‘Don’t let good news distract you from the best news.’ God loves you no matter what and has forgiven you. Hold the gifts of blessing with an open reverent hand.” Chuck held out his hand to illustrate just like he had seen Hal do for him many times.

“Well I am happy you have been paying attention to what I have been saying, but what are you doing using my own words against me?” Hal beamed as he knew his friend would get his sarcasm.

Chapter 23

Confessions of the bad guy in the movies and fictional writings most of the time only happen while the villain has the good guy tied up in some fashion and is about to be left to be disposed of by some incompetent evil intern who always botches his duties and the hero always escapes and kills the bad guy. We love stories, but we need to be wary of falling into the trap of expecting life to follow the plot patterns of fictional popular media.

Prison confessions are also met with skepticism. In general, as our self-righteous society loves to think we are at least not as bad as those locked up on death row. They are beyond hope and just working the system to angle for reduced time.

Marty confessed his sins in truth and held nothing back. His face to face encounter with the maker of his soul had so changed his perspective that coming clean was refreshing not fearful. Like cleaning out and infected pussy wound. Humble salvation has a way of giving us a healthy nothing to lose attitude.

With Rusty, Cordway, Jeana, Patty and Darla camped out around his bed like students listening to a great teacher he said. "You sure you have enough memory on your phone to get all this? It might take a while."

"You can talk all day if you need to." Cordway said as he still was harboring some doubts about Marty's sincerity. He of course remembered meeting Marty at his mom's house and he witnessed his ability to lie with a straight face like a politician.

"My name is Marty Cotley. In the last nine years I have raped five women. The last person I raped was Sharon. I kidnapped Stephen and Candace and Sharon and can give you where they are. Someone should get over there right away. I have planted evidence in each case to make sure others were accused of my crimes. I have also planted evidence for money in three other cases."

Cordway's skepticism was waving goodbye in a hurry and it vanished in full when Marty gave very specific details about each of his crimes and the victims affected by his actions.

Marty kept an even, matter of fact pace as he catalogued each transgression. Twenty minutes later he stopped talking and leaned back in his bed and looked as if he was finally able to breath normally for the first time in a very long time.

Transported to a different place of trust by Marty's gut level honesty and confes-

sion, Cordway almost did not want to put cuffs on him. “Sorry Marty, but you know I have to read you your rights and cuff you.”

“Sure, no problem I just cannot believe God has forgiven me for all of that sin!”

Cordway performed the legal stuff and cuffed Marty to his bed until he recovered enough to go to trial in earthly court for his crimes which had been washed white as snow in the heavenly courts. “We will have a guard on the room, but it looks like you are not a flight risk.”

Cordway left with the taped confession and called for the guard as he walked towards his car. He knew his work load was going to explode, but this was the fun stuff. Righting wrongs and freeing the falsely accused was good clean work. What had this man who had been so cold and calculating and done so many evil things and gotten away with them seen to swivel him so drastically to the easiest conviction a lawyer could ever want?

Rusty and the ladies were thinking the same thing so they lingered for a while in the afterglow of the immense workings of God.

Darla could not hold her inquisitiveness any more. “Marty, what did you see that brought about this change?”

“Well sister, it is kind of hard to explain. I saw warm bright light and heard a voice that was so loving and scary at the same time. I just felt all over my body that feeling you get when you are about to cry in happiness over some overly beautiful song or some happy ending in a movie. I just knew I had access to supreme power and that power was offering me pardon for everything I knew I had done wrong but was trying to forget and numb somehow.”

All four of Marty’s onlookers started to dab their eyes from those happy Holy Ghost tears that Marty had just described.

Rusty was a stickler for details and that was a good thing. “So Marty, just to be clear as priceless diamond, what is it that has pardoned you from all of your sins?”

Marty beamed with joy drops in his eyes and said, “The amazing wonderful undeserved shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross for my sins which I have personally accessed for myself.”

Rusty smiled again and asked. “Can we pray a prayer of consecration over you so God will use you wherever he sees fit?”

“Of course” Marty nodded with his upper torso and a peaceful look on his face.

Rusty prayed. "Lord we rejoice in the fact that you are a redeemer and changer of lives. We do not know why you forgive over and over and over and over again, but you do. We thank you for our new brother in Christ. We pray you protect him from discouragement as he deals with the consequences of his past. Help him to know that your grace is just as sufficient to help him through those consequences as it was to save him. Help him to grow up in you and follow you in all you want him to do. We rebuke all patterns of thinking from his past and say he is learning to walk in a different way that is holy and wholesome and joyful because your love is satisfying him deep in his heart. We consecrate him for your service Lord. We set him apart, in Jesus holy name, Amen."

Contact information was gathered by each of the five in that room. Plans were made to keep in touch no matter what happened to Marty. The four visitors did not want to leave because there seemed to be a thick aroma of sweetness in the Holy Spirit that they just wanted to linger in. Finally the clock started to squawk at them and they parted from Marty's room.

Left alone for the first time in his life with just himself and his personal savior, Marty smiled as he breathed and replayed in his mind all that had happened. Was it real? Was it possible that in such a short exchange the entire direction and destiny of his life could change so dramatically?

His room door was closed. The guard was posted outside. Alone, but not ever alone again, Marty continued his conversation with the King, the Messiah, the Savior of his soul, the mightiest one of all time. "Hi God, thanks for never giving up on me: Thanks for pursuing me. Thanks for loving me so much even when I was running far away from you. Help me to chase after you and what you want me to do for the rest of my life!" Tears gushed from his face as he embraced this personal moment with his God knowing that he had wonderful access to many more of these moments every second of every day from then into eternity.

On Thursday Hal Dorsey started his last day of being incarcerated at Parnell. The day started with his usual personal alone time with his sweet Savior. He so enjoyed the early time inside the structure of schedule and limited distractions to get him off track mentally. He had just read "If God is for us who can be against us." He was lying back on his bunk and imagining all the ways that God was for him. He was smiling as he pictured God smiling at him saying "Go for it Hal, I am for you!" He felt an inner stillness and peace no matter what would come his way that day.

The sound of keys clanging and clamoring to enter the lock on his cell accompanied by the excited heavy breathing of the guard holding those keys told Hal something important was about to go down. Finally once the guard fumbled into the cell looking like he was surprising the prisoners, Chuck witnessed the breathless guard summon Hal to the warden's office again.

"Praying for you my friend!" Chuck said with a look of uncertainty.

"Thanks!" Hal responded with his best air fist bump motion.

As he walked to the warden's office, he tried to fight back hope that he was going to be released. He knew his hearing was scheduled for an appeal, but did not know how long these changes could take.

Again Hal was greeted by the warden and detective Cordway.

Again he waited in peace for the information he had been summoned to receive.

This time the body language from Cordway was different in no small way. He leaned in and almost squeezed the life out of Hal's hand. "Are you ready for some great news?"

"Of Course" Hal exhaled with a blowing shape of the lips.

"Go pack your bags you are leaving right now!"

"What?"

"Go on, pack all your stuff and get outta here before I arrest you for loitering in the office of a warden who has an important job of keeping guilty people where they are supposed to be."

The excitement in Hal's heart eventually reached his face and he started gushing thanks and shaking hands multiple times.

"Stop by the mess hall on your way out, there are a few people who wanna say goodbye." The warden smiled as he savored a rare moment in a pretty thankless job.

As Hal approached the mess hall he remembered the first time he came there and how scared he was. He started to miss his time with his Band of Brothers but was certain he would be back to visit often.

A roar echoed down the hall to meet Hal as he approached the door to the mess hall. He thought there was some fight or something, but when he entered he

realized they were all cheering for him. Joyful tears were wiped from more than one face. Floyed and Hal hugged. "I am so proud of you." shouted Floyed above the happy din.

Hal raised his hands to give a short speech. "Thank you to my Band of Brothers who helped me find my best friend, Jesus. Each of your faces are emblazoned in my memory and I will pray for you often and I will be back to beat ya'll at cards anytime you want!"

Everyone who wanted a good clean manly bro hug got one. Smiles that could not be diminished by walls thirty feet thick glowed from many faces.

Back in their cell Hal's hands shook with anticipation as he slung his few belongings in a white plastic bag and waved it to show he was packing light. Hal was more than ready to leave his cell for forever. Chuck sat looking lost on his bunk.

"Thank you for being a friend who spoke the truth to me." Chuck's voice quivered as much as his lips. The sound of his voice wafted into the space of the room where much transformation took place.

"You are so welcome and I promise to be back to harass you in person on a regular basis." Hal stepped towards his friend.

"I look forward to it, hug your kids for me!" Chuck stood for his personal good-bye manly hug.

"Stop!" Said the warden who stood in the cell doorway unnoticed by both its inhabitants. "I have some bad news."

Hal and Chuck wrinkled their faces as they looked at the bearer of future bad news.

"Hal, I am sorry you will not be free from opportunities to harass Chuck in person outside Parnell because he is getting out too!" As he said the good news disguised as bad his face shined at the appropriate time.

"What?" Chuck shouted as he rubbed the back of his head with his right hand.

"No way!" Hal shook his head and laughed.

"How?" They both said at the same time.

"We just found out that your case Chuck was one of the cases Marty was paid to plant evidence in. Cordway has been working fast to right a lot of wrongs

with the information from his confession. The details have been spot on and so helpful.” The warden’s face reflected the fun truth that he was having a great day.

Hal and Chuck hugged again and jumped up and down at the same time.

“I know I can pack faster that you did old man!” Chuck beamed and fake punched Hal’s shoulder.

“Old man? I am only a few years older than you!” Hal failed with style at being offended.

“Thank you warden for all you have done!” Hal gushed as again he shook his hand.

Chuck followed suit fast. The packing proceeded in lightening fashion and both joyful inhabitants of a cell walked towards the exit surrounded by cheers from most of those confined physically, but many of them were not confined spiritually.

In the final staging area for release Hal and Chuck were even more surprised to see Hafid, Floyed’s former cell mate, getting ready for release also.

“Hafid, I was wondering why you were not there to say goodbye at the mess hall?” Hal said as he and Chuck both patted him with joy on the shoulder.

“I am just as surprised as you are, I guess some dirty cop planted the evidence against me and my case was over-turned. I just found out while you must have been saying goodbye to everyone else.” Hafid replied with a grin as wide as his face.

“That is so cool.” Hal’s head was spinning.

Cordway seemed to appear from thin air. “Are you three done being mushy about why you are leaving or do you just wanna leave!”

All three paused together as if on cue. Then they looked to Cordway to be trying to think of something smart to say in retort that would be funny. Then they slumped their shoulders only a little and walked towards him with twinkles in their eyes.

Cordway was not required to drive this trio home but he wanted to savor the feel good moment and he could answer the questions they were sure to have about what happened to secure their release as they put wonderful space between themselves and the walls that changed their lives forever.

As the four walked outside of Parnell to freedom that three had not experienced for quite some time Hal looked to the sky directly above him and saw puffy cotton clouds smiling back at him in their expanse.

“Thank you Jesus!” Hal bellowed from his soul. He raised his hands in praise.

Hafid and Chuck smiled and nodded and then laughed out loud in praise.

Cordway smiled and chuckled.

“Detective, can we get ourselves a nice juicy burger since we did time for stuff we did not do?” Hal probed.

“I think we can do something, but you three better limit your basking in the moment. If I get called away on another case your brother will have to take you to Rusty’s.” Cordway grinned naturally.

“What is Rusty’s?” Asked Chuck.

“Trust me, you will know soon and you will never forget!” Hal showed half his teeth in a knowing smile.

Soon they were flying down the highway headed towards Rusty’s at 65 miles per hour in the detective’s state issued Impala. Cordway had a little time to answer all the questions that the three musketeers minus one just released were sure to have about Marty.

“Rather than going through this piece meal, why don’t you let me tell you what happened and if you need more details when I am done I will give them to you.”

Cordway took the silence from the giddy free men as license to proceed.

“Earlier this week Detective Marty Cotley who was a vice detective from Jackson confessed to raping various women and tampering with some cases. One of the women he raped was Sharon and two of the cases he planted evidence in were yours Hafid and Chuck.”

“How did Sharon’s hair end up on the trunk of my car?” questioned Hal.

“The night he left with Sharon from that hotel he planted the hair on a random car in the lot. It was your car. Your case was really a perfect storm of circumstantial evidence, I am sorry I got it wrong.”

“Thanks, but no apology needed. If it was not for my time at Parnell my life would not have taken the complete U-turn that it has taken. I am a different

man inside and out because of what happened during a tough time that many would try to avoid at all costs. I had to go to prison to be free.” Hal smiled as he looked at the horizon for the first time in over a year as a free man.

“I must say, since I have been around your case and Rusty and Sharon and your family I have seen so many of these changes that give me hope for society.” Cordway was trying to politely fish for the inside scoop.

Hal did not skip a beat, he just flowed. “There is nothing better than amazing grace personally received. Jesus is the only person in history who proved he could forgive my sin and deliver me to eternal life in heaven. If we do not understand how scandalous and radical it is that a perfect God, based on the sacrifice of his only Son Jesus chooses to repeatedly, thousands and thousands of times forgive me for all my ugly nasty putrid sins, then the motivation and ability to be a new creation are not present. Detective have you personally received this amazing grace gift?”

A lump formed out of nowhere in Cordway’s throat. In an instant this societal theory discussion had gotten very personal and practical between himself and his creator.

“No, I have not, but when I do it, I want it to be personal and not persuaded by anyone else other than God.”

“No problem, I agree, I am firmly against people pleasing also.” Hal smiled and enjoyed the relief of letting Cordway go into the place he should always remain, the loving hands of a powerful and infinite God.

Hafid who had been nodding and praying through the entire exchange naturally changed the subject. “So is there other food than burgers at Rusty’s?”

“Of course.” Cordway and Hal said at the same time.

Chuck just sat and somehow reflected peace and anticipation on his face at the same time.

The soothing silence that is not actual perfect silence while driving enveloped all in the car as each processed the events of the day in their souls and looked forward to very bright futures.

At Rusty’s a party of epic proportions in joy not numbers was brewing. Many of the people who represented ripples in a pond around the life of Hal Dorsey

received word he would be showing up at the epicenter of recent events. Rusty with authority cordoned off the back corner of the restaurant and had an extra server come in to accommodate the increase in volume of food ordered. He also gave everyone an extra twenty percent off their meals and free beverages.

The ripples closest to Hal sat at a centrally located round table with extended church family and friends of friends filling in booths around the edges of that dining area. The joyful buzzing was centered at all of the twists and turns in the story of Hal and Marty and what had happened as a result of a miraculous confession in answer to prayer.

Rusty as usual was stationed by the front of the restaurant waiting for the freed men to arrive. As soon as he saw Cordway getting out of the car he rushed to greet the honored guests and shake their hands. "I imagine you three are looking forward to a good restaurant meal. I will cover your meals, you too Cordway."

"In that case I am having the best sirloin you got my friend." Cordway teased because he knew his favorite was the Chicken Alfredo which was to die for.

As the five reached the area reserved for their fans, as soon as everyone saw them a spontaneous cheer erupted and the joy of reunion oozed from every smiling face. Rose and Brian and Jeana swooped in for hugs from Hal and multiple conversations continued while orders were placed for food as a feast began which pointed squarely to the future feast all those who belong to Jesus will be enraptured by some day.

Once the food was delivered and all the revelers were settling in to enjoying and savoring every bite, Stephen had to make a speech.

"Dear friends, thank you for your support and especially your prayers though out this ordeal for all those affected by what has happened to my brother Hal." His eyes started to moisten again as he continued. "Hal, I am so proud of you, not because you are perfect, not because of your good looks, not because of your innocence from the crime you went away for. I am proud of you because you let God have access to your heart. You gave God permission to really love you and forgive you and He is changing you more and more each day. I love you brother." Stephen took two big steps and hugged his baby brother with force and praise.

Everyone applauded as they wiped tears from their eyes. The applause went on for just the right amount of time. Hal raised his hand to command everyone's attention.

"I cannot let my brother out do me in the moving speech department so I must

chime in and make sure my speech is a little longer and even more emotional. Seriously though, I want to thank all of you who have prayed for me in recent days and way back over the years. Stephen and Candace especially, thank you for never giving up on me and praying for me when you saw the prison I was in way before going to Parnell. Thank you to Jeana for praying for me and forgiving me for my sin in our marriage. Thank you to Patty and Darla and Jeana for praying over Marty and being used of God to help his life change. Most of all, I am thankful that my personal God was willing to go to any length to get my attention at Parnell so I could stop running and turn around and let him love me.”

Hal cried. Not sad tears. His tears were so far from sad he needed binoculars to see sad tears. Hal cried tears of joy as he raised his hand in worship to his personal king of kings and Lord of Lords.

A reverent stillness settled on that corner of the restaurant. Sniffles were the only things heard for five solid minutes as nobody wanted the Holy Spirit moment to end.

After a bit Hal broke the silence and said. “I feel led strongly to ask if anyone wants prayer for anything at all.”

Without hesitation a forty five year old man who was eating with his wife in the booth closest to the party, but was not part of the party, walked right up to Hal and said “Can you pray for me to be able to forgive my brother?”

Hal and Stephen and Candace and Rusty did not hesitate and prayed for the man as his tears from the release of true forgiveness flushed from his body. The prayer was natural and normal in this church that looked something like a restaurant.

Two more overhearing onlookers came forward for prayer and two from the party also received prayer. Rusty smiled and said “Who says you can’t have Church in a restaurant on a week night.”

Afterglow conversations happened for at least another hour. One particular conversation was on Hal’s mind, he needed to talk to Jeana.

Chapter 24

Earlier that morning, Marty had recovered physically enough to be transferred to isolation in jail. The two categories of most hated new prisoners in jail are rapists and bad cops. Marty was both so no person other than heavily armed guards would be anywhere near this prisoner for quite some time. Even the guards used were the most heavily vetted to be clear of any corruption. His trial was set for three weeks out so he had to settle in for quite a wait. His relationship with God had taken a few minor jostles here and there, but overall his memory of his encounter with God was fresh as could be. He enjoyed all the alone time to keep working on practicing his personal face time with the most powerful being in the universe. He right away requested a Bible and started devouring it word by word and page by page. Some of his guards looked at him with steely disdain because everyone knew what he was going to be tried for, but some guards knew the whole story and gave him little encouragements along the way as they were able.

Jeana had been so happy to see Hal of course, but the public nature of the gathering did limit serious one on one conversations. Hal was in great demand for conversation and he had not seen many of the people there for quite some time so Jeana did not want to just drag him away from his fans. As she was politely talking with others she did catch Hal's eyes wandering her way quite often so she could bide her time with no problem.

Finally the gathering thinned to the point that sitting with her ex-husband at a booth was a natural progression of the evening. Rose and Brian had been taken home by a friend that lived close. Hafid and Chuck said goodbye and promised to keep in touch as their loved ones picked them up at Rusty's.

"So how does it feel to be free?" Jeana asked in a sincere tone.

"It feels great, but it is different than I thought it would feel. I think that is true of everything in life, we expect things to feel and be one way, but expectations are often unfulfilled." Hal looked contented and peaceful.

"Well aren't you all mature and spiritual now, you keep talking like that and you will be compared to your brother." Jeana twinkled as she teased.

"That would be a complement to me, but do not tell him that." He teased right back.

“So how much flirting does a girl gotta do around here to get asked out for a date?” Jeana leaned in with a slight tilt of her pretty head and looked square in Hal’s eyes.

“My dear lovely and beautiful Jeana, you need to set a good example for our daughter and let the man do the asking and you do the responding.” Hal leaned in and smiled as he teased. “My schedule is wide open. Can I take you somewhere fancy tomorrow?”

“Sir I do declare I would be charmed and delighted if you were to accompany me to dine.” Jeana feigned fanning herself with one of those fancy fans from the south and batted her lashes with joy.

Plans were made for Jeana to pick Hal up at his brother’s house where he would stay for a while until he could re-enter all aspects of his life. While these plans were wrapping up Stephen swooped to the table and used his superior reasoning skills to deduce something good was coming. He chirped with pride and asked the rhetorical question. “So are you two going on a hot date?”

Both Hal and Jeana surprised everyone by blushing just a little as the whistling and whooping commenced around their booth.

Still feeling like everything that had happened that day was like a dream, Hal rode home with his brother and sister. The girls were waiting up for some special hugs from their favorite and only uncle. They had gone to an activity with church that had already been planned and they could not really change to be at the party.

“Oh you look so precious” was the first thing Hal said when he saw his favorite only nieces. Big hugs happened all around and the adults settled in to couches in the living room while they trundled off to bed content and yawning.

“So I hear you had a little adventure of your own with Sharon as captives somewhere. What was that like?” Hal showed his concern.

“Smelly!” was the one word response from Candace.

Stephen recounted the situation blow by blow and Candace chimed in to add color.

“The thing that made me just bust out laughing was the look on my brother’s face after Sharon went sprinting by him out the door that the Lord had literally opened wide that he thought was still locked.” They all three started laughing so hard they cried those wonderful happy tears that come from deliverance.

They just hung out for another half hour enjoying being able to be together again and share fully in all of God's good benefits for the first time as three siblings.

When Hal settled into his bed in the guest bedroom, he again smiled in wonder at his miraculous deliverance. This was the first time in a long time he had slept outside Parnell. It did not take long for the enemy of his soul to remind him of the stuff he used to do all alone in a room not at Parnell. Old images of lust started to sprint across his mind's eye saying 'come think about me' in giggly voices. Hal knew counter attacks when he saw them. He knew what got David of the Bible in trouble when everything was going so well. He knew that often persecution can actually be disguised as prosperity of circumstance.

Hal took a deep breath, out loud in a whisper he said, "Lord, help me not to lust after these images in my head. I cannot do it unless you help me. Satan, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ I rebuke you and the spirits of lust which do NOT satisfy. Be gone!"

Hal lay on his bed on top of the covers and continued his work on memorizing scripture and drifted off to sleep.

At 2:30 AM in his dream he felt in so strong that something was trying to grab him in a sexual way. It was so real, he felt himself physically warding off this attack. He jerked awake and screamed at the top of his lungs. "GET OFF!"

He woke up and realized he was standing. His door opened and Stephen stepped in with his robe on and his hair all messy. "Are you ok?" was his obvious question.

"Yes I am fine I just had a bad dream about some old activities." Hal said.

"Did it feel 'physical' in nature?"

"Yes"

"That could be demonic, but either way you wanna pray that junk away. Can I pray for you?"

Hal remembered all the times before Parnell where prayer with his brother was something to be feared. Now with tears welling up in his eyes he said in joy. "Of course!"

Those same memories from his brother's perspective brought tears as well for much the same reasons.

Stephen warred in passionate prayer for his brother against the evil that wanted to devour him again. Hal sat in peace and intimacy and wrinkled his face in joy as he sniffed.

The rest of sleep for Hal's first night in freedom was free of more than just being outside captivity. It was free of the insanity of lust and would continue one night at a time, one breath at a time, one prayer at a time. Hal was not worried about the next night because he was doing his life one day at a time with his sweet savior and family and friends who knew everything about him and in reality still stuck with him.

Cordway had to see Marty and make sure his amazing transformation had stuck. Being a detective he could see any prisoner anywhere any time. A normal boring Friday at the jail in East Lansing was boring for the guards and the staff. Those waiting for court were far from bored. They were nervous and worried about what was going to happen to them. One very angry and nervous rapist who had already done five years on another charge was waiting for trial on a new more serious rape charge. Clyde Jones was fidgety, frustrated and fuming as he waited to be called from his cell to be transported to judgement day before an earthly judge who should have been the least of his worries.

A shiv in jail can be made from many things and concealed easily by clever criminals even from the most vigilant guards. Clyde had manufactured his own shiv and was intent on using it to orchestrate a suicide by cop scenario. He thought, 'No way, I should endure another long stretch in this prison hole.'

His runaway anger at the world in general and a long list of people whom had hurt him in specific was driving him to a perceived glorious rebellious and violent end to his life. Clyde had also bribed his guard to fasten his handcuffs loose during transfer to court so he could carry out his plan.

Near the top on the list of people whom he hated with passion was one detective Cordway whom had been the one to put him away for his last stint in prison. What a fortunate coincidence that just as Clyde was being transferred through the main hallway toward the exit, Cordway was transferring Marty to a room for a visit.

As soon as Clyde saw Cordway his plans changed in lightening fashion to end two lives that day. As the passing of both parties like cars on a two lane road approached Marty saw Clyde slip the small shiv into position in his hands.

At the perfect time Clyde lunged at Cordway with a swiping motion aiming directly for his jugular. Marty knew there was no time to warn Cordway who was droning on about some sports team and what they needed to do to improve and make the playoffs. Marty knew that pushing Cordway out of the way could possibly get him in trouble and maybe negate his testimony of real change. Only one option remained. Marty had to block this threat with his own body which was left exposed because his hands were cuffed firm behind his back.

Clyde lunged and Marty lunged. They were both committed to the death to goals so far different God could fit the Grand Canyon between them. The dangerous shiv and Marty met each other without much of a sound, but the small sharp blade sliced a huge gash in the inside of Marty's upper right arm. Blood started gushing like a sprinkler everywhere making a mess of the shiny jail tile floor.

Guards pounced on Clyde with speed before he could turn the shiv on himself. He appeared to be drenched in gloom because he failed in both his goals for the day.

Cordway pounced on Marty and put immediate pressure on the wound while screaming for the medics to come and save his savior. One thing that is bad about jails is the bars. The gates and doors keep prisoners in but they also slow down how fast people can move around the facility. By the time the medics could arrive to provide help for Marty he was clear to be fading fast.

"Hang on!" Screamed Cordway as he looked into the peaceful bloody face of the former serial rapist who gave up his own life to save his.

Marty continued to pale and as he did he saw that amazing, beautiful face again. The familiar face was his sweet savior Jesus, who shed his own blood for all of us including a so-called nobody criminal like Marty.

Marty smiled and looked in peace as he continued to drift away. With three final breaths Marty perked up for just a sentence and delivered a message to Cordway.

"Jesus told me to tell you that you cannot protect yourself or your daughters from bad things but He can. Give your life to Him now and He can help you through the pain here on earth until there is no more pain in heaven forever." Marty in peace breathed his last breath in his earthly body with a smile just as the medics arrived. His heavenly adventure was just beginning but it would never end.

As the medics started to try to revive Marty, Cordway stood and looked as if dazed at Marty's blood on his hands. Deep in his heart but clear as high chime

he heard. "I shed my blood for you." Tears of true spiritual transformation flowed from Cordway for the first time, but not the last.

Jeremy Collins the inmate who tried to poison Hal for Marty had received word from Marty that his services were no longer needed and would not pay him the agreed amount but rather donate that amount to Feed My Starving Children. Since Hal was no longer at Parnell, another chance to kill him was impossible anyway. Jeremy felt listless and directionless with no tasks to accomplish. Boredom pounded on his brain like a hammer and he felt like each day was living itself on auto pilot. Focus in prison should not be lacking.

During an average mundane lunch this man who had succeeded and sometimes failed in ending other people's lives, had no idea that in a few fleeting moments his own life on this earth would be gone, never to come back.

Out of his view at the table behind him in the mess hall, a fight erupted in an instant as if out of nowhere. A huge hairy hulk was reaching back to deliver a blow to the face of his enemy with his fist at his table and by mistake delivered a blow with his elbow to the temple of Jeremy. He dropped like a rag doll hitting his head again on the bench and the hard merciless cement floor.

Two seconds in earth time is maybe two blinks. In eternity where time is not an issue, a lot can happen in two seconds. As the function in Jeremy's brain stopped and his spirit left his body, a final quick conversation happened between his fading soul and the creator who loved him beyond compare.

"Remember me? I made you and want you to spend eternity with me in perfect joy, what do you say? Do you accept my forgiveness for your sins? The voice sounded fuzzy and from a distance to Jeremy but he knew it was real and it was God and He was speaking the truth.

In the second half of the 2nd second between this life and the next, Jeremy made a fatal, brutal, agonizing mistake. He paused to consider his options. In an instant the reality that not deciding is still deciding hit his body and spirit like a freight train and he was feeling the most intense pain he had ever felt, ever. His eyes were wide open but he could not see a thing. Even holding his hand in front of his face he could not see his hand. He could hear just fine and all he heard was moaning and groaning and screaming and grinding of teeth. Some of the sounds were far away and some were frighteningly close.

He could feel people glancing off him as they stumbled trying to get somewhere,

anywhere other than where they were right now. Every touch of the skin hurt like hell, just like when you run hot water on a burn that is trying to heal.

“Am I in hell?” Jeremy screamed as if somebody even wanted to listen to him. The answer to his own question came later when he started trying to think about how long his agony would last. He tried to console himself but there was nothing to do consoling with. He tried to conjure up hope, but there was nothing even remotely hopeful around him. The real agony was regret. He remembered being told about hell and being warned on occasion, but most people seemed to be afraid to talk about this place and now forever and forever and ever he had to live with this endless, painful, regretful, hateful and slimy reality. No sleep, no rest, no comfort, no hope and no escape were what he looked forward to with no end in sight. His greatest regret was all the times he said “I would rather be a king in hell than a servant heaven.”

Still able to feel and think, he curled up in a ball in a fetal position on stinging embers of searing pain and whimpered “What a fool I have been!”

Hal Dorsey was giddy re-assimilating into his life. He was called by various local radio stations for interviews to share his amazing story. For work he decided to go a fresh new direction from what he had done before. In his workings with radio stations he decided he wanted to go back to school and train to work in radio. His brother and sister and nieces were also quite giddy enjoying extra time with this new transformed relative. Hal used his time during the week wisely working on applications for school and making contact with various churches to share his testimony as well.

His reward for working hard during the week was a much anticipated dinner date with Jeana at Rusty’s on Friday night. They met and walked in together and Rusty giggled and fawned like a school girl over his two friends on their date. He gave them a corner of the restaurant mostly to themselves and made sure they had the best server, which just happened to be Sharon.

When Sharon saw them in her section she feigned disgust and with her best sarcasm said. “Do I have to wait on you people?”

Then she smiled and broke all the rules of serving and sat down with her guests for a few minutes to catch up on their lives. She shined as she produced a ring from her pocket which a certain man had recently given to her and shared the story of a very romantic proposal. Jeana and Hal displayed their happiness for her as she put the ring safely back in her pocket to keep unharmed while she

worked her shift.

“Ok so much for the happy mushy stuff in my life, I need to get you two some food A.S.A.P” In an instant she was gone and returned with beverages that she had memorized from recent visits that each had made at other times as individuals.

The pair who had not eaten out together for quite some time studied the menu while sneaking peaks to study each other. They ordered food in between more friendly banter and Sharon clicked back into super server mode taking care of her other two tables who were enjoying the show and in no hurry themselves.

“So how has your week been?” Hal asked to start things off.

“It has been really good.” Jeana responded and realized that it really had been a good week and she was not just saying those words to pretend everything was OK.

They talked and laughed together for about forty minutes. Hal truly enjoyed the ease of their communication, but what he loved most was the ease with which Jeana talked about her personal relationship with Jesus. She glowed with confidence that no matter what anyone else would say about her to try to button hole her into categories like single mom or divorcee or good looking or nice person she knew deep in her heart, deep in her soul and deep in her spirit that the ONLY category or label that defined her was adored and redeemed by God.

Hal had the same confidence and glow and when he saw this woman, who after all he had put her through still was even able to be in the same room with him let alone on a date, his eyes moistened around the edges and he breathed a prayer of thanksgiving to his sweet Savior.

“Jeana, I still love you. I never stopped. I cannot understand how you have forgiven me for the junk in the past, but I know it comes from the only true source of forgiveness, God. I am learning that receiving should be the goal of understanding, not just learning a bunch of ideas to impress people with at parties. I choose to receive your forgiveness and want to spend the rest of our lives applying the grace and forgiveness of God to every area of our lives and our kid’s lives. Will you re-marry me?” As Hal spoke these words from deep in his heart he slid to one knee and produced a fuzzy black box from his left pocket.

Jeana was moved by this man kneeling before her. Ever since their conversation at Parnell and the changes she had seen in herself and in Hal she suspected this moment would come, but now that it arrived it felt different than she thought it would. It was of course very romantic and honest which is what every woman

deeply wants from her man, but it was also realistic and down to earth.

While smiling and crying she gave her response in her own unique way. “My honey Hal, you know I have always loved you and am so grateful you have received God’s amazing grace which is the only way we can be right here right now in the first place. Yes, I will re-marry you, now get up off the floor before you stain the knee on those pants and I cannot get it out with my special stain remover and kiss me.”

Hal chuckled and staggered just a bits as he got up and realized the floor did not have plush carpet upon it. He stooped with joy on his face while putting his hand on her shoulder and gave her a restaurant appropriate kiss. Then he whispered in her ear, “I promise you many, way better kisses in the future.”

Cheers and applause startled the engaged ex-spouses as they realized that Rusty had gathered half the customers in the restaurant to be an audience to the reunion of a sacred union.

“Jeana continued to smile as Hal joined her on her side of the booth. “So honey Hal, what kind of bling did you get me.” She opened the black fuzzy box and saw a plastic ‘Hello Kitty’ ring.

Hal tried to cushion the blow that he thought might come and said “I promise to get you a proper ring once I can afford it.”

“I love it!” Jeana squeaked with glee, “I cannot believe you remembered I have always loved Hello Kitty.”

Hal glowed and said, “I promise to always be honest with you, so I must confess our daughter helped me pick the ring out.”

“Even better!” Jeana’s face shone as she admired it on her hand as if it was the Hope diamond.

Chapter 26

In fairy tales we always hear the famous jealousy creating words, “And they lived happily ever after.” These six words are no help to the psyche of little girls and little boys as they grow up thinking about what their lives are going to be like when they grow up.

When Hal Dorsey had his happily ever after life before he had an affair, lost his marriage, lost his job and lost his freedom, his happy was not even close to happy. Sure there were moments of happiness and connection with Jeana and his kids, but the ever after part cut like a knife because his experience was far, far, away from constant unending happiness.

Stories of any kind filled with all the wonderful romantic amazing things that other people were doing and the fantastic enchanting places that other people were going to so easily became an indictment against his soul. The lie with ease pierced him through when he saw these Facebook post worthy endings was the lie that gnaws on all of us daily. ‘When am I going to get my forever happy ending?’

Now Hal was going to get a second chance at a life he now knew for certain he never, ever could deserve based on his own merit. Deep down Hal was thankful that his expectations of how getting re-married would feel were sure to be nothing like reality. Somehow having low expectations as he rested in his Savior’s true perfect love, took the pressure off the whole occasion.

What brought joy to his heart was his re-marriage was in reality a new marriage because he was a totally different person and so was his sweet Jeana.

Soon after the proposal Hal had some alone time with Brian and Rose because the journey back to Jeana and sanity had taken a toll on his kids. After his conversion at Parnell he had sent letters to Jeana to read to his kids, but he needed some alone time to make sure any lingering stuff from the past could be dealt with.

They sat at Rusty’s for a special breakfast and he poured out his heart for his kids. “I know I have said this in writing to you two, but I just wanted to make sure both know how much I love you and regret the time I had to be away from you while at Parnell. I am not going to be perfect at being there for you in the future, but with God’s help I will keep growing to be a better and better dad to you both. Do you forgive me for the past? If you are not ready to do that it

is ok.”

Brian and Rose looked at each other and just let the moment sit for a second. Then Brian said “Dad, you know I cannot stay mad at you. Thanks for being humble, I forgive you for the past. Does by forgiveness increase my chances at getting the brand new Madden video game?”

Hal chuckled and said, “Well son things are a little tight right now, but as soon as I can I will get you that game and learn how to play it with you.”

Rose who seemed to be much taller to Hal said, “Daddy, I feel like I am mostly forgiving you, but is it ok if that takes some time?”

Hal reached for her little hand and said. “Of course you can take your time forgiving me. Just keep asking Jesus to help you forgive all the way and I know he will help you with that. Thank you for being honest with me.”

As Hal dropped his kids off at Jeana’s house for the last time he gave them big hugs and said he could not wait to be together as a family all the time again.

Three weeks from the proposal, the wedding that was the talk of the town because of the crazy circumstances of the lives of the couple involved, would again become one life. Still a messy life and a work in progress but one life.

Invitations went out easily to a close circle of about one hundred. The Church that had been such a help and support during the search for the three kidnapped members and it’s pastor worked with joy to put lovely decorative touches on the event that became one of the top places to be for the day.

They allowed one documentary crew to be there, but turned down three other requests. Outside the church, photographers camped out like vultures looking for glimpses to feast on. Inside, excited and joyful talking was centered on the various segments of the story of Hal, Jeana and the kids’ lives.

The talking was only partially hushed by the piano prelude but the processional song with organ and piano brought silence, not because of the music alone, but by the choice of who Jeana and Hal chose to be their flower girl.

Most people love weddings because everyone dresses up nice and the fantasy of conflict free love oozes out of beautiful people showing lavish love to other beautiful people. Then we try to convince ourselves of the reality of God’s unconditional love for everyone which has nothing at all do with how we look or act.

Hal and Jeana wanted to send a different message. They wanted to give everyone a picture of the reality that God's unconditional love for us by definition cannot be earned by our cuteness, our talent, our drive, our dedication or any other thing.

One of Jeana's dear friends, Janine at her church had a special needs child named Shauna. Shauna for the first four years of her life had been fighting the battle with Cerebral Palsy that from day one her single mom knew was going to be up hill all the way. Her hair was red and she had freckles at the top of her chubby slightly asymmetrical cheeks. Her mouth was open most the time and her tongue was going all the time in many directions. Her eyes danced with joy as she kept learning and processing life through her particular window of reality.

With all eyes on Shauna who was aided by a sitting walking harness with wheels that supported most of her weight and guided occasionally by her mom. She did a zig zag pattern down the aisle, she was clumsy and full of glee and pushed rose petals off her mini tray in front of her walker everywhere as her feet bravely pawed at the carpet on the floor and pulled her forward.

When she reached the front of the church exhausted but joyful she received a raucous standing ovation. Hal and the pastor standing up front could not stop chuckling and smiling. Shauna and mom took their seats triumphantly in the third row on what would be Jeana's side. The couple was also adamant there would be no seating in bride or groom sides since everyone was in this together.

Rose, Brehanna and Jessica walked side by side as glowing and proud junior bridesmaids. The red and black colors of the wedding looked stunning on these cousins with one rose each, in their hair and cute mini bouquets to augment the lovely dresses.

The way more boring adult procession started with two groomsmen Floyed and Chuck. Floyed was granted a special one day release from Parnell as long as he was accompanied by detective Cordway. The detective winked in large fashion as he told the smiling warden he needed the giddy prisoner for a serious police detective matter and would have him back in 24 hours. Both the warden and detective had exactly zero concern he would try and escape.

Floyed was first and accompanied Candace down the aisle with just the right mix of strut and flair. Chuck was next and was a little shy not wanting to mess up his steps as he escorted Darla. To most of the attendees it was not lost on them that the person who had some part in the ending of the first marriage between these two was in the wedding party and a close friend of the bride for the re-marriage. The restoration of God knows no bounds.

Brian looked sharp in his tux as his dad's best man and Patty walked just as proud as if Jeana was her own daughter playing the role of Matron of honor.

The moment everyone was waiting for came with ease. Everyone stood on cue with the music change and Jeana glowed with the true joy of the Lord as she grasped Rusty's arm for support. Rusty was honored to give Jeana away and was a wreck with puffy eyes as he cried and sniffled through the trial of a front row seat to the culmination of the restoration of this most holy relationship. When the bride and Rusty made it to the front, they paused for the pastor to say, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"

"WE DO!" Came from every corner of the sanctuary as what seemed like the entire room pledged support of the re-marriage. Jeana's mom of course nodded her approval from the front row smiling from ear to ear.

This epic celebration was going to be no quick affair. There were three songs, a skit and a poetry reading. The pastor with passion and joy explained that the reason marriage is so important is that it is the picture that God uses to illustrate his love for each individual in the church. The church is of course NOT a building but an interdependent body of Jesus followers. His challenge to Hal and Jeana and everyone else present was to realize that every day it is impossible to love anyone, including yourself unless you let God love you first, then let that love flow through you to others including your spouse.

Before the couple completed their vows, Hal took the microphone to share from his heart.

"We just want to take this moment to thank each of you for all your support and prayers in the past and we beg you to not stop praying for us now. I personally am so thankful to my brother who I know never stopped praying for me as I flopped around on the floor like a fish out of water for so many years. I am thankful for my sister and my extended church family as well and my kids for all the support and prayers. Most of all I am supremely thankful to my God who kept pushing me to the end of myself while pursuing me. I am so thankful he sent me to prison so I could be free and out of the fog. If you are here today and you are living out of physical prison but are bound and shackled in the spiritual prisons of shame, anger, addiction of any kind, materialism and any other prisons which promise to satisfy you and are lying, today you can be free from all that junk in the power and forgiveness that only comes from God through his Son Jesus who died on the cross for you personally."

The pastor stepped in joked "Whoa Hal are you trying to take my job away from me?" Then he gave a firm invitation for people to respond to the truth they

heard.

One of the camera men from the documentary crew in quiet put his camera on the floor and walked at a steady pace with purpose to the front. Tears of change trickled down his cheeks as he prayed with Hal and Jeana and their pastor. Everyone in the congregation was in no hurry, they just rested in the silence and praised and worshipped along with the angels in heaven as another person booked their own ticket on the best journey ever that makes everything on this earth look and smell like two week old garbage in comparison.

When they were done praying the camera man he made his way back to his camera and resumed his job smiling.

The pastor picked up the next thing on the agenda as if the interruption was a normal thing, which it was and said. "Of course Hal and Jeana want to say their own vows."

Hal took the microphone with boldness that was not his own.

"Jeana, you are beautiful to me on the inside and outside because you are learning to receive love from God and love from me. I thank my God every time I think of you, even when I am mad at you. I promise to love you and cherish you. I promise to not worship money or title or position. I promise to lay my life down for you in big heroic ways, but also in the small ways like doing things every day to show you my love. I promise to learn how to love you better. I promise to be faithful to you in thought and deed. I know I cannot be faithful to you without God's help. I know I cannot love you without God's help. Therefore I promise to keep persevering in prayer for God's protection of our love. I promise to not sweat the small stuff that a year from now will not matter one bit. I promise to confess my sin to God and you when I blow it. I promise to fight in prayer for you until my last breath leaves this body; then invite you over for the best tasting tea ever at my mansion in heaven. I love you."

Jeana needed some time to compose herself before she took the microphone. She locked her eyes firmly onto Hal's and nodded even though part of her felt weird about receiving such precious words. She felt a letting go of the weirdness as she prayed in her mind and felt the Holy Spirit saying to her. 'It is ok to receive, because no one deserves anything good. That is the whole point of Grace!' She breathed deep and invited God to help her get through her vows.

"My dear honey Hal on that day when everything fell apart I thought that I would never be standing here looking into your eyes again. I really do believe in miracles because I am living one. Just the fact that God has forgiven all our sins is a miracle. I choose to receive your love and I choose to receive God's

love. Not the theory of love but the reality of love. I choose to honor you with all my heart and body as God helps me. I choose to submit to your leadership in our home. I choose to pray for you daily. I promise to be faithful to you and not bring up the past as ammunition for the future. I promise to humbly and gratefully receive your love even if it is not packaged in the way I would expect it. I promise to keep learning how to respect you and love you in a way you can receive. I promise to make sure I fully understand before I pounce or react in anger. I promise to pray for you daily until we die and after having tea in your mansion in Heaven you can come over to my city in heaven for crumpets.”

Joyful snickers rippled through the attenders as the last line was delivered.

The pastor said “You two are perfect for each other you will never get anything done because you are talking all the time, but at least you will be communicating!”

Now everyone was whooping, laughing and rejoicing. Stephen’s shoulders were shaking as he could not stop chuckling.

“By the power vested in me by the state of Michigan I now pronounce you, Hal and Jeana, man and wife AGAIN. You may kiss the bride.”

Hal kissed Jeana for the first time in a long time, but he did it as if it was the last time for a long time. The look of joy and sweetness on her face made him weak in the knees and so thankful.

A standing ovation erupted like a volcano that was finally allowed to cut loose and flow. You could faintly hear the recessional behind the happy chatter and laughter that ensued as the wedding party exited with various preplanned unique dance moves.

Hal and Jeana stayed behind and greeted guests row by row as they released them to the reception. This technique was designed to limit long receiving lines, but because everyone was so invested in the story of these two, they ignored unspoken pressure to keep their congratulations brief. Forty minutes later, the couple made it through everyone and joined the reception for the customary dinner and cake and other activities.

Toasts of punch spiked with Sprite and sherbet were led by Stephen and Patty with all the pride of parents enjoying the success of their children, both the toasters wowed the throng with their eloquence and heart for God. When they were done, the pastor dryly chimed in. “Now I know where these two get their long windedness from.”

Everybody laughed and told him he had no right to talk since as a pastor he gets to drone on for thirty to forty minutes every week and no one can complain. He acquiesced and feigned being put in his place.

As the reception wound down Hal and Jeana caught each other's eyes as they were being efficient and dividing and conquering their job of engaging in conversation with their guests. They both were looking forward to wedding night activities that everyone who has been married thinks about often and sometimes talk about.

This couple was different than people getting married for the first time. They had already been behind the puppet show curtain and seen all the strings. They knew that coming together again sexually would be an adjustment, but were confident that just as God had helped them in every other area of their lives; he would help them in this area also.

Time kind of fast forwarded and now they were leaving the church with bubbles filled with air from the lungs of so many people who loved them floating all around. They entered Jeana's car and eased safely into the night air with whistles and waves from friends fading into the distance for now. Knowing it was Jeana's car the wedding party refrained from any type of decorating on the car itself, but they did tie a few cans to the under carriage of the car.

They only drove two miles before pulling over and untying all the cans and throwing them away responsibly. When Hal got back in the car after throwing the cans away he pretended he got in the wrong car by mistake and commenced with some serious flirting with the renewed love of his life.

"Oh excuse me miss, I must have jumped into the wrong car by accident. Pardon me for the intrusion." Then he paused for a moment for effect and said. "While I am here do you mind me asking why a gorgeous young lady such as yourself is doing all alone in a car at this time of night?"

Jeana loved it when Hal did these spontaneous role playing scenarios. They stopped fairly quickly when they got married the first time, but she was not living in the past. Right now she was going to enjoy flirting with her husband.

"Sir, I do not know who you are and I assure that I am more than capable to take care of myself anywhere, because my God is on my side and loves me greatly. Please leave at once or my mace in my right hand will put you in much pain."

She pushed him with her left hand on his right bicep and as she pretended to push hard she felt the muscle that she knew full well was there.

“Wait a minute sir, now that I have felt your big strong muscles I think maybe you should stick around and protect me from all the weirdos and sickos out there in that big bad world.” She started rubbing his shoulder and the back of his neck.

Hal smiled and took in the beauty of his Jeana. “Miss, I am offended that the only reason you feel that I am trustworthy is that you felt my muscles. I have a brain and a sensitive heart that is just looking for the right women to spend my life with.”

Jeana smiled and kept stroking Hal’s hair gently. “Sir, it was not my intent to offend. I can tell by the fact that you can so easily express your emotions that you are a trustworthy man. The muscles are just the icing on the cake. Would you be interested in making out for a spell?”

Hal broke character because he really wanted to kiss his wife. “What took you so long?” he blurted out in haste as he covered the distance between the driver’s side and his wife’s lips in about one and a half seconds.

The re-newlyweds snuggled and kissed and smiled and hugged for as long as they wanted, then proceeded with joy to their hotel for more intimate practice in non-verbal communication skills.

After Cordway participated in the sending off of the joyful couple, he lingered for a while and talked with Rusty and his family. He was eager to share his new found faith and Rusty was very supportive and encouraging. He learned how to play Oh Phooey with Chuck and Floyed and a few stragglers from the wedding that loved to play. He really enjoyed the fellowship and bond with these people and looked forward to growing closer in the Lord as he attended the church on a regular basis.

The time to return Floyed to Parnell came too soon and he did not complain or whine, but simply said goodbye and hopped in the car. Their true freedom in Christ trumped any circumstances on the outside that would try to lie to them and define them. If the Son sets you free you will be free INDEED.

After dropping his new friend back at Parnell, Cordway went home to his apartment with plans to soon share this amazing story with his ex-wife and his daughters. While driving he also made plans in his heart to visit Marty’s mom and tell her how her son saved his life.

Chapter 27

Stephen and Candace and the girls of course would keep Rose and Brian with them until their parents got home from their simple three day honeymoon. They all arrived home and collapsed into their respective beds which had been prepared in advance to be very welcoming. As Stephen drifted off to sleep he cried and thanked his personal God for doing one miracle after another to transform the lives of so many people. Most precious to him was the full knowledge that he really had his brother back. Not artificial religious mumbo jumbo, but real, authentic, life changing faith was growing more and more in his brother and this was so good because God is so very good.

On the first morning of many that Hal and Jeana would spend together as a reunited couple this was a great morning. They had checked in to a quaint but inexpensive bed and breakfast on the edge of town and the night went well. It was not a great morning because there was no conflict or adjustments to being married again. It was a great morning because God was with them as they navigated the usual problems that everybody has in relationships.

Hal woke up first and as he felt the warmth his lovely life partner next to him he replayed in his mind various aspects of the totally amazing and God designed marital enjoyments from the night before. They had taken their time and massaged and nurtured each other while praying over each other in thankfulness as well. Honest prayers like “Thank you God for making my wife feel so soft and good” and “Thanks God for protecting this pleasure with marriage.” This union was not seedy and dirty, it was clean and joyful and gratifying.

While navigating the letdown that always comes to every good thing as a part of this life, so we won't put our hope in anything in this life, Hal was attacked briefly with some images from past lust episodes. As quick as the attack came he started praying and surrendering all rights to lust in any way, even after Jeana. Loudly in his head he rebuked the spirits of lust and put on God's armor as his only protection. One of the lies of lust that he rebuked extra hard was the lie that the only good sex as depicted in all the movies and TV shows is rushed and passionate and scandalous and dirty. So many people mistake physical intimacy with total intimacy. This is a huge mistake, because without the protection of marriage, how is a person to know that all the wooing is real and not just some con job to get someone into bed? Intimacy physically is only somewhat close

to satisfying if there is a connection spiritually and relationally and that is not an overnight process. It takes work and trust and total surrender to God who invented intimacy so he can be trusted to show us how to really get it.

Hal rubbed Jeana's bare back as she stirred but kept sleeping. He prayed for her in his mind. He prayed God would protect her and grow her up into all He wants her to have. He prayed that God would help her to let in his love and God's love. He started to sob with passion and warred for the heart of his wife in Jesus' precious name.

Jeana woke up and stretched with a glowing face and looked at her husband and saw his tears. His tears melted her heart. "What is wrong honey?" she said.

"Oh I am just so thankful for all God is doing in you, it makes me cry sometimes." Hal smiled and sighed as he spoke.

"Ahh, now you are gonna make me love you even more. I already remarried you and blew your mind last night, what more do you want?" Jeana said as she leaned in for a morning kiss.

"That is all I need. If you love God and love me and our kids, I am the most blessed man on the planet." He chirped.

They lounged for another half hour and enjoyed snuggling and soon their stomachs started demanding food with noisy growling. "So me lady may I cook thee breakfast?" Hal said in his best British accent.

"Sure" was her gleeful reply.

They both remembered they were in a B&B at about the same time, so his cooking for her could wait until they got back home. They laughed as they showered and dressed and went to breakfast which really hit the spot.

They spent most of the day perusing around parts of town that they had not seen before because they were too busy working and raising their family before. They just enjoyed exploring together. Jeana did a little shopping as Hal provided his opinion on some gifts for the kids. In the middle of the afternoon after a late light lunch at a quaint little café they started to head back to the hotel and were planning on doing a surprise visit to their kids and their beloved caretakers for a few days.

Hal was driving and pulled to make a left hand turn onto a two lane road and there was a car coming about 150 yards away which he had to go in front of to make the turn. Jeana was nervous because she had been in a few accidents and

she spoke harsh out of that nervousness. “Look out. What are you thinking?” came from her mouth.

As she said these words she heard the harshness of her tone and cringed. Hal cringed as well because he felt scolded and he could feel the defensiveness rising in himself. “Look how much room I had.” Hal said as he drove safely on their way. “I must have had 50 feet clearance did you see that?” Now it was Hal’s turn to cringe as he heard the harshness in his own voice.

Most conflict in marriage is about the little things, but if we do not pay attention we will let the little things gnaw their way into big things. Hal had learned a few things and so had Jeana, they knew that amazing grace is so practical because it can help us resolve issues where our value is not up for grabs.

No longer were these two trying to do brain surgery wearing oven mitts. They had a helper named Jesus whom they had invited into their relationship and he could wield a scalpel like nobody’s business.

Hal took the initiative. “Jesus, help us to process this minor conflict in your love and your strength.” He pulled the car onto a side street and speaking slow and calm he apologized for his part. “Jeana, sorry for my harsh tone and defensiveness, I know you are just trying to keep us safe.”

Jeana smiled and praised God for her gentle humble strong man. “Hal, please forgive me for pouncing out of fear, I know you would never intentionally put us in harm’s way.”

Hal snickered and said. “I am so glad we have learned how to resolve conflict in better ways than the past, but I will be careful not to get a big head about it or we will blow it big time.”

As these two would drive down many roads together as husband and wife and parents, they would revisit this humble conflict resolution model often. Sometimes they would need more time to resolve things and they never did it perfect, but anything worth doing is worth doing imperfectly.

Supper at Stephen and Candace’s house ended up not being a surprise as they suspected the newly re-weds would not want to be away from their kids too long. Rusty and Sharon and her fiancée, Jeremy, Patty, Darla and a few other friends all turned a simple surprise dinner into a party of almost epic proportions, not because of anything external, but because of the internal presence of God in each heart.

As these friends and family who had been through so much together held hands

in a circle Hal prayed this prayer.

“My sweet Jesus thank you so much for your amazing love which goes beyond my expectations in reality not just theory. Thank you for my family and friends. Thank you for forgiveness which I need lots of. Help us Lord to grow more in you every day and serve you wherever you lead. Amen.”

As they fellowshiped around the food they talked much about the way better feast that everyone who knows Jesus’ forgiveness personally will get to experience forever and ever.

Three weeks later on a Saturday morning Hal Dorsey drove to Parnell to visit his brothers and mentors. He had gone through the arduous work of being cleared to be able to volunteer. Even though he had glowing support from the warden, being cleared was still time consuming.

As he drove he could not help but remember the last time he was headed to Parnell and the dark foggy place he was in as he tried to make sense of what was going to happen to him.

“I will never leave you or forsake you.” The all too familiar sweet gentle voice came from over his shoulder. “Yes, I know.” Replied Hal; “I cannot understand why, but I choose to believe and receive anyway.”

Perspective is so important to live with. Sure they had to watch their finances and could not get stuck into trying to act affluent and they had to be careful not to get their value from how good their kids were doing, but these challenges paled compared to the dark place he was in when God showed up and changed his life at Parnell. Learning to live a life from the perspective of how bright his future was in Christ was not easy, but it was so worth it.

When the guards escorted him into the same room at Parnell where everything began for him, he was easily overwhelmed with joy. Floyed and all the guys showered him with their greetings and introduced him to three new members of the Band of Brothers.

They soon got down to the serious business of bearing each other’s burdens as each person shared. They poured out their hearts to God for each other as the Holy Spirit again draped over the room like a thick mist, soaking each man with peaceful, restful joy. They lingered for an extra ten minutes and then had lunch together. Of course cards were played again and laughter abounded as usual. Plans were made for regular visits from Hal to his still continuing Band of

Brothers at Parnell.

As Hal left he got hugs all around, the last to hug him was Floyed.

“I am so glad you let God have his way in your life brother.” Floyed said as he beamed with his regular smile.

Hal paused for effect. “My dear, dear friend I am so glad you had the boldness to introduce me to my heavenly friend Jesus who every day is sticking closer and closer to me as a brother.”

THE END

From the Author

— *Luke Grover* —

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Thank you for taking the time to read this novel. I only have one goal, that you would let God have his way with your heart. Please share this with someone you love.

I used to work in Christian publishing and much money was spent on hyping the next big seller. The only problem is that mixing business and ministry is tricky. Keeping truly God honoring motives is a challenge because it is so easy to be blinded by the lights of fame especially in ministry circles.

Serving God is a calling not a career. Check out John the Baptist's resume.

A couple years ago a men's retreat speaker who had published a couple books responded to my request for advice on how to increase my opportunities to share the good news of Grace in more places by telling me to market myself through my current circles of influence. Then he started to explain that his wife is happy he keeps writing books because it keeps the lights on and the mortgage paid. That very day I committed to the Lord that I was going to write a novel and even if it only impacted ONE PERSON and I only received rewards in heaven it would be so worth it!

My Bible tells me that MY GOD shall supply all my needs according to HIS riches in glory. I trust that if he has blessed you through reading this book, he will also lead you to know how to thank me financially or with a word of encouragement or whatever.

PAY IT FORWARD PUBLISHING? If God has blessed you through this book then send me a small donation. If you received this book from a bookstore please give them a donation also. If He has not blessed you, you probably did not get to this part in you're reading. Many marketing people would say that doing this does not make financial sense. To them I would say "It did not make financial sense for the widow to use her last meal to feed a prophet, yet God supplied all her needs."

Sincerely,

Luke Grover

God bless you with an ever growing understanding of his amazing, matchless love for you. Cross references:

2 Corinthians 12:9 : S Ro 3:24

2 Corinthians 12:9 : S Php 4:13

2 Corinthians 12:9 : S 1Co 2:3

2 Corinthians 12:9 : 1Ki 19:12

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Thank you to my own personal Band of Brothers, you have impacted me in so many ways over the years, you know who you are.

Most of all, thank you to my amazing powerful, loving Savior who somehow delights in forgiving my sins over and over again because for some reason he not only loves me but he likes me.