

# River of Fire

Darrell Case



Proverbs 11:30

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## **What readers are saying about Darrell's books.**

### **River of Fire**

Quite a lively, moving story. One will find it hard to just set down, the book till they have completed it! I received this book free in exchange for a review that I have read and enjoyed! Great for those who enjoy a bit of mystery and romance!

Angela

A fast paced novel that makes salvation clear.

J.

River of Fire by Darrell Case is my favorite of the books I have read by this author. The story line was so interesting that I read the book in one sitting...I just couldn't put it down. There is an interesting reference in the story to D. L. Moody and Phillip Bliss. I hope the author writes a sequel.

BillieKay

### **Sluagh**

Another great mystery by Darrell Case.

I've never read a bad one yet.

Kelly

This is a psychological thriller with a wonderful twist. While we get a vivid picture of the psychological character of the killer; we get an even better look at the spiritual fight that goes on around us all the time. Other characters in the story are very well developed.

Allison

If you are a fan of suspense, and enjoy the spiritual battles added to the story line - this is definitely your type of book.

Sonya

## **Never Ending Spring**

One thing that I really liked about the story was the way that the author kept God as a very important part of the theme of the story.

Deanna

This was the first time I read a book by this author. I loved it from the start! The plot captivates, making you want more.

L. Lawrence

I loved every aspect of this book. Mr. Case describes scenes so well, they were vivid in my mind. The suspense was perfect and kept me guessing.

Susan

## **Out of Darkness**

Wow!! Where do I start?? I was immediately sucked into this book from the very beginning. I found myself turning page after page, constantly wondering what was going to happen next!

Kim

The ring of truth and familiarity of the heart, this book exhibits is so compelling that one cannot help but read the entire book without stopping. Indeed it was impossible for me to even put it aside for more than just a few moments.

Dr. Wesley Rose

Out of Darkness was spell-binding to me. I could hardly leave it alone until I finished it. I am looking forward to his next novel. Judy

# River of Fire



## **River of Fire**

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For more information about Darrell,  
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[www.darrellcase.com](http://www.darrellcase.com)



**From:**

**Date:**

For Sarah Stevens  
Friend, fellow Christian  
Editor  
1963-2013



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As we, age friends become dearer. We realize our time on this earth is short. So it was with Sarah Stevens, who passed suddenly. Her absence leaves a large unfillable void in our lives and our church. We will miss you Sarah. However we know heaven is sweeter because of you.

Many thanks to Tim Woodward. Tim edited my first book *Live Life to the Fullest*. He stepped up to the plate and did an excellent job on *River of Fire*. Thank you Tim.

To Justin Davis for another magnificent cover. To those who judge a book by its cover, this should be a best seller.

To my wife Connie, who urged me to release *River* after it had languished around for many years.

To Lila Drake ,who previewed *River of Fire* and pointed out my blunders. To you, the reader. Your accolades humble me.

It is only by the grace of God I can write. Without Him, I could do nothing.

# River of Fire

## Chapter 1

Drawing herself up to her full five foot two inch height, Victoria Winters rose from her desk. She wore matronly clothing and kept her auburn hair in a bun, hoping to look older than her nineteen years. Inching her way to the back of the schoolroom, she watched him. The week before, the children had decorated the walls with handmade ornaments. Pretending to admire these, she watched Billy out of the corner of her eye. She stopped at the one made out of pinecones. Amanda Berry had created it from the tree in the middle of the schoolyard. She worked her way to the back of the one-room schoolhouse where she could view the children's slates.

He was cheating again! Why? He was such a good student, one of her best. At least he was until the last few weeks. He was looking at Julie Rhoad's slate. His head moved down the page as he wrote the answer to question number five. Ray's higher arithmetic book lay open on his lap.

Coming up the aisle, she stopped directly behind him, peering over his shoulder. Victoria saw that he was indeed cheating.

"William Hayman!" the teacher said, her voice sounding like a pistol shot. Billy jumped up and knocked the slate off his desk onto the floor where it shattered. The book

slid off his legs onto the floor, its pages open, fluttering like a wounded bird.

The pieces of the slate skidded across the bare pine boards. Leaving the pieces lay, she placed her hands on the small boy's shoulders and brought him to his feet. Guiding him to her desk, she felt the small boy tremble. Tears leaked from Billy's eyes and wetted his cheeks.

The rest of the class stared. They had never known this teacher to punish a student severely. In fact, Victoria used the paddle only as a last resort. The three times she had, there were tears in her eyes. One of the older recipients said it felt more like a love tap. She had no intention of using it again.

"Return to your work," Victoria said, instructing the rest of the class as she glanced at the wall clock. "You have five more minutes to finish your test."

Sitting down, she positioned the ten-year-old child in front of her. The little boy's face was pale, his hands shaking.

"Billy, why were you cheating?" Victoria asked. "You're one of my best students."

He wanted to tell her about Whitey and his friends. They terrified him. Their threats were real. Other boys had crossed Whitey and his cronies and had suffered the consequences. The only way out was to lie.

"I ain't cheatin," Billy said.

Victoria didn't bother to correct his English nor was she willing to be drawn into an argument.

"I know what I saw," she said, her heart breaking.  
"You will stay one hour after the other students are dismissed.  
Also, you will not participate in the Christmas Pageant."

"That's not fair!" Billy shouted. "I'm Joseph."

The other students looked up from their work.

"Would you prefer I expel you for the year?"

The small boy shuddered. If his father found out he had been kicked out for cheating, he would be more severe than Miss Winters. Big tears squeezed out of the corners of Billy's eyes and ran down his cheeks.

Victoria's heart ached for him.

"Billy, I'm not trying to be mean but I can't let you get away with doing wrong."

She hugged him to her chest as his breathing became more ragged. She could feel his tears dampening her shoulder. When his tears stopped, she released him. Victoria smiled at him.

"Please clean up your broken slate," she said, handing him an extra one she kept in her desk.

"Do I still have to stay after school?" he asked.

"Yes. It will give you a chance to retake your test."

Sullenly, Billy returned to his desk. Picking up the broken pieces of the slate, he placed them in the wastebasket. Returning to his seat, his head slumped on his desk.

Later, with no one to help him, Billy knew he had failed the test. Checking the wrong answers, Victoria shook her head. What had gotten into that boy?

After an hour, she let him go. He seemed reluctant to leave the schoolyard. Several times Victoria looked out the window and saw him dawdling around the trees. She was about to put on her wrap and check on him when he walked down the lane. Even then, his feet seemed to be dragging.

Leaving the schoolroom, she entered the living quarters at the rear of the schoolhouse. The little room was cramped with not much more than a bed, a dresser and a small eating table. The small wood stove in the corner was cool to the touch. She left it that way for the time being. Dark snow clouds rode the western horizon; already a few flakes were beginning to fall. It would be a perfect night for the Christmas play.

Walking with his head down against the wind, Billy never saw the three boys lurking behind the old hollow tree ready to pounce on him. He couldn't tell the teacher about the threats. She was so good to him but what would they do if they thought he had told her about them.

A shadow loomed over him. Fear shot through him and settled in his heart. His breathing increased, the air from his lungs coming out in a plume of white smoke.

"What ya doin' squirt, makin' googoo eyes at the teacher?" Joe "Whitey" Sanders sneered, stepping from behind a tree.

The flat-faced fifteen-year-old towered over little Billy. Whitey worked at his father's blacksmith shop which only added massive muscle to his already heavy frame. When he was ten, his father, Otto Sanders, had brought his son into the shop and ordered him to close his eyes. He then touched a red-hot rod to the child's arm. The child screamed in pain and surprise. When Joey's sobs stopped, Otto told him, "Let that be a lesson to you, boy. Always be careful around the forge." When the burn healed, it left a three-inch white scar, sealing his fate to the nickname, 'Whitey'. The back - breaking labor in his father's shop only gave him a sour attitude. Even the older boys stayed out of his way.

"I asked you a question, squirt," Whitey said, doubling his fist. "You tell her about me? You better not or ..." He waved his fist in the air. Billy shook his head emphatically.

On each side, the tow-headed twins, Rudy and George Fairfax, cousins to Whitey, flanked Billy. They didn't always agree with his actions, but he was family. They wouldn't admit it even to themselves, but they were afraid of him.

Grinding his teeth, Whitey advanced on the ten-year-old. Billy was sure he caught a fleeting glance of a wild dog. "Now give me the coins you took from her desk."

"I aint no thief." Billy said defiantly. "I'm not gonna steal from her."

"You're a liar. Give me that money." He advanced on the child.

Whirling on his heels, his short legs pumping, Billy ran for all he was worth.

"Get 'im!" Whitey yelled to the twins.

Rudy made a valiant effort to catch Billy, jumping over logs and splashing across the creek but in the end it was George's agility that won out. They brought him back to Whitey kicking and whimpering. They searched him but found nothing.

"You bring me them coins and also bring me the money in your daddy's jar," Whitey said.

"I can't. He's saving it for spring seed," Billy said as he felt wetness in the front of his pants.

"Will ya look at that? Little baby wet himself," Whitey sneered. "Maybe your momma'll let you wear a diaper to school tomorrow."

Billy hung his head in shame, fear shaking his body. Tears dripped off his chin onto the freshly-fallen snow.

"Pull his coat and shirt up over his head," Whitey ordered.

Grasping the young boy's arms, Rudy and George did as they were told, exposing Billy's bare back. Whitey reached behind the hollow tree. Suddenly there was a whooshing sound and fire bit into Billy's back. He jerked and screamed in pain. Rudy and George stared in horror at the angry red stripe running across the pale skin. Billy struggled to free himself. They had seen Whitey beat up kids before but this was different.

"Stuff the tail of his shirt in his mouth," Whitey said. They did as they were told, neither one wanting to defy him. He could just as easily turn on them.



Rearing back, Whitey brought the whip down again. Billy bit down on the rough material of his homespun shirt. He tried to hold on but at the tenth blow, he lost consciousness.

Letting go of Billy's arm, George screamed, "Stop! Stop, you've killed him."

"Naw," Whitey said. "He ain't dead."

"I'm gettin' outta here," Rudy said, taking to his heels.

"Me too," George agreed, following his brother. The boys ran down the snow-covered road leading to Pottsville.

"Cowards!" Whitey called after them.

Both boys disappeared over a small rise. Kneeling beside Billy, Whitey rubbed snow in the boy's face. Billy moaned.

"Don't hit me again; I'll get the jar for you."

"You better," Whitey said, his face inches from Billy's. "And iffen you tell on me, I'm gonna whip you harder next time and I'll get your mamma too. You hear me?"

"Yes," Billy whispered.

"What?" Whitey said, shoving his fist in Billy's face.

"Yes, I hear you" he shouted, using his last ounce of strength.

Jenny Hayman was taking fresh loaves of bread from the oven. She wasn't worried about Billy's tardiness. Many

times before he had stayed behind to help Miss Winters clean the schoolhouse. She cut off a thick heel of a loaf, buttering it heavily, then putting it in a pan on the stove.

"That'll keep it warm 'til he gets home," she said, humming to herself. She always fixed a snack for Billy before he did his chores. She smiled, breathing in the aroma of the fresh baked bread. It made the house smell so nice.

She heard the front door open and close. Thinking it strange since Billy always came in the kitchen door, especially on baking day, she called out to him.

"Billy, is that you? I've got a slice of bread for you on the stove."

There was no answer, only the sound of the bedroom door closing.

Entering the kitchen, Owen Hayman asked, "Where's Billy? I saw him come in."

"I guess he's in the bedroom."

Billy peeled off his shirt, wincing at the pain. It was covered in blood; balling it up, he hid it in the corner of the room.

His father entered the bedroom without knocking.

"Son, when you feed the pigs tonight, I want ...."

Owen stopped in mid-sentence, his eyes drawn to the open wounds on Billy's back.

"What happened? Who did this to you?" his father demanded, his thick hands clenching into fists.

Billy's mind raced. He knew what Whitey was capable of. His father might stop him but if he didn't, Whitey would hurt his mom. He had to protect her.

"Billy, tell me now." Owen Hayman demanded.

His father would be mad at her but he had no choice.

"Teacher," Billy said. "Teacher did it."

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 2

Victoria's feet wanted to skip but she restrained herself, knowing it wouldn't be ladylike. Her mint-green dress was too long to be fashionable but it at least it covered her worn shoes. She gathered the hem of the dress in her left hand to keep it from catching on the rough boardwalk.

The children's voices ran through her mind. That morning before lessons, they had practiced the Christmas songs. Teddie Hamilton's high notes on 'Silent Night' brought a smile to Victoria's lips. They sounded like the scraping of a dry wagon wheel. It made the other children cringe. Thinking of it now, she almost laughed out loud. She had finally convinced him to tone down some.

After she had dismissed the children, she discovered she was short three candles for the Christmas play. With only two hours to go, she hurried to the mercantile.

Stopping, she admired the coat in the window. Morgan's Mercantile carried only the best. The coat - - straight from Paris - - was certainly the most beautiful Victoria had ever seen; nothing compared to it. However, she felt herself very fortunate. Color reddened her cheeks as she thought of the many times she had hinted to Fred about needing a new coat when the one she had was perfectly fine.

Everything would change in the spring when she became Mrs. Fred Morgan. At thirty-five, Fred Morgan was

still one of the most handsome men in Pottsville. Sensitive about his receding hairline, he compensated for it with his drooping handlebar mustache. Victoria always seemed to melt whenever she gazed into his deep brown eyes.

Victoria tugged at her glove, removing it from her left hand, and admired the diamond engagement ring. It sparkled in the sunlight that filtered through the clouds.

Movement drew her attention back to the window; someone was removing the coat from the display. She shaded her eyes to see inside the store window. It was Fred! Victoria smiled and gave him a shy little wave. Carefully folding the coat over his right arm, Fred turned and walked across the store.

Victoria frowned. It wasn't like Fred not to acknowledge her presence. Putting her glove back on, she stepped to the door. She stopped with her hand on the brass doorknob. The bell over the door tinkled, sounding to her like Christmas bells. The smile returned.

Of course, why didn't she think of it before? Christmas was two weeks away, too late to order another one. So dear, sweet Fred was taking it off the display before his mother or one of the clerks sold it.

She gave him sufficient time to carry it to the back room before entering the store. The odors of candy, coffee, oranges, and sweet meats assailed her nose. She breathed in the deep scents of Christmas. On three sides of the mercantile, shelves reached the entire fourteen feet from floor to ceiling while a counter ran the length of the back wall. On the counter lay her beloved coat. Before it, stood a sharply-dressed man, arguing with Fred, his little pig-jowls flaming red.

Throwing down his stovepipe hat beside the coat, he raised his voice.

"Confound it, Fred. I've spent hundreds of dollars in here over the years; you ought to give me that coat!"

"Can't do it, Mr. Mindis. Mother would have my head," Fred said, picking up the coat.

"Excuse me while I return this to the window."

"All right, all right, you win. Wrap it in your best paper. Elsie better like it," Mindis said, counting out the coins.

"I'm sure she will," Fred said, carefully folding the coat into a box.

Victoria watched it go as she might see a friend go to the grave. Fighting back the tears, she busied herself at the candles.

The bell hanging from the door rang again. This time it sounded like a death pall. She turned to see Mindis carrying a brightly colored package down the street. Gathering up the candles, she carried them to the counter.

"Will that be all?" Fred asked, totaling up her purchase. There was no hint of friendliness or recognition in his voice. Not knowing how to react, Victoria said nothing.

"As you can see, Miss Winters, we are extremely busy, so if there's nothing else?"

His words hung heavy in the air. Before she could stop them, the words tumbled out.

"You sold the coat," she said, trembling.

Fred smiled at her, his handlebar mustache curving up.

"Yes we did and at a very handsome profit I might add."

"But, but it was mine," Victoria said, the tears coming unbidden down her cheeks.

"Don't be silly, you couldn't afford a coat of that quality on a teacher's salary."

Victoria's cheeks burned as she averted her eyes.

"If you need a coat, I believe mother has an old one she would be willing to sell."

He raised his voice, "Mother could you come here a moment, please?"

"No, I'll make do," Victoria said as she gathered up the candles.

"Please put these on the school's account," she said, heading for the door.

"The account for the school was closed this morning," Fred stated.

Victoria wheeled around. Facing the storekeeper, she said, "By whose

authority?"

"The account is closed," Fred repeated. He paused.  
"As a member of the school board, I have that authority."

"Fine," Victoria said. Stomping up to the counter, she dug into her purse and extracted the few coins she was saving for a celebration dinner. Flinging them down on the counter, she rushed out.

She flew down the street oblivious to the stares and murmurs of the townspeople. Back in her living quarters at the rear of the schoolhouse, she threw herself across the bed and sobbed.

How could Fred be so insensitive? Upon her arrival in Pottsville this fall, he was so kind. She was thrilled when he began to call on her. When he asked her to marry him three weeks later, she accepted almost before the question was out of his mouth. True, most Saturday evenings, she waited an hour or more after he closed the mercantile, then he whisked her into the back entrance of the hotel to a private dining room. It all seemed so romantic. Now she wondered why he never wanted to be seen with her in public. He said he needed to prepare his mother for the news. She had a weak heart, but he had had months to make his intentions clear.

Exhausted, she allowed herself to close her eyes.  
"Just a few minutes rest, then I'll be refreshed," she thought.

Drowsiness overcame her and she fell into a restless sleep filled with images of Fred handing her the coat, then pulling it away, doubling over in laughter.

Some unknown noise awoke her. Startled, she lit the lamp. The wall clock with the broken face stared back at her. It said ten minutes to six .



"Oh my, I'm late," she said. Rushing to the armoire, she jerked it open. How glad she was Aunt Gertie had insisted she bring her best dress with her. Hurriedly she changed into the blue velvet gown with lace at the neck, waist, and hem. Glancing in the cracked mirror on the washstand, she was shocked at what she saw. Pouring water into the basin, she tried to wash her bloodshot eyes and remove the evidence of tears from her face.

"Well, I can't do anything about that now," Victoria told herself. She repaired her bun, tucking in stray strands of hair. Setting down on the bed, she buttoned up her shoes. How she wished she could afford a new pair. These had been repaired so many times they were more thread than leather. When cobblers saw the size of her feet, the price went up several dollars.

"Blimey, they're boats!" One exclaimed, causing Victoria cheeks to redden. After that, she wore longer dresses, and inquired about the prices at cobbler shops without lifting the hem of her dress to reveal her feet.

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 3

A heavy banging made Victoria jump. She hurried to the door. The thin panels vibrated under more thunderous blows. Fearing it would break, she sprang to open it.

Constable Luke Maples stood on the stone steps. Fist raised and legs spread, he stood there ready to strike again.

"Meetin's started," he growled. Turning away, he was swallowed up in falling snow.

Taking a few precious seconds, Victoria surveyed the scene before her. The landscape looked like a winter wonderland the stark trees turned into glazed statues. The barren brown earth sparkled like a blanket of fairy dust. She breathed in the fresh frozen air, then hurried to the front door of the schoolhouse. The snow seeped into her shoes.

Entering the schoolroom, Victoria's heart swelled. Every seat was occupied with children. Their mothers and fathers stood against the walls. Wind howled around the building, finding every crack, driving bits of ice and snow against the windows.

Anxious to get to the school, Victoria had left her coat in her room. She shivered now, wishing she had taken time to get it. All eyes turned in her direction. She gave them her best smile, only to be met with stares and frowns. Her desk

had been pushed against the wall; the three members of the school board sat in front of it.

The president of the bank, Harvey Anderson, Phillip Metcalf, a prominent farmer, and Fred Morgan sat before Victoria's desk. Constable Maples took a seat on the dunce stool in the corner, his large body overflowing the child's chair. Victoria never used that stool, feeling encouragement a better aid than humiliation.

She started to make her way to the front of the room, smiling at the children seated around her.

"Please wait until we call for you, Miss Winters," Harvey Anderson said.

"But the Christmas Pageant. . . ."

"Miss Winters, we are in a meeting to discuss your future. There will be no Christmas play," Phillip Metcalf said, chopping off each word.

"I don't understand," Victoria said, continuing to walk toward the front.

"Miss Winters, please stand back against the wall until we ask you to speak," Anderson said. "If need be, Constable Maples will assist you."

Maples stepped off the stool, a broad, evil grin on his face. His eyes sent a chill through her heart. Reluctantly, Victoria turned and walked to the back of the room. People stepped out her way, giving her a wide path. Maples sat back down. His eyes still on her, he gave her a wink. The action made her blood run cold.

"The board will now hear from Mr. Owen Hayman. Mr. Hayman, do you wish to speak?" Anderson asked, addressing a man in high boots, wool pants, and a plaid shirt.

"I sure do!" Owen Hayman replied. He gave Victoria an angry look. "My Billy came home an hour late tonight."

"Is that unusual?" Fred Morgan asked.

"No sir, it's not. Many a time, Billy has stayed behind and helped clean up. That's just the kind of boy he is." He paused for breath.

"I kept him over to redo a test. I..."

"Please be quiet Miss Winters . you will have a chance to defend your actions no matter how deplorable they may be." Morgan said.

"But I..."

Maples stepped off the stool. Victoria moved back until she pressed against the wall.

"Billy, come here," Owen called. Painfully, Billy Hayman eased himself out of his chair.

Turning Billy around to face away from the school board, his father gently raised the boy's shirttail. Red angry welts crisscrossed Billy's back, a few wounds still seeping blood. The crowd gasped and some of the women cried out in shock.

"Doc says he may be scarred for life," Owen said, his face a mask of anger. "That woman ain't fit to teach

pigs. She beat my Billy until his shirt was soaked in blood!" he said, staring straight at Victoria.

Victoria's face paled! Her mind raced. For a moment, she felt faint.

"No, no! I would never do. . . "

"Quiet, Miss Winters. You will have a chance to respond to the charges."

"Billy," Anderson said softly, "can you tell us what happened?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Billy saw Whitey's threatening stare, his hands hanging at his side, closing into fists. For one instance, Billy had a touch of courage and then it crumbled.

"Teacher did it," he said so softly that Anderson leaned forward unable to hear him.

"Please speak up, son. There's no need to be afraid."

The little boy pointed a shaky, accusing finger at Victoria.

"Teacher did it! I...I fail my mathematics test and..." the boy began to sob.

Whitey had a triumphant smile on his face; he had never liked Victoria and now he would be rid of her. Billy hung his head in shame.

"What did she use, son?" Metcalf asked.

"A little whip," Billy murmured.

"This one?" Maples asked picking up a whip from the floor beside the stool.

The color drained from the child's face as he recognized the whip Whitey had used.

"Yes sir," Billy said trembling, tears running down his cheeks. "It hurt."

"I would imagine it hurt like blazes," Anderson said.

"What's the punishment for something like this, Maples?" Metcalf asked the constable.

"But I didn't do it. I would never whip him," Victoria cried.

Then why did we find this whip in your desk?"

The people around her moved back as if Victoria had a deadly disease.

Victoria cringed into the background. She couldn't believe her ears. Surely, they didn't mean her.

"Someone must have put it in there. I didn't do it. Billy, tell them."

"Some time in the pokey; depend on how far ye want to carry it," Maples snuffed his heavy mustache, thoroughly enjoying her discomfort.

"What do you mean?" Fred asked.

"Well, if you want to go through the court trial, it could mean a couple of years in the penitentiary."

Victoria felt as if a giant hand was squeezing her heart.

"You oughta see what they do to nineteen-year-olds up there," Maple said.

His eyes told Victoria more than she wanted to know.

A woman's voice spoke up. Victoria thought it was Mrs. Hayman but she could not be sure.

"If you ask me, we oughta use that whip on her!"

A roar of approval went up from the crowd.

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 4

Adam Wakefield knelt down at the front pew, his Bible open before him. He read the passage again: "Trust in the Lord with all thy heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." He bowed his head, a peaceful assurance washing over him.

"Lord," he prayed, "you never send your people to a new ministry without going before them to prepare the way. Thank you for the opportunity to minister in Chicago. The congregation of Market Street Church needs your guidance just as much as the brothers and sisters in the hills of Arkansas. Please help me to be worthy of the task. Amen."

Adam pulled himself to his feet using the back of the pew for support. He was careful where he held the old wooden bench. This pew was coming apart in three places. And it was one of the better ones He hoped to work on it this week, but with several of the congregation down sick, well, maybe later.

Then the thought struck him. God had shown him he was to leave Apple Valley. To leave the people he loved. Like Abraham, he was to go to a new territory. Somehow, Chicago didn't seem like the promised land. A new shepherd would pastor his people. This building cared for by another. The people he called his own for the last five years were no longer his.



When his father died Adam was ten, and Pastor Ashmore became like a father to him. He took Adam fishing or gathering wild fruit and nuts. Sometimes he invited Adam just to be around the church while he prepared his Sunday sermon. As Adam grew older, he accompanied Pastor Ashmore on sick calls. Some days they rode, riding their mules' way back in the hills, visiting the unchurched and the unsaved. On summer days, they stopped by wooded streams. Here they would catch and eat their dinner.

At sixteen, he preached his first sermon from the pulpit behind which he now stood. Adam smiled; it had lasted all of three minutes. When he was done, he had gone back over the points he had made, making it last a couple minutes longer.

Then he sat down, his head hung in shame. Pastor Ashmore stood up and praised his young protégé. As Pastor Ashmore spoke of Adam's work with the sick and elderly, Adam's cheeks grew redder. Sitting halfway back, his mother beamed.

One afternoon in July he walked across the valley to Pastor Ashmore's small cabin. Something felt strange. He knew the elderly man was home. His mules were in the corral behind the house. Receiving no answer to his knock, he looked in the window. Pastor Ashmore lay on the kitchen floor. They buried him in the cemetery behind the church he loved.

At nineteen, Adam became pastor of Lighthouse Church. He remained single in spite of the attempts of all the matchmakers in the congregation. His dark hair and eyes gave him a severe appearance. His tall, muscular frame made many men step aside when they saw him coming. He grew a mustache to soften his appearance but wasn't sure it helped.

"It makes you look very handsome, son," Edna Wakefield said.

"But mother, I want to look like a gentle, caring pastor, not an avenging angel," Adam protested.

Banking the fire in the pot-bellied stove, Adam's eyes swept the one-room church.

"I'm going to miss you, old friend," he said, his eyes misting.

Donning his coat and the old leather hat left to him by Pastor Ashmore, he stepped into the cold, December afternoon. Apple Valley spread out before him. The setting sun sent a golden glow over the small village. Behind the bridge spanning the creek, several boys and girls skated.

Walking through the tall pines, he breathed deeply of the crisp air mingled with wood smoke. The happy voices of the children rang across the valley. The fresh, fallen snow blanketed the tree-covered hills. Next spring the valley would be white again with apple blossoms.

Adam's mind suddenly darted to the stone-coldness of Chicago. The city seemed to him like a distant planet. He shivered. All his life he had walked these hills. Only through the grace of God could he give up this beloved country.

The small village of Rutherford Gap lay below him. The town was named for Blake Rutherford, an early settler from England. Blake had picked the spot to build a mill. It was now operated by his grandson, Cal. Walking down the trail, Adam passed the mill at the edge of town. His heart was light and heavy at the same time.

The new ministry would be exciting but no matter which way he turned, he saw another member of his flock.

Ben Hastings was coming out of the telegraph office, getting ready to lock the door as Adam reached for the knob.

"Sorry, Ben, I didn't know I was so late," Adam said, pulling out his pocket watch.

"No, you're not late, preacher. Wife's got a birthday party planned for Sarah Ann. She'll be four tomorrow," Ben announced.

"That's wonderful, Ben," Adam said, slapping the man on the back. "I won't delay you."

"You sure it's nothing urgent?" Ben asked.

"It'll keep. I'll be by first thing tomorrow morning. You give Opal my best."

"I'll sure do that, pastor. See you tomorrow morning," Ben said.

He strolled down the street whistling.

"Now there's a happy man," Adam said to himself, remembering the day he had married Ben and Opal. It was his first wedding. He grinned, remembering that he had been more nervous than the bridegroom."

A pang of sadness touched him. Ben now had a wife, daughter, and newborn son. Suddenly, Adam felt very lonely.

Returning from the War Between the States, Drew Wakefield moved his family and small son into the cabin he

had built overlooking the Gap. One day, a month after Adam's tenth birthday, he went into the woods to fell trees for a new barn. On that unfortunate day, a neighbor passing by found his broken body lying underneath a tree. He spread the alarm, bringing all the men of the valley on the run.

Drew lived three days; long enough for Pastor Ashmore to make sure of his home in heaven. They buried him on the ridge above the cabin. After Drew's death, many urged Edna Wakefield to move off the farm. She sternly refused. They would never be rich, but with a few cows, pigs, chickens and her garden, they would make do. In the last few years, Edna also took in sewing for the townspeople.

Stopping at the edge of the clearing, Adam surveyed the homestead with a critical eye. The porch ran the length of the cabin. There was a new roof on the barn. The words seemed to echo in his mind, "I'll take care of her."

Sensing his eyes on her, Edna laid down her sewing and looked out the window at her son. She saw the peace on his face.

"He's made his decision," she thought.

Ever since he received the letter, she had prayed the Lord would guide him. Secretly she wished he would stay in the valley. She had grown comfortable and had persuaded herself her son would always be here in the valley. It would be hard to let him go. If not for The Lord, she would find it impossible. Tears misted her eyes; she wiped them away quickly lest he see them.

Adam came in carrying an armload of wood. Dumping the chunks in the wood box, he brushed the chips that clung to his coat and closed the lid.

He leaned over and kissed his mother.

"You've made your decision," Edna said. It was more a statement than a question.

"Yes. I feel the Lord would have me pastor the church in Chicago," Adam said, fighting back tears. Edna nodded a lump in her throat. Trying to cover up her disappointment, she held up the dress she was working on.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I think you should go with me to Chicago," Adam said. Taking the dress from his mother, he carefully laid it on the sewing table.

Hugging her, he looked down. It seemed to him there was more gray streaking through his mother's black hair than ever. Pushing back, Edna held him at arm's length as she had when he was a child.

"Now wouldn't that be a sight? Hire a new pastor and get his mother in the bargain!"

"I'm sure they wouldn't mind. The parsonage is huge."

"No," said Edna with conviction. "My home is here. But you must go. God has a wonderful ministry for you in Chicago."

"Pastor Wakefield! Pastor Wakefield!" a child's voice called, interrupted by sobs. The porch floor pounded under running feet. Adam threw open the door. Ten-year-old Violet

Higgins, her hair in disarray and clothes soaked in water, collapsed in his arms.

"What is it, Violet?" Adam asked, his eyes sweeping the clearing, "Is someone chasing you?"

Violet labored for breath.

"Yo...your house is... clo...closest."

"To wh....." Edna started to ask, then gasped. Her face turned white. This afternoon she had watched the children skating on the ice by the bridge.

"Violet," Edna said, fighting for composure. "Listen to me. Did someone fall through the ice in the creek?"

"Be...Becky," the little girl sobbed, "un...under the bridge."

Releasing the child, Adam sprinted across the clearing, vaulting fences, leaping over logs, praying. "Dear Lord, don't let me be too late."

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 5

Victoria's face burned with horror and indignation. Gasping, her hand flew to cover her mouth. The room whirled around her. She felt like she was going to faint. To be accused of something as vile as beating a child was inconceivable. Her eyes swept the room for a friendly face but she saw only heads shaking and whispers as all eyes turned to her. She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself.

After calling for order, Anderson was speaking. Victoria forced herself to focus on what he was saying.

"Miss Winters, you've heard the accusations against you. Do you have anything to add before we make our decision?"

Her legs shaking, Victoria started to the front of the room. Stopping halfway, she groped for the back of a nearby student's desk to steady herself. Her fingers touched cloth. The occupant of the chair, the Banks' nine-year-old son Andy, bolted from the chair as if she had placed a hot poker on his neck. He ran to his mother and clung to her dress. The woman glared at her with hatred. Anderson eyed Victoria suspiciously. She gripped the back of the chair, her knuckles turning white.

"I . . ." she stammered, blinking back tears. She tried again, her voice coming out an octave higher. "I ...I can't believe you would . . . I love my students."

"That's why she beats 'em," a male voice said behind her. A titter ran through the crowd. Her eyes sought out Billy Hayman.

"Billy, who really beat you? Don't be afraid. You can tell me," Victoria said.

Billy looked at Whitey standing with Rudy and George by the stove. Victoria saw him look in their direction. Until Billy, Whitey was the only student she had to punish. On two different occasions, she had caught him trying to peek into the girl's outhouse.

Tears came into Billy's eyes, he loved Miss Winters. Surely Whitey couldn't do anything if he told on him in front of all these people. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Ain't ye done enough?" Jenny Hayman said, pushing Billy behind her.

"All I want to do is clear up the confusion." Victoria said. "It wasn't me who whipped you, was it? Come on Billy, tell the truth. I'm not mad at you."

"My Billy don't lie. Iffen he said you whipped him, you did it!" Owen Hayman bristled, starting for Victoria.

"Now simmer down, Owen," Anderson said, "We'll handle this."

Hayman backed off and joined his wife and son at the rear of the schoolroom. Fred Morgan stood to his feet and cleared his throat. Victoria relaxed. Here at last was a friendly face. But he wasn't smiling. His next words chilled her to the bone.



"While Miss Winters' actions were appalling I don't believe it would be in the best interest of this poor child or town to go through a trial. I propose we dismiss her and send her back to Chicago on the next train."

"Train don't come through till Saturday," Jenny Hayman said. "That's two days from now. Where we gonna keep her till then?"

"You can't leave her runnin' loose," Owen joined in.

"I got plenty of room in the hoosegow," Maples said smiling. His eyes told Victoria he had more in mind than just keeping her locked up.

There was a general murmur of approval.

"All in favor, raise your right hand," Anderson said.

His eyes resting on Victoria, Fred's hand went in the air; others followed suit.

"Miss Winters, you are hereby relieved of your duties as teacher of Pottsville School," Anderson said. "You will be held in jail until Saturday afternoon at which time you will be put on the train to Chicago. This meeting is adjourned."

The crowd surged forward; hands pushed Victoria out the door around the building. They shoved her into the small living quarters. She had been thrilled to call this room home the last few months. Now it seemed so pitiful. Hands tore her handmade decorations off the walls and threw them to the floor to be trampled underfoot. A rail-thin man in the garb of a farmer threw her carpetbag on the bed.

A woman she had called a friend ripped her two dresses off a nail. Balling them up, she stuffed the torn clothing in the bag. Fred's mother dumped the contents of the broken-down chest out on the floor. Victoria watched in dismay as her mother's broach rolled across the bare boards. Snatching it up, Victoria lovingly placed it in the pocket of her coat.

"These ain't even good enough for rags," another woman shouted. She held up a ragged pair of Victoria's pantaloons for inspection by the crowd. The display was greeted with a mixture of hoots and laughter.

Victoria's embarrassment and anger deepened as the woman tossed piece after piece of her tattered clothing into the corner of the room. She tried to push her way through to retrieve her under garments. Otto Sanders, Whitey's father, blocked her way, thrusting her bag in her arms.

"Leave 'em be. We can use them rags to clean the room," he replied with a smirk.

"I must have my clothing," Victoria said in tears, stomping her feet.

He retreated.

"You gonna wear those garments with holes in 'em?" he said laughing.

"They are all I have," she sobbed, scooping up the articles and stuffing them in her worn bag. The clasp had broken on the train to Pottsville. Holding it closed, she stood to her feet. She walked unsteadily toward the schoolroom but Fred Morgan blocked the door.

"Excuse me?" she said, not daring to look him in the face.

Unmoving, he held out his hand. Realization slowly dawned on her. Setting her bag on the floor, she slowly worked the beautiful diamond ring off her finger. Tears dripping down her chin, she handed him a piece of her heart. Snatching it, Fred shoved the ring deep in his vest pocket. Silently he moved aside allowing her to pass.

Waiting for her in the classroom, Maples jerked the bag out her hands. Grasping her upper arm, he dragged her out into the deepening snow.

"Ow, you're hurting my arm. Please let go."

Ignoring her, the constable increased the pressure. Holding her dress up with her other hand, Victoria fairly ran to keep up. Sharp pains shot through her arm from wrist to shoulder.

Maples was only a rehabilitated town drunk rescued by Anderson so that he could have a handle on the law but he found taking the banker's orders very profitable. The job didn't pay well but Anderson and the others kept his coffers filled. Their only requirement was that he stay away from alcohol. He solved the problem by making his own corn whiskey.

Hauling Victoria into the jail, Maples wrenched open the door to the single cell.

"How ye like them apples?" he said, hurling her inside. "Ye ain't no fancy school teacher anymore. You're just a jail bird."

Stumbling on the hard, packed earth, Victoria cried out as she hit her head on the edge of the wooden bunk. The cell smelled of old urine.

Maples laughed and slammed the door. The clank of the lock echoed against the walls. Crawling onto the bunk, Victoria rubbed her arm. She curled up into a ball. If only she could just disappear. She pulled her dress up, exposing her shoes.

Standing at the bars watching her, Maples gave a low whistle.

"Iffen you ever escaped, we'd never catch ye with those snowshoes on your feet."

Victoria buried her face against the wall. Hearing the front door open, then close, the sound of heavy tread on the boardwalk told her Maples was gone. She moaned, her tears wetting the single blanket. She had given them her best. She had treated their children with love and respect and they had rewarded her with cruelty. Lying on the hard bunk for what seemed like hours, she finally fell asleep.

She awoke to rough hands touching her intimately. Sunlight streamed in the single-barred window filling the jail with light. Victoria started to scream but Maples clamped his other hand over her mouth.

"Be good to me, missie, and I might let you escape," he hissed in her ear. He pushed her down on the bunk, crushing her with his weight. The smell of sour mash whiskey was overpowering. Victoria beat his barrel chest with her small fist.

"Go ahead, missie, I like it when they fight," he said. The sound was low and guttural like the growling of a wild animal.

Terror shot through Victoria; she knew she was in trouble and there was no one to save her. This big, overweight brutal man was going to rape her.

"Lord, please help me!" she prayed, her strength waning.

He reached down to lift her dress. Suddenly, somehow Maples was lifted up from the bunk and hurled through the air in an instant and then dropped. His body slammed against the dirt floor. He rose slowly, shaking his head, looking confused.

"What'd you do to me?" he said. He screamed and came at her again; again with the same result.

Springing from the floor like a man twenty years younger, he slammed and locked the cell door. Victoria sat up, shivering and shaking with fear, yet relieved.

"You're a witch, that's what ye are!" he screamed, his mustache bobbing up and down. "I'm supposed to give ye breakfast, but I ain't feeding no witch, no sirree."

Victoria's stomach lurched; even the thought of food made her sick.

"Ye just wait, missie. This ain't over, not by a long shot!" Hitching up his trousers and cinching his belt, Maples left the building.



# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 6

Trees stood like silent sentries in the light of the half moon. The bridge loomed out of the darkness. Beneath it, Adam saw a black gaping hole ten feet from the center support. Taking a deep breath, he plunged into the creek.

With one hand on the edge of the hole, he felt as far as he could with his other hand.

Nothing.

He felt in another direction. Still nothing. If he didn't find her soon - he wouldn't let himself dwell on such thoughts. He tried again, his body losing feeling. His hand slipped off the opening. He fought the panic rising in him.

His feet touched bottom. Using as much strength as he could muster, he kicked against the mud. Coming up fast, he bumped his head against the ceiling of ice. Something was in front of him. It was Becky!

His lungs bursting, he breathed in water. No, it was air. They were in an air bubble created by the drop of the water level.

"Help me," the little girl murmured.

Adam was shaking so violently; he had to fight to get the words out.

"It's going to be all right," Adam said, trying to calm the terrified child.

"Becky, are you hurt?"

"No, I just cold," she said through chattering teeth.

"Honey, I want you to take a big breath and hold it. Can you do that?"

Becky nodded. Opening her mouth, she took in a big gulp of air until her dimpled cheeks were bulging. Knowing he only had one chance, Adam said a little prayer and then took a deep breath of air himself. He pulled the little girl to his chest and together they plunged under the water.

As Adam kicked to gain control, the mud covered the water's surface and swirled before his eyes, blurring his vision. Thinking he had made a deadly mistake, Adam was ready to swim in the other direction.

Then he saw a glimmer of light overhead in the opening of the ice. Becky was starting to struggle now. Adam knew her small lungs were out of air. He swam with his free hand, holding Becky tightly with the other. Something was holding him back. He felt the limb of a submerged tree dig into his shin. He could feel it cutting into his leg. Kicking furiously, his pant cuff became hopelessly entangled in the branch.

Glancing up, he saw his mother looking down into the swirling water. He could see her lips moving but he was not able to make out the words. Gathering all his strength he gave Becky a huge push toward the opening.



"Can you see them?" Edna asked, her heart throbbing.

Paul Dobbs, owner of the livery stable, held his lantern high, his face exposing the fear in his heart. His eyes probed the murky water.

"No!" he called out.

"It's been too long," Edna said, choking on the words. Silently she prayed, "Oh God, I'll gladly give him up if you'll bring him back alive."

When Violet had raced into Paul's living room without knocking, Paul had not waited to don a coat or hat.

"Johnny, you run and ring the town bell. Tell everyone we need help at the bridge. A little girl is drowning."

Paul tilted his head, listening. Johnny should be ringing the bell anytime now. Impatiently he shucked off his boots. Just then the bell rang, its clear tones drifted across the hollow sending the urgent message.

Lights winked on in houses in the village and on the surrounding hills. Paul prepared to dive in.

"Look!" Edna cried.

Paul held the lantern near the hole. A small hand was suddenly thrust up out of the water. Leaning over as far as he could, Paul grasped the hand, pulling Becky out of the water, Edna immediately wrapped the shivering little girl in blankets she had snatched from the bed. Shouts echoed across the valley as men ran toward the bridge.

"Becky, are you okay? Did you see Adam?"

The gasping child stared at her with confused and puzzled eyes.

"Reverend Wakefield!" Paul asked desperately. "Did you see the preacher?"

"He the one held me up," Becky said through chattering teeth.

Adam's problems were multiplying by the second. He couldn't get loose from the tree no matter how hard he kicked. Quickly he slipped his suspenders over his shoulders and tore his pants off. Struggling out of them, he swam with renewed vigor for the opening in the ice.

Paul was the first to see him. "Make a chain," he shouted to the others standing on the bank.

They obeyed him instantly. Men linked arms and pulled Adam from the freezing water and across the cracking ice to the bank. Leo Marsh, keeper of the town's lone saloon, was the first to notice.

"Hey preacher, where's your britches?" His belly laugh rolled across the valley.

"I guess I lost them in the water," Adam said, coughing and spitting.

Edna rushed up and draped a blanket over her son. "Never you mind, Leo Marsh. I wouldn't care if he was buck-naked as long as he's safe."

Leading Leo to Christ was one of Adam's most ardent goals.

"Why Leo, it was the only way I could think to get you to the creek to baptize you, but the water is too cold." Adam said with a shaky grin.

"That's for sure, preacher," he roared. That's for sure."

The next morning, Adam stopped at the telegraph office to send his acceptance to Market Street Church. His stance as a hero was evident by the courtesies shown him. When he tried to pay for the telegram, Ben refused to take his money. At the church, a fire burned brightly in the pot-bellied stove.

He had just hung up his coat and hat when Maggie Tuttle burst through the door carrying one of her famous apple pies. She insisted Adam have a piece before it cooled off. Cutting a generous helping, she placed it before him on the small table he used for a desk. At that second, Mary Caldwell entered with a pot of coffee. The two women fussed over Adam for a half-hour, chattering all the while. As if by a secret signal, they abruptly left.

Silence settled over the small sanctuary. After a long session of prayer, Adam was deep in the second chapter of Ephesians. He looked up as a cold blast of air stirred the pages of his Bible.

Without preliminaries, Hank Farrell, chairman of the deacon board asked, "What's this I hear about you leavin' us?" The gruff seventy-year-old strode up the center aisle of the church, snow clinging to his pants halfway to his knees.

"Ben Hasting!" Adam said under his breath. "Should have known he would spread the word."

"Yes Hank, I'm going to Chicago."

"One of them big city churches? Thought ye turned 'em down?" Hank questioned as the thawing snow from his boots formed puddles on the pine boards.

"It was a hard decision, Hank. You're not just my congregation, you're my friends, and I love you dearly," Adam replied earnestly.

"You sure this is what the Lord wants you to do?" Hank asked.

"Yes Hank, I'm sure. I don't want to go, but I must."

"Then I'm behind you one hundred percent and the rest of the folks will be too."

"Thank you, Hank. That means a lot to me," Adam said, hoping his next church would be as good as this one.

"I'm callin' a meetin' for tonight, by creaky. We'll take up a collection, send you off proper like," Hank said, heading for the door.

"Hank. Hank! You don't have to do that," Adam called but Hank was already out the door.

Might as well try to stop a forest fire in August, he said to himself.

The fact that the Higgins lived in abject poverty was apparent as soon as you walked on their property. There was a tumble-down barn with half of its roof missing. A pole was propped up against the outhouse, holding it up. They had more dogs than kids and they never had enough to eat. The bevy of

dogs greeted Adam with a chorus of barking. Adam patted them with one hand while he kept his other high in the air.

"Come in, preacher," Alice Higgins said, stepping aside to let Adam pass. Adam entered, carrying the rest of Maggie Tuttle's' pie.

Laying it on the cluttered table, he asked, "How's Becky?"

"Doc says she best stay in bed three or four days," Alice answered, stirring around behind him. "Here, let me take your coat. We's sure grateful fur what ye did last night," Alice's eyes filled with tears. "I don't know what we'd a done iffen iffen we lost her... Thank ye."

She threw her arms around him, squeezing so he could barely breathe. The Higgins were not known to be overly affectionate and Adam was surprised by her actions. As quickly as she grabbed him, Alice let him go. Her cheeks reddened, giving color to her pale face.

"The Lord did it, Alice. I'm just glad she's going to be all right."

Alice waved a bony finger at Adam.

"The Lord did it, but he uses them that's willin'."

"Then Becky came through with no ill effects?" Adam said, breathing a prayer of thanks.

"Only one," Alice chuckled. "Keeping her in bed!"

Adam knocked and entered the small bedroom.

Becky felt like a queen propped up on an array of pillows. She was holding court over the entire house. What a grand day! Violet sat on a chair at the foot of the bed. Her only purpose in life at the moment was to make her sister happy. Tomorrow was another matter.

"Preacher Wakefield!" Becky said. Throwing the covers to the side, she sprang out of bed.

"Whoa, young lady," Adam said. He scooped the little girl off the cold floor and deposited her back on the bed.

"I gotta go help momma," Violet said, excusing herself, "Ifen you need anything, I'll be right in the other room."

"Thank you, Violet." Adam said, smiling.

Becky started to get up again.

"You need to stay in bed," Adam said.

"I know it makes momma feel better, but I don't feel sick a'tall."

"Shall I read you a story?"

"Oh yes," Becky shouted, then added, "Please!"

"Which one?"

The child tapped her chin with a pudgy little finger.

"How about the lion in Daniel's den?"

Suppressing a chuckle, Adam opened his Bible to the sixth chapter of Daniel.

## RIVER OF FIRE

### Chapter 7

On the day of the train's arrival, Victoria paced her cell all morning. The last two days, she had eaten very little, partly because Maples offered her food sparingly. When he did, he watched her with lust-ridden eyes. Her stomach lurched and churned, feeling his gaze on her every move.

She could only guess at the time as there was no clock on the wall. Only the shadows creeping across the floor told of the minutes slowly ticking away. Before, she had wanted to go to Billy and demand the truth. Now all she wanted to do was be rid of this town and the people who turned on her. It was all so unreasonable.

After what seemed like days, she heard the low whistle of the train. A few minutes later, she became frantic. Where was Maples? Surely he knew they would not wait. She gripped the cold steel bars. Under her weight, the cell door swung open. Her heart told her something was wrong! Nevertheless, her head said Maples had forgotten to lock it.

Her heart in her throat, Victoria grabbed her bag off the desk and headed for the door, where she ran straight into Maples.

"Where ye goin', missie?" Maples asked, his speech heavy. His beefy hand closed over her slender wrist.



"The train," Victoria said as calmly as possible, gasping in pain.

He leaned into her face, his breath still sour with whiskey.

"What makes ye think I'm gonna let ye go?" he asked, slurring his words.

"You must. The school board said so."

Shaking her like a terrier would a rat, he said, "I run this here jail. I says what goes and what don't go."

The train gave another warning toot.

"Please let me go. I didn't do anything."

"No, but you're gonna," he slurred, winking at her.

With one final call, the train pulled away from the town and the clickity clack of the wheels faded away.

Tearing Victoria's bag out of her hands, Lucas shoved her back into the cell. Following her, he unbuckled his belt.

"What's the meaning of this, Lucas?" Harvey Anderson asked, charging into the jail. "Why is she still here?"

Fastening his belt before he turned around, Maples gave Victoria a warning glance.

"Why, Mr. Anderson, sir. I was a hurrying to get her when I tripped on a loose board. Felt like I broke my leg," Maples said, rubbing his shin.

Well, I can see you didn't," Anderson said. "So why isn't she on the train?"

"I was just comin' to that, sir. Time I got here it was too late."

"That's the most unlikely story I ever heard," Anderson, said gritting his teeth. "I'm assigning my clerk, Louis Hurley, as your deputy until Miss Winters is gone."

"You can't do that," Lucas said like a wounded bull.

"He can either be your deputy or the new constable," Anderson said, his tone like steel.

Louis Hurley was a kind, gentle man. If he shorted someone a penny, he would chase the person down all over town to repay them. With Hurley here, Lucas's chances to take advantage of Victoria were nil.

"Well, what's it going to be?" Do we have a deputy or a new town marshal?" Anderson asked, tapping his foot impatiently.

"All right, send him over," Maples said. "Fine. I could use some help."

Feeling it safe to speak, Victoria spoke up. "He tried to take advantage of me."

Maples looked like a trapped animal. Anderson looked at Maples, then the young schoolteacher. He seemed to be weighing his options.

"Please be quiet, Miss Winters," he said finally. "No one wants to hear your sordid tales."

"It's true," Victoria cried, tears misting her eyes.

His face inches away from Victoria's, the banker said, "Listen to me, young lady. If you persist in spreading your lies, I will personally see that you spend more than a few days in this jail. And I will make sure you are alone with our fine constable."

Victoria could see Maples grinning behind Anderson's back.

To Victoria's relief, Lucas spent most of the day away from the office. Hurley closed the bank promptly at 3:00 pm and then per Anderson's orders, he hurried to the jail. In truth, he was glad to help. He liked Victoria. She always greeted him in the bank or on the street, often stopping to inquire about his family.

As he entered the jail, Maples glowered at him.

"'Bout time. I ain't 'et since mornin'." Jamming his hat on his head, he started to leave.

"What about Miss Winters?" Louis asked.

"You feed her. I'm busy," he said, slamming the door behind him.

"Crazy old drunk," Hurley said when he was sure Maples couldn't hear him.

The jail was cold as ice. Going outside, the clerk carried in an armload of wood. Soon as he had a cheery fire blazing, he filled the coffeepot with fresh water and coffee,

sitting it on the stove. Stepping close to the cell, he called softly.

"Miss Winters, are you asleep?"

"No, Mr. Hurley. I'm awake."

"Have you eaten anything today?"

Victoria shook her head. Louis left, then returned fifteen minutes later with two heaping plates of fried chicken, baked potatoes, and green beans. Insisting that she sit at Maples desk, he poured each of them a cup of steaming hot coffee. The food smelled delicious. Her appetite returning, Victoria ate ravenously, quickly emptying her plate. Hurley shoved the second plate of food in front of her.

"Oh, Mr. Hurley, I can't eat your supper."

"This is yours, Miss Winters. I've already eaten," Hurley lied.

Eating slowly from the second plate, Victoria asked, "Can you please tell me what is going on?"

Stepping to the window, Louis Hurley searched the street before answering.

"I overheard a conversation today between Mr. Anderson and Mr. Metcalf. Mr. Metcalf's nephew arrived from St. Louis this afternoon," Hurley said. "He's the new teacher."

Victoria gasped. "But they only dismissed me two days ago."

"Mr. Anderson sent him a telegram on behalf of the school board three weeks ago." Louis said.

"Three weeks?" Victoria cried. "Why?"

"In your contract, you receive half your salary in December and the remainder in May. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Victoria said, wondering what her salary had to do with it.

"If you are dismissed for any reason by a meeting of the school board, your contract is void. You are entitled to no compensation." Hurly said, his eyes burning with anger. "The money is divided among the members of the school board. You might be comforted to know this is common practice with these men."

Suddenly everything fell into place. They had tricked her into teaching for no pay.

Even though he was not married, Louis was sensitive to the needs of women. The jail was toasty warm as he approached the subject.

"Miss Winters, if you would like, I will heat some water for you to take a bath."

Victoria looked at him in horror. Hurley almost laughed out loud.

"Don't worry, Miss Winters. I will hang some blankets to cover the front of your cell for privacy."

"What about the constable?"

"I'll make sure he doesn't bother you."

Victoria felt relief wash over her.

"That would be very nice. Thank you."

Victoria had just removed her undergarments and stepped into the tub when she heard Maples come in.

"What ye doin' with 'ose blankets hangin' on the bars?" Lucas demanded as he walked toward the cell.

"Miss Winters needed some privacy," Hurley explained, edging toward the stack of firewood against the wall.

"What fer?"

"She's taking a bath."

Maples grinned.

"We can't have 'em blankets covering our view of the prisoner," he said.

Victoria cringed as she heard his footsteps draw closer to the bars. Expecting to be exposed any second, she tried to cover herself, spreading her arms across her body.

There was a loud clunk and then the sound of a falling body.

"It's all right, Miss Winters. He'll be out for a while. Take your time. If he comes to, I'll hit him again!"

Victoria breathed a sigh of relief and thanks. Luxuriating in the steaming water and the fragrance of the French soap Hurley provided, she relaxed, smiling. Soon she would be back home. And all this would be a bad memory.

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 8

The train gathered momentum. A thick plume of black smoke trailed behind it. Adam watched as the figures on the platform grew smaller in the distance. He waved until the train rounded the bend.

"Sure gonna miss him," Hank said. "He was a good friend."

"He was the best preacher I ever heard," Ben Hastings replied. "Hope them people in Chicago appreciate him."

A lump in Edna's throat prevented her from speaking. She dabbed at moist eyes. When she carried Adam in her womb, she gave him to the Lord. The pain in her heart spoke of her commitment. From the depths of her soul, she heard the Lord's gentle voice. 'Be comforted, my child, I will use him mightily for the furtherance of my kingdom.'

Settling into a seat in the crowded passenger car, Adam flushed with excitement; yet he wondered, would he really fit in a big city like Chicago? Conway O'Malley's letter poked him in the chest. Removing the envelope from

his shirt pocket, he carefully unfolded it.

'Dear Adam



You will remember our meeting last summer as I traveled through your beautiful country. You persuaded me to attend the Sunday service. I found it to be very pleasant. I must say I enjoyed my stay in Apple Valley. I believe you heard me mention the church in Chicago of which I am a member. This brings me to the subject of this letter. Our own beloved Pastor August Peabody passed away two weeks ago. While we mourn his passing, we are in desperate need of a new pastor. I have spoken highly of you and made the recommendation upon your behalf to the other deacons.

As I am acquainted with you, they felt that it would be appropriate for me to correspond with you as a representative of the church. Therefore my friend, on behalf of the congregation, I am offering you the pastorate of the most prestigious church in Chicago. Let me assure you the salary is very good. The parsonage is well maintained and large enough for a family, if you decide to pair up with one of the lovely ladies in our congregation Do not let me down, old chap. Please telegraph your reply as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Conway O'Malley'

He hadn't answered Conway's letter right away. In fact, he had written a refusal three times. Each time, he tore them up on the way to the telegraph office , the last one when he stood before Ben's desk.

What the future held, he wasn't sure, but he knew who held his future! The train labored upward, climbing out of Apple Valley, carrying the man of God to his destiny.

Victoria's weekend in the cell was peaceful, with the exception of a visit by Owen Hayman Sunday morning.

"What's she doin' here?" he asked, his face red with anger. "Anderson said she's 'posed to be gone by now."

Hurley came to her defense immediately. "There was a mix-up. Miss Winters will be on the next train."

"She'd better be or I'll know the reason why!"

"Mr. Hayman," Victoria spoke up. "I have never mistreated any of my students."

Owen snorted. "That ain't what Joey Sanders says."

"Mr. Hayman, you must know Whitey Sanders has told many falsehoods." Victoria said.

"I don't have to believe him; I saw what you done to my son's back!" Turning, he stomped out of the jail.

Monday morning, Harvey Anderson came into the jail with the constable in tow.

"On your feet, Miss Winters. The train will be here soon!" Then to Maples, "Open the door, Lucas. We wouldn't want her to be late this time."

"No sir, we wouldn't," a subdued Lucas Maples said.

Exiting her cell, Victoria reached for her carpetbag on the desk.

"I'll get that," the constable said, jerking the bag from her grasp.

The snow had continued to fall all weekend; some places it was up two to three foot deep. Victoria trudged through the drifts as she followed the swiftly moving men. By the time they reached the cleared platform at the train station, Victoria's dress was soaked past her knees. Her feet were wet from the snow that seeped in through the rips in her shoes. Her breathing was labored.

She sat on the wooden bench shaking so badly she thought she would fall off. Anderson was at the ticket office. He pulled a large roll of bills from his inside coat pocket. Peeling off several, he paid for the ticket.

A shrill whistle announced the coming train. Victoria felt another chill race down her spine. Anderson stuffed the remainder of the money back in his pocket. Watching her salary for the last few months vanish, Victoria summoned her courage. Taking a deep breath, she said, "What about the money you owe me?"

"What money?" Anderson asked, his hand still on the roll of bills as if to protect it.

"Our agreement was for half my pay in December and the remainder in May."

Anderson's laugh was cold and sinister.

"Miss Winters, your conduct voided your contract with us, and therefore your claim is invalid."

"Will Mr. Metcalf's nephew receive the same treatment from you, sir?"

Anderson froze. The smile melted from his face. For a moment, Victoria thought he was going to strike her.

Holding her suitcase, Lucas nervously shuffled from one foot to the other.

"You were looking for an excuse to fire me. You planned this; it was all a conspiracy. How much did you pay Whitey to whip that poor little boy?" Victoria asked, her heart hammering in her chest. She felt it all the way to her toes. "Was Fred in on it from the beginning?"

Sweat popped out on Maples forehead. Anderson recovered his composure.

"Don't fight me on this, Miss Winters. I run this town. You have no proof of what you say. "

"If it is the last thing I do, I will prove my innocence," Victoria said trembling. "You're nothing more than just a bunch of thieves."

Anderson swore.

"If you return to Pottsville, Miss Winters," he said, his face a mask of hate, "I will turn Maples loose on you. I will not restrain him as I did this time."

For his part, Maples looked ready to run. He glanced nervously at the ticket agent. The man stared down, working intently on something on the counter.

Victoria recoiled, knowing Harvey Anderson never made idle threats.

Grasping her by the arm, he half dragged her in the direction of the approaching train. He grasped Victoria's arm and dragged her to the edge of the platform. For a precious few seconds, she thought he was going to throw her under the

wheels of the engine. The rushing breeze of the train took her breath away.

Leaning in close, he said, "Don't return to Pottsville, Miss Winters, if you value your life."

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 9

Maples handed Victoria her bag. It felt surprisingly light. He and Harvey Anderson walked away. Placing a step down onto the platform, the conductor extended a hand to Victoria.

"May I help you aboard, miss?" he asked, smiling. He was one of those men who looked like everyone's grandfather. Gray hair stuck out from under his small blue cap, deep lines creased his face. He reminded Victoria of a friendly scarecrow.

"Are you all right, miss?" he asked, the creases in his face deepening.

"I'm fine, thank you," she said feeling guilty for lying.

He nodded, picked up the step, and placed it back inside the passenger car.

"Better find a seat, miss."

Leaning out, he held onto the car with one hand and swung a lantern with the other. Victoria's eyes swept the interior of the passenger car. Every seat was filled. A tall square-jawed man with dark hair and eyes, his ruddy face broken by a trim mustache, stood up. Pulling off the old leather hat from his head, he motioned to the now empty seat.

Smiling her thanks, Victoria was making her way to the seat when a little man with a potbelly and red veins on his nose pushed by her. Claiming her seat, he regarded her with baleful eyes. The train lurched, throwing Victoria against the tall stranger and she grabbed his arm to keep from falling. She could feel his muscles ripple through his worn blue suit. A strong hand caught her, helping Victoria regain her balance.

"I'm sorry," she said, feeling awkward in the presence of the handsome stranger.

"No need to apologize," he said, smiling at her. He turned around to face the potbellied man, his tone icy.

"Sir, I believe you're in the lady's seat."

"Ish tha' so?" the man asked, his speech slurred.

"Yes sir, it is."

"Wadda are you gonna do 'bout it?" the man laughed and then hiccupped loudly.

"I'll just stand back here," Victoria said, intending to move to the end of the car.

The stranger placed a firm, gentle hand on her shoulder.

"It's only proper for a gentleman to offer his seat to a lady."

The potbellied man fixed his gaze on Victoria with a blank stare. "I would iffen I could find one." Addressing the car full of passengers, he said, "Do ya know what this'n did back in Pottsville?"

Adam's face turned to stone. His eyes became as black diamonds. Leaning over, he grasped the man by the front of his shirt. Bracing himself, he jerked the potbellied man over the arm of his seat into the aisle. The man's face was purple with rage as he struggled to his feet to face Adam. He stood up and raised his bloodshot eyes to face the broad-shouldered preacher. Muttering curses, he scurried away to the back of the car.

"I believe this seat is yours, ma'am," Adam said, bowing to her.

A murmur of approval ran through the car. An elderly woman in the seat opposite

Victoria whispered, "Now there's a real man."

"Thank you, Mr...." Victoria said.

"Adam Wakefield at your service. And you are?"

Victoria hesitated. Would he know about Pottsville and the accusations?

"And you are?" Adam repeated, smiling.

"Victoria Winters, Mr. Wakefield."

Adam extended his hand. Victoria took it and was rewarded with a gentle squeeze.

"Do you live in Chicago, Miss Winters?"

"Unfortunately, yes." A shadow crossed her face.



Adam didn't comment on her choice of words.

"Is Chicago your destination, Mr. Wakefield?"

"Yes, I'll be pastoring Market Street Church."

Victoria blinked in surprise. "You're a minister? Please excuse me for not using your proper title."

"Ma'am, I'm from the Ozarks. Down there we don't hold with titles. It's just 'preacher' or 'brother.'" Changing the subject, Adam asked, "Where do you attend church, Miss Winters? Dare I hope you're a member of Market Street?"

"Oh my, no," Victoria said. "My aunt and I attend a working class church."

"Working class church? I'm afraid I don't understand. Don't all the classes worship together?"

"Oh no. My aunt works at a sewing factory. The owner would be very displeased if his workers shared the same pews with his family."

Adam was silent for a time. Victoria worried that she had discouraged him.

"I'm sorry. Forgive me for speaking out of turn," she said.

Adam smiled. "God is going to make some changes at Market Street, Victoria. Will you help me change the attitude of the congregation? Please say you'll be there."

His use of her first name sounded so wonderful. She felt as though she had known him forever. Adam gazed into

Victoria's pale green eyes and felt as if he was falling through fields of light. She smiled and the light expanded to her ivory-chiseled face.

"I will speak to my aunt. Perhaps we will come."

"Wonderful, I'll look forward to it."

At Springfield, the elderly lady and several of the other passengers disembarked. Among them was the potbellied man. As he passed her seat, he leaned over and was about to say something. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the preacher's cold hard stare. Straightening up, he hurried off the train

After their departure, Adam sat down and they continued their conversation. Adam told her about his home in Apple Valley and the loss of his father. Tears came to her eyes as he spoke of his struggle to survive. His face glowed as he told her stories of visiting in the hills with Pastor Ashmore. He concluded with "That's the reason I wear this old hat," taking it off his head and holding it up thoughtfully. "Other than my faith in God, it's the only thing I inherited from my friend."

Adam's easy manner comforted Victoria. She found herself opening up to him. "My mother taught school and kept the farm running. She was so worn down when the fever came that she didn't have the strength to resist it. She was planning my sixteenth birthday party for Saturday, but by then she was lying in the cemetery beside my father."

Adam had the urge to take Victoria in his arms to protect her from the pains of life.

"My father died at Gettysburg before I was born," she said.

"War is so terrible. I pray my sons will never have to fight."

Victoria's breath caught in her throat. "Oh you're married?" she asked, her voice barely audible over the click of the rails.

"No," he answered, a little too quickly, "but I plan to be some day and have a brood of children."

Victoria's heart leaped in her chest. 'Don't be such a ninny' she told herself. 'You don't even know a thing about him. You trusted Fred and he betrayed you.'

As the countryside sped by, she spoke of her life with her mother and he shared about his mother.

The train slowed as it came into the station in Chicago. Passengers picked up their bags and prepared to depart. They stepped from the train onto the platform.

Reminded of the lightness of her carpetbag, Victoria opened it. Glancing inside, she gasped and her heart plummeted. It was empty! She plunged her hand into the pocket of her coat. Her mother's broach was gone! Tears welled up in her eyes and a cold shiver overcame her. Her emotions changed from disbelief to anger and resentment. How could they? They had lied to her. They deceived her. Fred broke their engagement. They had stolen everything that she held dear to her heart.

Suddenly she felt a renewed determination well up within her, an inner strength she had never felt before. It rather scared her at first but on second thought, she liked the feeling. She would show them. She would show everyone! She steamed with anger. It even touched Adam. What did she

know about this man? Only what he told her. Perhaps he was a liar like Fred.

Adam tried to take her bag but she held on to it with new resolve. Adam gave up and went in search of a cab. After hailing one, he rejoined her, again reaching for her bag.

"I'll not be accompanying you, Reverend Wakefield," Victoria said loudly. 'If that's who you really are' she thought to herself.

"Do you have someone coming for you?" he asked with evident concern in his voice.

"That's no concern of yours, sir."

"But Victoria!"

"Good day, Mr. Wakefield."

Rebuffed, Adam turned away.

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 10

Victoria waited until Adam's cab was out of sight before she began the twenty-five block walk to her aunt's house. Leaving the safety of the station, the shadows seemed to reach for her. The quickest way was through one of the worst areas in Chicago but she shuddered at the thought. She had only walked five blocks when she heard running feet and then somewhere up ahead, she heard a woman's screams. Diving into the shadows, she huddled against a building. Two figures ran past; a man and a woman. The woman's dress was torn; the man chasing her was clutching a large knife.

A glimpse in the street light showed the horror on the woman's face. She screamed again. Victoria stifled a scream of her own. Then the couple was gone. She waited a full two minutes and hurried on.

She longed for Adam's protection but she reminded herself she couldn't trust anyone, with the exception of Aunt Gertie.

Dear sweet Aunt Gertie. When Victoria's mother had died, her father's widowed sister was her only living relative. Working in a sweatshop, she barely made a living for herself but she still took on the task of raising the orphaned girl.

Stepping over a drunk sprawled in her path, Victoria cautiously walked on. Each time that she saw someone coming her way, she would slip into the shadows until they were past. Pressing against the building, she tried to make

herself invisible. She held her breath, lest the sound betray her position; waiting until they were swallowed up in the gloom.

The wind whipped around corners and howled down the streets, the sound chilling her to the bone. She had forgotten how frigid the gales off Lake Michigan could be. She tugged at her ragged coat. The wind found its way into the small tears and rips at the seams. Tears stung her eyes and blurred her vision. She thought of the warm coat in the mercantile.

She had given her best to the people of Pottsville. She would often work several hours after school, cleaning, painting, and redecorating the classroom. Victoria purchased small gifts as rewards for her students; she even paid for books when the child's parents could not afford material themselves. She never complained about the lumpy mattress on her bed. She slept on the well-worn couch cushion in her room, often waking with a backache from tossing and turning during the night. Victoria had even set aside personal time to coach some students who were slower in their reading.

And what did they do? They lied about her, they stole her mother's broach. Then they falsely accused her of whipping one of her students and put her in jail!

From now on she would view each person's actions with suspicion. Everyone would have to prove themselves worthy of her trust.

Suddenly feeling conviction for her thoughts, she heard her mother's voice softly whisper to her heart: 'Victoria, there's no doubt some very bad people are in this world, as well as very good. Never let the bad sour you on the good.'

Adam was one of the good; she just knew it in her heart!

She was within two blocks of her aunt's house when a tall, hulking figure ran out of the shadows of the alley beside her. He was moving fast, very fast. He was coming her way! Victoria picked up her pace, walking faster and faster. Her pulse hammered in her ears.

She looked back. He was motioning to her, waving wildly and saying something she could not hear. Nor did she care! Terror filled her heart and made her feel faint. The voice sounded familiar but she could not take a chance. She fairly flew down the street. He was right behind her.

Crying out, she picked up her dress and ran. In front of her aunt's house, she tripped on the root of a tree. She fell headfirst on the ground, ripping the hem of her petticoat and skinning her knees. Glancing behind her, she screamed. He was practically on top of her, reaching out to grab her. Desperately rolling over on her back, she kicked and shoved his hands away.

He said something she didn't understand. Scrambling to her feet, she limped through the old iron gate. Shaken and confused, she felt blood running down her leg. The gate creaked again. He was coming after her! Finally reaching the rickety porch of her aunt's house, she felt a sense of relief wash over her.

Grasping the rusty doorknocker, she banged it as hard as she could. She dared not look behind her. She heard his shoes crunching in the snow as she pounded on the door with her fist.

As the cab rounded the corner a block from the station, Adam leaned out the window.

"Let me out here, driver," he said.

The man frowned.

"Here sir? But I just picked ye up."

He hurried on, afraid of losing his fare. "You're not likely to find another carriage this time o'night."

"Yes, I know." Adam said, opening the door. "This will do nicely."

"As ye wish sir," the driver said, reining the gelding to the curb. Before the carriage stopped rolling, Adam jumped out. Shoving the full fare into the man's hand, he disappeared into the shadows.

"Thank ye sir. Merry Christmas to ye, sir!" the man shouted over his shoulder. Quickly he drove the horse back in the direction he came, hoping to find another late night fare. He didn't notice the young girl hurrying past.

As the light of the single street lamp fell across Victoria's face, Adam saw fear mingled with determination. Waiting until she was half a block ahead, Adam followed her. Victoria's small figure brought a pang of pity to his heart. 'Lord, heal Victoria's heart. She's so deeply wounded. Help her to feel your love.'

Ahead of him, a woman screamed. Instantly, Adam was alert. Victoria hugged a nearby building as a man and woman ran past, the woman's face a mask of fear. The man



raised a butcher knife, ready to strike. The street lamp illuminated the scene of horror.

As they ran past, Adam swung his fist into the man's face, breaking his nose. The man fell as though he had hit a brick wall. His feet flew out from under him and the knife clattered to the ground. Picking it up, Adam threw it down the alley. He nudged the man with the toe of his boot; the guy was out cold. Unaware of her protector, the woman ran on, still crying.

A few blocks down the street, Victoria stepped over a drunk. The prone man made a grab for her foot. Moving quickly behind her, Adam grasped the drunk's wrist. In the brief struggle, he lost sight of Victoria. Panicking, he cut through an alley, then coming out from between two buildings, he looked both ways. Not seeing her, Adam ran down another alley. Breathing heavily, he emerged on the sidewalk a few feet behind her.

Terror touched her face. He called out her name, hoping she would remember his voice. She didn't and she only ran faster. 'She doesn't know it's me. Then again, maybe she does.' Adam saw Victoria trip and cry out in pain. He ran forward and attempted to help her up.

"Victoria, I'm so sorry," he said softly. He held out a hand but in the darkness but she could not see his face. She batted it away.

Regaining her footing, she limped through a gate that led to a ramshackle house and began pounding on the door. Adam started to open the gate then thought better of it. He stepped back into the shadows cast by a huge tree.

'Adam Wakefield, you fool. You try to protect her and all you end up doing is scaring her half to death,' he rebuked himself. He waited until the door opened.

"Victoria!" a small round woman cried, wrapping Victoria in her arms. Pulling her inside, the woman closed the door.

Adam hesitated. Maybe he should go explain himself. Looking at his pocket watch, he was shocked at the time. The hour was way past for him to meet the head deacon. Charging down the street, he sprinted the remaining blocks to the church. He skidded to a halt.

Market Street was rumored to be the most expensive church in Chicago. Adam believed it. Even in the moonlight, the building was impressive. The members bragged the stained-glass windows alone cost more than most church buildings. The spire reached to the sky, topped by a gold cross. On clear days, it could be seen for miles. Ships on Lake Michigan used the cross to guide them. The tolling of its handmade bells had become a landmark. It was said you could set your watch by them. The stone steps leading up to the church reminded Adam of a small hill. Directing his attention to his left, he saw what appeared to be a small mansion.

"Surely that can't be the parsonage!" Adam remarked. His eyes took in the gleaming columns, the ornate carvings at the roof, and the lead-etched windows. The house reached three stories and was topped by a widow's walk.

At that moment, the double doors to the mansion burst open. A man with a stern expression barreled down the steps from the house his black waistcoat flying. The man stopped just short of running over Adam.



# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 11

"Well now, finally made it, did you?" he said with a Scottish accent. His heavy muttonchops moved as he spoke.

Adam struggled to answer. How could he tell this man that he had been following a girl through the streets of Chicago? Shane O'Malley owned one of the largest factories in Chicago and he definitely did not like to be kept waiting.

"I apologize, Brother O'Malley. I was unavoidably detained," Adam said.

"Yes, yes. Be that as it may, you're here now. I had hoped to show you around the church and parsonage but unfortunately, I must go now."

"Brother O'Malley, is this the parsonage?" Adam asked, indicating the mansion.

"Yes of course," O'Malley answered with a hint of mild irritation in his voice.

"It's so huge," Adam commented, raising his gaze to the roofline.

"James will see to it that you are settled for the night."

"James?" Adam asked, mentally running over the list of deacons.

"Your valet, Reverend Wakefield," he replied. "Market Street Church has the wealthiest congregation in Chicago. We have a reputation to maintain. Therefore, our minister must live in the same manner in which our members are accustomed." O'Malley paused for breath. "I have scheduled a meeting of the deacon board at ten in your office tomorrow morning." Then he added with emphasis, "Please be on time!"

"Great," Adam said. "I have some ideas how we as a church can serve the Lord better."

"Yes," O'Malley muttered under his breath, "I'm sure you do. Good night, Reverend Wakefield."

"Good night, Brother O'Malley."

O'Malley started to walk away then turned back to face Adam.

"Oh by the way, Reverend Wakefield. At Market Street, we do not address each other as 'Brother and Sister.' Nor we feel first names are appropriate. We find Mr., Mrs., and Miss to be sufficient. Good night."

What do I call the children? Adam asked himself. He felt a chill in the air that had nothing to do with the weather. He was still staring after O'Malley when a tall black man about thirty-five opened the door to the house.

"Please come in, sir."

Climbing the steps, Adam entered the lavishly furnished foyer.

"May I take your coat and . . . hat, sir?" the valet asked, eyeing the strange leather piece on Adam's head.

"Yes thank you," he answered as gentle hands reached up, almost spiriting the hat off Adam's head.

Adam felt as though he were in an expensive hotel. A massive staircase curved to the second floor. The polished hardwood floors gleamed in the light of a large crystal chandelier. The furnishings nearly made him breathless. In one corner was a large overstuffed chair while in the center of the dining room stood a table with twelve chairs. The huge fireplace was ablaze and made the room feel so warm and inviting. The gaslights seemed unnaturally bright compared to the kerosene lamps back home.

The parlor was to the right. This room alone was bigger than the cabin back in Arkansas.

"Oh Lord, have I made a mistake?"

"What is that, sir?" the valet asked, leaning toward him.

Adam flushed. He was not aware he had spoken aloud.

"What? Oh I'm sorry, I was just thinking out loud."

"Very good, sir. I have a small dinner prepared if you would like."

"That would be great...James, is it?" Adam asked, holding out his hand.

The black man hesitated, then timidly grasped the minister's hand.

"Yes sir, James Colburn. If you will be seated in the dining room, I will serve you, sir."

The dining room was equal to the parlor. A fieldstone fireplace covered one wall and a built-in china cabinet graced another wall. Over the long gleaming oak table hung crystal chandelier, slightly smaller than the one in the foyer. Adam counted twelve chairs including the one in which he sat.

The china had blue flowers against a creamy white background. Without thinking, Adam lifted the plate before him and read the inscription on the bottom: Wedgwood Blue.

Each piece of silverware was slightly heavy to the touch, with a small engraved rose pattern. A look on the back of the fork read Rogers Fine Silver. A fine linen cloth covered the large table with matching napkins and on the table was a silver candelabra with three candles of different sizes, the flickering flames casting shadows on the white tablecloth. In the center of the table, a beautiful crystal vase held a bouquet of fresh flowers. 'Where do you get fresh flowers this time of the year?' Adam wondered.

A noise in the background startled him. James entered, carrying a large plate heaped with fried chicken, and placed it on the table. Making several trips to the kitchen, he returned with steaming bowls of mashed potatoes, vegetables, and freshly baked rolls. The different scents made Adam's mouth water; he realized just how hungry he was.

On the fifth trip back to the kitchen, Adam held up his hands.

"Whoa, James! How much more do you have in there?" he asked. "You have enough here to feed an army. Are we expecting company?"

James placed a plate full of breaded pork chops before him and stared at him a second, his bushy eyebrows raised in surprise.

"My instructions were to make sure you were taken care of, sir," James replied as he took Adam's plate and filled it to near overflowing.

"You're doing an excellent job."

"Thank you sir," James replied, then took his place standing behind Adam's chair, a towel draped over his left arm.

Bowing his head, Adam gave thanks for the meal, his safe trip, "And Lord, bless James for his faithful service". He could hear James shifting uncomfortably behind him.

None of the previous pastors had ever mentioned him in their prayers.

Diving in, Adam savored each delicious bite.

"This is delicious, James," he replied between mouthfuls.

"Thank you sir," he replied, almost embarrassed. James was not used to being complimented. He continued to stand erect behind Adam, a towel over his arm.



Taking a few more bites, Adam heard a low rumble. He looked behind him; James was visibly embarrassed.

"James, have you eaten yet?" Adam asked, laying down his fork and knife.

"No sir!" James said. "That would be improper. The servants never eat before their master."

"No, my friend, it would not be improper." Jumping up from his chair and nearly tipping it over, Adam began gathering china and silverware from the cabinet. He placed them on the table next to his seat.

"Please don't, sir," James cried out, wildly waving his arms. "Don't."

Adam filled a plate for James that was equal to the one filled for him.

"I take my meals in the kitchen, sir." James answered.

"Not tonight!"

"But sir!" James said. "I'm a Negro!"

"I've noticed that," Adam said with a bit of a chuckle as he pulled out a chair for the shaken valet. "And I'm your employer. Now sit!"

Obediently, James sat down, feeling like he did not belong.

Adam sat back down and began eating again. "Aren't you hungry, James?"

"Yes sir," the butler answered.

"Then eat!" Adam ordered.

Careful lest he spill something, James began spooning food into his mouth. He kept a watchful eye on this strange minister. Reverend Peabody had always insisted he take his meals in the kitchen using the discarded silver and chipped china. One time when the pastor was gone, James had eaten in the dining room. Coming in unexpectedly, Peabody threatened to fire him. He pleaded for his position and promised to never do it again. Finally the minister relented and gave his faithful servant another chance.

When the meal was over, Adam surprised him again by helping to clear the table. The valet protested but it was of no avail.

James led Adam up the stairs to the third floor. At the end of the hallway, James opened a door. Adam stepped into a room that was half the size of his church back home. His gaze scanned the room. A large double bed dominated the center of the room and a nightstand sat next to it with a small lamp. There was an upholstered chair in the corner under the window and a braided rug was spread on the floor in front of the bed. The fireplace gave a warm glow to the room. Adam's thoughts turned to Apple Valley and the people he left behind. Well, if Chicago was where the Lord wanted him, he would stay there until God told him differently.

Wishing him a good night, James departed to tidy up the downstairs. Loneliness engulfed Adam. He missed his friends at the church. He missed the Ozarks, its forest and the rivers that seemed to run forever. He missed the day-to-day

routine of making a living, the hardship that had made him into the man he was. Most of all, he missed his mother!

"You're twenty-four years old," he chided himself, "and it's about time you cut the apron strings." Deep in his heart though, he knew he would never stop missing her. With an effort, he pulled his thoughts from the hill country.

Lying in bed, he thought of Victoria. He was sure she was troubled about something. Perhaps some incident in her past had made her mistrust ministers. Why was he drawn to this woman? In the hills, mothers had often tried to pair him with their daughters. He had resisted, feeling they weren't right for him.

After the deacon's meeting he would call on her. He prayed that she would accept his apology. He had only wanted to help her but he only succeeded in scaring her more. A vision of her lovely face appeared before him as he drifted off to sleep.

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 12

Adam slept fitfully, tossing and turning all night. Finally, he got out of bed at five o'clock. After a time of prayer and Bible study, he went downstairs. James was on his hands and knees polishing the floor.

"Reverend Wakefield sir!" he said. "I'm so very sorry. I didn't expect you to be up for some time. I'll get your breakfast right away sir." Jumping up, he slipped on the wet floor and fell to his knees, catching himself with the palms of his hands.

Hurrying down the stairs, Adam helped him up. James was almost in tears from pain and humiliation.

"Whoa, slow down friend. What's the rush?" Adam asked as he helped the valet to a chair.

"Reverend Peabody always wanted his breakfast the moment he awoke," James explained, rubbing his shin.

Unwilling to criticize a fellow minister, Adam simply said. "Well, you're working for me now and I want you to take your time."

"Thank you sir," James said, relief evident in his voice.

Adam feasted on a breakfast of ham, eggs, toast, rolls, coffee, and something delicious which he could not identify.

When Adam saw the church, he was amazed. Six magnificent snow-white columns rose thirty feet to the domed ceiling, figures of angels intricately etched in them. The marble floor shone like a mirror, reflecting the many colors in the stained-glass windows encased in the walls.

At the front, a hand-carved organ stood majestically, its pipes extending to the top of the church. Halfway up the back was a balcony large enough to hold the entire population of Apple Valley. Almost at eye level with the balcony stood the pulpit. Behind the pulpit was a thirty-member choir loft. Finding the stairs at the side, Adam climbed to the platform.

"Must be twelve feet high!" he said. Leaning over the front, he looked down at the floor "If I ever fall off from here, I'll break my neck."

"Ain't nobody ever got excited enough to fall from this here pull - pit before."

The gravelly voice came from below. "cepting Mr. Moody."

Adam leaned further over the edge of the platform. A wrinkled snow-haired black man was peering up at him. His tattered pants sported many patches, his white shirt was smudged, and the sleeves had small tears and rips. He stuffed a blue handkerchief into his back pocket. The elderly man's expression changed to one of fear as Adam descended the stairs.

"I didn't mean to speak outta turn," he said in a pleading voice.

"I'm glad you told me," Adam said with a broad grin, offering his hand. "I'm the new preacher, Adam Wakefield."

"Elijah Colburn," the old man said, gently taking Adam's hand as if the gesture was new to him. "I's the janitor here."

"It's beautiful," Adam remarked with a sweep of his arm. "How many others do you have helping you?"

Elijah stared at him for a second. "I's the onlyest one. Been doin' it fo' fifty years. Mr. O'Malley's pa, he done bought me and Lilly Mae to keep the church," he explained, his eyes suddenly brimming with unbidden tears. "Just 'fore the war he took my Lilly Mae and sold her down south."

Adam was appalled. What kind of man was this O'Malley? He recovered quickly..

"James is your son?" Adam asked, trying to imagine the horror of the family being separated.

"His name's Isaiah, but Mr. O'Malley say that not proper name for a valet." Elijah's voice trailed off, tinged with anger. "He was only three when they tore him outta his momma's arms - - both of 'em squealing."

One of the huge doors opened, startling both men.

"Elijah! If you want to keep your position, you'd best clean the sidewalk and steps before the others arrive," Shane O'Malley called out as he took long strides up the aisle. His snow-covered shoes left a wet trail on the floor.

Elijah jumped as if hit by a lightning bolt. "Yes suh!" he murmured. Turning to Adam, his eyes implored him not to mention their conversation. Adam nodded slightly to the frightened man.

O'Malley lowered his huge frame onto the front pew. "He's sure slowing down," he smirked, watching Elijah walk down the long aisle with a slight limp. His handlebar mustache twitched under a slight chuckle.

"How long have he and James been members of the church?"

O'Malley's laughter echoed over the sanctuary. "They're servants, Reverend Wakefield, not a part of the congregation."

"I'll have to speak to them. Possibly they will join us this Sunday."

O'Malley's jaw hardened. When he spoke, his voice was cold and sinister. "Reverend we will not have any Negroes attending this church as long as there is breath in my body!"

The Deacon's meetings in Apple Valley were a joy for Adam. Humbled under the responsibility of leading the church, the men cried out to the Lord in prayer. Afterward, they made each decision by mutual consent. The harmony among the brethren was a thing of beauty. Adam longed for those times now.

It started bad and quickly got worse. In addition to Shane O'Malley, the board consisted of his son, Conway, Robert Michaels, Jr. and Sr., and Frederick Cooper, president of the largest bank in Chicago. The younger O'Malley was

taking great pleasure in his father's discomfort. A broad grin spread over his freckled face. His flaming red hair gave him the appearance of a good-natured imp. His robust frame shook with laughter.

An avid nature lover, he had met Adam while on a trek through the Ozarks. They hit it off instantly and became fast friends. Robert Jr., a thin, sickly man of thirty, formal in dress, was not in the mood for foolishness. Cooper was unable to attend.

"Really Conway! The finances of this church are no joking matter." Robert said with an air of importance.

"Oh lighten up, old chap," Conway said, slapping Robert on the back. The action produced a fit of coughing. "Market Street has money to burn."

Confined to a wheel chair, the elder Michaels was more vocal than his son.

"That's what's wrong with you O'Malley's. Always free with everybody else's money," he said, waving his fist in the air. "If you are convinced we need new pews, then you purchase them,"

"You can afford to give them as a gift." Robert Jr. said.

"At least we don't pinch a penny till it screams," Shane O'Malley said.

Adam entered the fray, holding his hands up, palms out. "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Please!"



"I'll not be taken advantage of just because I'm in this contraption," Sr. said pounding his fist on the arm of his wheel chair.

"Nobody is trying to exploit you, you old skinflint," Shane said.

Bedlam returned with all four speaking at once. Putting his two index fingers in his mouth, Adam gave a shrill, loud whistle. The shouting stopped as all eyes turned to him. Robert Sr. clasped his hands over his ears.

"Oh my goodness!" Jr. said, smacking his lips like a fish out of water. Shane O'Malley frowned and the lines around his face grew deeper. Conway was delighted, his grin broadened.

"See father? I told you he could blast the birds' right out of the trees."

"Now on to other business," Adam said, not missing a beat.

"What other business, O'Malley? What've you got up your sleeve?" Robert Sr. shouted.

"This idea is mine, not Bro. . er, Mr. O'Malley's," Adam informed them as he dropped into the plush leather chair behind his desk. "For several years I have followed the success of Dwight L. Moody."

O'Malley's face became a deep shade of red. Michaels snorted as Robert Jr.'s mouth dropped open. Only Conway looked on with interest.

"Mr. Moody's efforts to reach the poor of this city are legendary." Taking a deep breath, Adam continued, "I propose we at Market Street do the same."

"Crazy Moody!" Michaels said.

"Bring ruffians in from the street?" Jr. said, his eyes wide in disbelief.

"How would we go about it?" Conway asked.

"Perhaps we could rent a building in the poor section of town, large enough for the ladies to teach Bible lessons. Also they could give instructions on cooking and proper nutrition to the women," Adam said, gaining momentum. "The men would help the fathers."

"And pray tell what would we help them do?" Jr. asked, lifting his chin, his voice rich in sarcasm.

"Why, all sorts of things," Adam replied, his eyes bright. "How to be better husbands and fathers; for the ones, who are looking for work, teach them skills, to handle their finances better."

Adam's voice softened. "But the main purpose of our mission would be to bring them to Christ."

O'Malley's words were cold. "My wife will not be working with any street urchins."

"Now father, you don't know what mother will say." Conway said.

Jr. stared at Adam as if he had grown another head.

"I'll not stand for it!" Robert Sr. said, pushing himself up, attempting to stand. Instantly, his son was at his side.

"Please father, calm down. Remember what the doctor said," Robert Jr. pleaded.

"I don't care what that quack said. No country bumpkin is going to ruin my church! Working with riff raff, ha! I'll not do it, I tell you, I'll not do it," he shouted with fervor. The veins in his neck throbbed and his face turned a light shade of purple.

His son took him by the arm and gently pushed him down. Conway went to the

other side.

"Get away from me, O'Malley."

Wrenching his arm free from his son, the old man swung his balled up fist at Conway, missing horribly. The momentum of the undelivered blow sent Robert Sr. tipping over sideways, landing the older gent on the floor. Jr. tried to catch him but could not. Rolling across the Persian carpet, he struck his head on Adam's desk. A dull thud echoed through the room. Michaels lay still with a purple bump rising on his forehead.

Robert knelt beside his father, his face ashen.

Stunned by the drama unfolding before him, Adam stood frozen in place. Jarring himself to action, he rounded the desk as Conway and Shane also came to Michaels' aid.

"Let us help you," Conway said, reaching out a hand.

"You've done quite enough," Robert said, slapping at Conway's hands. Turning to the door, he raised his voice. "Jarvis! Get in here now."

A black man in the dress of a carriage man burst into the study.

"What's wrong with Mister Michaels?" He asked, easily picking up the elderly man and placing him in the wheel chair.

"Take him back to the house and then go for Dr. Pear," Robert Jr. said.

Without a backward glance, the three of them hurried out.

Shane cleared his throat. "We should get going too," he said, more to himself than the others. Conway followed his father out. Before leaving, he assured Adam of his continued support

Soon Adam was alone with his thoughts. He eased himself back into his chair, shaking his head. Closing his eyes, he began to pray. An hour later, there was a soft knock at the door. As Adam opened it, James came in carrying a tray of covered dishes and silver pitcher of steaming coffee.

Adam cleared a space on his desk, replacing the commentaries in the bookcase.

After saying grace, Adam picked at the meal.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" James asked, backing in the direction of the door.

"Yes James, please have a seat."

James lowered himself slowly into a well-tooled guest chair.

"How long have you lived here?" Adam asked.

"I was born in the basement of this church," he replied, pointing downward with his index finger. "I grew up helping my father," James said with pride.

"Has the church had any deacons other than the Michaels and O'Malley's?"

"No sir, not that I recall."

"James, what is your opinion of Market Street Church?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, sir," he said, shifting his feet, obviously uncomfortable at the question.

"Come on," Adam said. "You've lived here all your life. The only person who knows this congregation better is your father."

James's heart was pounding so hard, he thought sure Adam would hear it. Adam had met with the deacons this very morning. Were they looking for an excuse to fire him and his father?

"They are a wonderful group of people," James said, his eyes downcast.

He was not used to lying and it showed.

"James!" Adam said, "We both know that's not true."

James decided to trust this preacher.

"They're a terrible set of fools!" he said, tears welling up in his eyes. "They sold my mother to buy a new pulpit. They are working my father to death. Worst of all, they're going to hell and don't even know it!"

"Thank you James," Adam said.

## RIVER OF FIRE

### Chapter 13

Taking in her sixteen-year-old niece had stretched Gertrude Winters' strained budget to the breaking point. However, she never complained. She decided to ask the foreman at the sewing factory for more hours.

"You're the slowest one I got!" he said laughing. "You can barely keep up now."

"I must be sure each stitch will hold," Gertie explained.

"Well ya better do it faster iffen ya wanna keep yer job."

Gertie sadly turned to go.

"Want more work do ya?" the foreman said, "I'll pay ya a little more iffen you work the whole twelve hours without a break."

So for the next three years, Gertie sewed twelve hours a day, six days a week. Her hands and back ached. Her legs became heavy and numb in the drafty conditions in the winter. In summer, the heat pressed down like a heavy hand. At times the pain was almost unbearable, all the while the foreman yelled in the frail woman's ear. Each night she hobbled home, praying for something better for Victoria.

As she matured, Victoria realized the huge price her aunt paid to raise her brother's child. She vowed as soon as she grew to adulthood that she would pay back every cent Aunt Gertie had spent on her.

Victoria woke the next morning to sunlight streaming through the front window. As she stretched, she felt searing pains shoot up from her knees to her hips. Her knees ached from her fall the night before. Moaning aloud, she removed her covers and lifted her nightgown. Thankfully, she only had a few scratches; she would put some ointment on them this morning.

Gertie rose before daybreak, dressed, ate a cold biscuit with jam if she had it. She then walked the ten blocks to the factory. She never disturbed Victoria, leaving her to waken on her own.

Shivering, Victoria dressed quickly. The house was ice cold. As events of the past few days crept through her mind, tears slid down her cheeks. She had failed. Shoveling a few precious chunks of coal on top of the sleeping embers in the cook stove, Victoria carefully measured coffee into the pot. When she had a reasonable fire going, she sat the coffeepot on the stove.

A short time before she was offered the position in Pottsville, she had applied at the sewing factory. Gertie, a normally gentle soul, seldom became angry.

When she arrived home that night, she nearly exploded.

"Don't ever let me see you near that place again!" she said, her eyes glaring. "They treat women worse than animals. I promised your mother I would take care of you. I'll not have you working your fingers to the bone in some sweat shop."



"But Aunt Gertie, I just want to help." Victoria said, close to tears.

Softening, Gertie said. "I know dear and you will. But not by slaving in a sweatshop."

So the subject was forgotten and never mentioned by either woman again.

After eating a cold biscuit, Victoria set to work cleaning the house and washing the laundry. She had just taken down the clothing strung throughout the house when Gertie came home. They sat down to a meal of beans and cornbread which was the only food Victoria could find in the house.

Last night, after her aunt had bathed and applied ointment to her knees, Victoria confided in her about the events in Pottsville. The story came out haltingly at first but her account flowed easier when she realized Gertie's shocked expression wasn't directed at her but at the criminal behavior of Anderson and his crew.

Hugging Victoria to her, Gertie whispered comfort, just as she did when Victoria was a child.

That night, though exhausted, she slept a dreamless sleep. She awoke the next morning to a cloudy, cold Chicago day. The wind off the lake cut through the thin weatherboarding and made the house chilly.

If Anderson informed his banker friends, as he was sure to do, it would seal her fate with any school in Chicago. Each night as she lay in bed in her little back room in Pottsville, she had dreamed of bringing Aunt Gertie there. It would not have mattered. She knew Fred would never have stood for it. Next summer, she would try again in another

town, one where they had never heard of Pottsville. However, for now she would find work even if she had to sell apples on the street! Pouring herself a cup of coffee, Victoria sat down at the table. It was then she noticed the slip of paper lying in front of her.

'Victoria, please don't worry. God has everything under control. Just trust Him. On my bed is enough material for a dress. You know where I keep the patterns. I'll be praying for you today. Love, Aunt Gertie. Romans 8:28'

Going to the closet in her room, Victoria took her mother's Bible from the shelf. Dusting it off, she opened it to Romans 8:28. 'And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.'

Bowing her head, she prayed, 'Lord, Aunt Gertie says your word is true. I don't know how you can make the things that have happened to me the last few days work for good, but please help me.'

She did not close her prayer; instead, she finished her coffee while leafing through the scriptures. Deeply involved, Victoria did not hear the knock at first. The dress lay around her in pieces, waiting to be sewn together.

At the second knock, she opened the door. In spite of her resolve of the night before, she was glad to see Adam.

"Reverend Wakefield. What a pleasant surprise, please come in," she said,

stepping aside.

Ducking his head, Adam entered the small living room.

"How are you this morning, Miss Winters?" he asked. He noticed her nervous and her flushed face.

"I apologize for my actions last night." Victoria said, dropping her eyes.

"That's quite all right, Victoria. I'm afraid I frightened you."

"Frightened me? I don't understand."

"When you fell, I tried to help you up."

Realization dawned on Victoria. She gasped.

"You followed me?" she said, her voice rising.

"I...I'm sorry. I wanted to protect you," he said. He looked like a little boy caught with his hands in the cookie jar. As quickly as it came, her anger left her.

She smiled. "I'm in your debt, Adam."

Her use of his first name sent a thrill through his heart.

"Is your aunt home? I'd like to meet her."

"She's at the sewing factory. She will be home about half past 6."

He held the old leather hat by the brim. His fingers felt clammy cold. Why was he so fidgety around this woman?

Over the years, he had dealt with many single women in his congregation but none were like this one.

"I hope she will attend the services at Market Street with you this Sunday."

Victoria smiled again, lighting up the drab room. Adam had an overpowering

urge to keep her smiling forever.

"Aunt Gertie dearly loves her little church so this will be a real sacrifice for her."

"Perhaps I could meet her pastor."

"I'm sure Pastor Clark would be delighted. He's quite a gentle little man."

"Is that your church also?"

Victoria looked uncomfortable. "I'm afraid I don't attend church as often as I should," she said.

Adam could not imagine not being in church each Sunday. He decided to change the subject. His gaze caught the pieces of material.

"Oh, you're making a dress. My mother is a seamstress."

"I'm not much good at sewing. My aunt is much better at it than I am. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"That sounds great," Adam, said, taking off his coat. He handed it and his hat to her.

Laying them on the couch, she led Adam to the kitchen.

Soon they were seated at the table, their hands wrapped around steaming mugs, chatting like old friends. The next two hours passed quickly.

Adam talked about growing up in Arkansas. Victoria related her years living

with her aunt. Adam wanted to ask about Pottsville but he restrained himself.

"Mr. Michaels is a very hard man to work for," Victoria said. "And his son isn't much better."

"You know them?" Adam asked.

"Yes," she said sadly. "He owns the factory where my aunt works."

When Victoria excused herself for a moment, Adam inspected the cupboards.

"Bare as Old Mother Hubbard's," he observed.

Victoria returned to an empty kitchen. He was gone. She chided herself. 'What did I say wrong? I talked too much. No one likes a chatty woman'. She tried to work on her dress but couldn't see for the tears dimming her eyes. Finally, she laid it aside and had a good cry. The small home echoed with her sobs.

Dusting one of the guestrooms, James heard noises coming from the kitchen. Listening, he heard the sound of pots and pans being moved around in the cabinets and doors being opened and shut. Only one other time had the parsonage been

broken into. James had almost lost his position. The deacon board took his and his father's pay for a month to replace what was stolen.

Trembling, James crept down the stairs. He was not a fighting man but he would do whatever was necessary to protect the house. Peering around the corner, he saw Adam on his knees. He was placing food supplies in a large wooden box.

Glancing up, he saw the black man looking down at him, a confused look on his face.

"I thought you were a burglar."

"Well, I am stealing some of our food."

Standing up, Adam explained his mission to James. Soon they were on their way.

Victoria kept going over what she had said to Adam. "Surely I didn't offend him," she thought.

She tried to concentrate on the dress but finally put it away.

A movement on the porch caught her eye.

"Adam!" she exclaimed, throwing the door open.

"Victoria, this is my new friend, James Colburn. This is the young lady I was telling you about. Miss Victoria Winters."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Colburn."

"Charmed, Miss Winters."

Both men were smiling, holding boxes overloaded with food.

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 14

The last few months Gertie had dreaded coming home to a empty house. Victoria wrote as often as her small savings would allow. The letters were full of news. She was thrilled at the progress of the children; she felt as if she knew each child personally. She shook her head sadly. One thing she knew, Victoria would never beat a child. Her heart was so tender she could not stand to see even a bird suffer.

Gertie quickened her steps. No matter what the future held, Victoria was home. Usually the house was so cold and lonely; it would be a welcome change tonight.

She was not ready for the reception she received. A cheery fire danced in the fireplace in the living room. Christmas decorations hung on the walls, doors, and windows. A lovely nativity set stood proudly on the mantle. The most delicious aromas filled the house and voices filled with laughter drifted from the kitchen. Gertie began to wonder if she was in the wrong house.

Victoria burst into the room, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks flushed. "Aunt

Gertie, you're home!" she said, hugging the older woman.

"The old place looks wonderful. Where did you find so many decorations?"



"We hoped you'd like it."

"We?" Gertie asked. Before her niece could answer, there was a call from the kitchen.

"Victoria, where do you keep your serving platters?" a booming voice asked.

Pulling her aunt along, she entered the kitchen. The small room was crowded. A tall man leaned over the stove, basting a golden turkey. A black man, his face beaming, bowed to her. "Good evening, Mrs. Winters. May I seat you?"

Unable to respond, Gertie stared at him, her mouth wide open. A fine linen cloth draped the old rickety table, elegant silverware and china shimmered in the light of a gold candelabra. In the center of the table, plates were heaped high with baked potatoes, green beans, corn, and rich brown gravy. Two pies and a cake sat on the counter along with small plates and serving spoons.

With mixed emotions, Gertie sat down in the chair James held out for her. She managed a murmured "Thank you" to the smiling servant.

"Aunt Gertie, this is Reverend Adam Wakefield and James Colburn.

"I would shake hands with you, but as you can see, I'm a little preoccupied," Adam said, taking the turkey out of the oven.

"How did..." Gertie stopped in mid sentence.

"It was all Reverend Wakefield's idea," James said, "and a wonderful one if I may say so."

"We wanted to surprise you," Victoria said beaming.

"It is a very pleasant surprise. Thank you," Gertie said, her voice choked with gratitude. Suddenly aware of her ragged clothing she blushed. "I knew you'd have supper ready, but Victoria, I never expected this."

After James served them, he disappeared. In a few minutes, the trio heard the music of a violin. James backed through the door playing the instrument. He played several pieces while they ate, stopping only to serve desert. He ended with "Silent Night."

James's protests fell on deaf ears. All three insisted that he eat while they clean up. Soon all the dishes and silverware were packed away. And all of Gertie's cabinets were filled with enough food to last for weeks. Afterward, the four of them played games in front of the fireplace until late in the night. James was uncomfortable at first but soon joined in. For the first time since he was a child, he felt a part of a family.

Adam's first Sunday was a flop, at least as far as he was concerned. Many of the people stayed home or attended services elsewhere; the word had spread about his meager income at his former church in Arkansas. He had envisioned the word of God coming out of his mouth, falling in powerful waves on the congregation. In truth, it was more like a wet blanket. Adam's bright spot in the day never materialized.

When Gertie woke with a fever, Victoria was torn between going to Adam's church and staying home to care for her. She knew Adam would understand.

Adam's knock on Gertie's front door that Sunday afternoon brought an immediate response. Victoria welcomed him into their home where Gertie sat in front of the fireplace wrapped in a brightly colored quilt. Feeling better, she tried to apologize to Adam for missing church but he just waved it off.

Wanting to leave the two young people alone, Gertie suggested she go to her cold bedroom, Victoria and Adam insisted that she stay close to the fire. Adam spoke of his home back in Arkansas.

"Uncle Bill and I planned to buy a farm someday," Gertie said with a faraway look in her eyes.

"I didn't know he was interested in farming," Victoria said.

"Oh my, yes," Gertie replied with a sad smile. "He said 'We'll have eggs from our own chickens, milk from the cows, pork from the pigs, and vegetables from our garden.' He said 'Gertie, we won't have to buy a thing.'" She sighed, "Then one night he went to sleep and never woke up. Our dream died with him. I had to go to work at the sewing factory."

Victoria put her hand on her aunt's arm, vowing to herself someday to make Gertie's dream come true. Adam remained silent, thinking how fortunate he was to grow up on the farm.

Victoria searched every day for employment but soon found out just how far Anderson and his banker friend's rumors could spread. Each night, she came in more discouraged.

After another stormy deacon's meeting on the next Saturday, Adam prepared his sermon. It was the last service

before Christmas. He was sure the sanctuary would be packed. 'This church will hold more people than the entire population of Apple Valley, including the hound dogs,' he said to himself. As he was shaving, his hands shook so from the nerves that he cut his lip.

"Oh, why did I have to do that this morning?" he said. He dabbed at the blood, praying for the flow to stop.

Too nervous for breakfast, he gulped down a cup of coffee. In the church office, he locked the door and fell on his knees. Rising an hour later, he went over his notes one more time.

"Lord, if I preach this they'll run me out of town on a rail." He pulled the sermon from the pages of his Bible, intending to tear it up and start over. 'Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables'.

The words of Paul humbled him. Here was a man of God slated to die in a short time and he was exhorting the young preacher Timothy to contend for the faith. With new determination in his heart, Adam strolled out the door of his study.

Elijah Colburn met him in the hallway.

"Preacher, could I's talk with ya?"

"Of course. Would you like to meet me here after the service?"

'T's won't trouble ya like that," Elijah said softly. "Isaiah done told me what ya been a doin' the last week. I ain't never seed airy a preacher like ya."

Unbidden tears threatened to spill down the elderly man's face.

"Have I done something wrong?" Adam asked.

"Naw, naw, ya been a doin' somethin' right. Wantin' to he'p all 'em po' folks."

All week, Adam had invited everyone he saw to Market Street, regardless of their social standing.

"I'm a askin' the Lord ta he'p ya today," Elijah said, his face shining. "Ya give 'em the word of the Lord."

Taking the old work-worn hands in his own, Adam said, his own eyes moist, "Thank you Elijah. The Lord used you to encourage my heart."

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 15

Excitement and fear fought for space in Adam's heart. The church was filled to capacity. A crowd of at least twenty-five men, women and children stood by the back wall. Sitting with her aunt in the back pew Victoria caught Adam's eye. They smiled at each other. His heart swelled; he felt he could walk through the gates of hell.

"Elijah!" Adam called. "Help me set up chairs for the people standing in the back."

"But preacher, they's the poor people. They's only in at Christmas time, then they's hast to stand."

Adam's smile washed off his face to be replaced by a cold expression. "Not as long as I'm the pastor of this church. Follow me."

Going to a meeting room behind the office, he picked up a chair. Nodding at another one, he ordered, "Take it to them!"

Elijah followed the minister to the rear of the sanctuary. Adam and Elijah set the chairs down next to a man and woman holding twin infants. The couple shyly smiled their thanks.

Sitting in his wheelchair at the end of the second row, Michaels saw Adam and Elijah first.

"What's that crazy preacher up to now?" he shouted, waving his cane in his son's direction.

"Hush father!" the younger man said, stealing glances around him. The choir was singing the old hymn, "Faith of our Fathers." When no one seemed to notice, Robert sighed with relief.

"Don't you tell me to shut up!" he shouted over the choir.

Robert rolled his eyes. It was going to be another one of those days. He tried to restrain his father but he just became more agitated.

Conway rose, intending to help carry more chairs. Shane put his arm up to the pew in front of him to stop his son.

"Leave him be," he said, nodding at Adam. "Let him make a fool of himself, if he's a mind to."

For the next few minutes, Adam, Elijah, and James carried chairs to the grateful recipients.

Their actions were greeted by gasps, moans, and shaken heads by most of the wealthy. A few smiled their approval. O'Malley reached his boiling point when James and his father filled the last two chairs placed near the left wall. He remained in his seat only for appearance's sake. Robert finally succeeded in calming his father; turning sideways, he concealed the black men from him.

As the choir began to sing 'Silent Night,' Adam ascended the steps to the pulpit. Robert was congratulating

himself when Michaels turned around and caught sight of Gertie. Before he was confined to the wheelchair, he used to walk through the factory daily. Even now, in poor health and with his son in charge, he would have Jr. roll him down the work aisle once a week.

Many times, he would stop at Gertie's machine, threatening to fire her if she did not speed up.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Michaels," she told him each time. "I'll try to work faster."

"Well you'd better; I'll not put up with your lollygagging." Truth be told, she was his best worker but she seemed unmoved by his wealth and power and this irritated him to no end.

"What's she doing here?" he screamed, pointing a finger at Gertie and raising his cane in the air, waving it wildly. "I don't allow any of my workers to attend this church!"

His son rose up to calm his father. Robert Sr.'s eyes landed on the two black men sitting by the wall. He seemed about to say something when his face turned deathly white. Suddenly he leaned forward and fell to the floor. A man Adam recognized as Dr. Pear rushed forward and knelt by the unmoving figure. Several men left their seats as they helped the doctor carry the fallen man to the pastor's study. Women looked on, covering their mouths with lace handkerchiefs. Adam gripped the side of the pulpit, his knuckles turning white.

"Let's pray for our brother," he said, his voice shaking. After a brief prayer, he opened his Bible to Luke chapter 19.



For the next half-hour he preached on the rich tax collector Zaccheus.

Speaking of his need of salvation. Adam watched as the cold, stern faces before him melted into concern and conviction. Several women dabbed the corners of their eyes.

"I'm sure many of you have someone in your past who told you about Christ. Just like Zaccheus, you have a choice. He accepted Christ as his Savior. The change in his life was immediate and we can expect this too. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, 'Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.'

"So I ask you today. What will you do with this Jesus who is called the Christ?"

After giving an invitation for those who wanted the Lord in their lives, Adam closed the service. The Inquiry Room had been used for storage until this week but was now thrown open. The room soon filled to capacity; Adam had to push his way in. Fashionable ladies stood next to housewives; men of wealth by street vendors. Victoria stood in the far corner. Adam's heart leapt in his chest. He dealt with each person making sure they understood the way of salvation. Finally after what seemed a lifetime, he came to Victoria. "Have you received Christ before?" he asked her.

"No, I thought I had. But as you explained in your sermon, I realized all I did was join the church," Victoria answered with trembling voice. Tears welled in her eyes, "I know I need him."

After reading verses from the book of Romans, Adam led Victoria in a prayer of acceptance. At the end of the

prayer, she raised her head and a brilliant smile lit up her face. To Adam, it looked like the sunrise after a furious storm.

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 16

As he entered his office, Adam dreaded what he expected to find. Dr. Pear looked up from his seat as he walked in.

"I'm afraid he needs your services more than mine," the doctor said sadly, shaking his head.

"Will he recover, doctor?"

"I don't see how he can. He's been hanging on by a thread for years."

Robert Jr. came into the room. Ignoring Adam, he told the doctor he had arranged for an ambulance to transport his father home. The elderly man lay on the couch, his face frozen in a twisted grimace.

"If I might make a suggestion, Mr. Michaels," the doctor said to Robert Jr.

"Of course, Doctor. What is it?"

"We've done all we can for him on earth. I would advise him to prepare his soul for heaven."

Adam thought Robert Jr. was going to throw the doctor out. Then his shoulders, normally straight, suddenly slumped. Two attendants came in and lifted the ailing man

onto the stretcher and carried him out, his son following just a few steps behind. When they were gone, Dr. Pear turned to Adam.

"Stay close, Reverend Wakefield, he really needs you."

Seeing Adam's shocked expression, he hurried to explain.

"He wasn't always this way. He changed after a train accident killed his wife and left him a cripple. He's been bitter ever since."

Adam's first visit to the house that afternoon was a disaster. Jr. was resigned to his father's death, nevertheless he refused to see Adam. Adam was finally able to persuade the butler to allow him in.

Robert Sr. had regained consciousness and lay propped up in bed, his pallor that of a dead man. As Adam walked into the room, the man caught a glimpse of him.

"You come to see if I'm dead yet?" he asked sarcastically. "Sorry to disappoint you, preacher."

"I came because I am concerned for your soul."

"My soul is beyond repair. Now get out and let me die in peace," he scowled.

"Let me pray with you."

"Get out! Jarvis!" he screamed, gasping and choking.

Instantly the butler came in.

"Get him out of here."

"Please come with me, Reverend," Jarvis said gently.

Adam returned to the Michaels' estate each day that week, sometimes with little or no success. The last two occasions he was allowed to pray for the dying man. The last time, he thought he saw a glint of tears in the old man's eyes. Robert had even softened to the point of thanking him for his visits.

At two o'clock Sunday morning, Adam awoke to a loud pounding at the front door. Throwing on his robe, he hurried down the stairs. Running from the servant's quarters, James beat him to the foyer.

Jarvis stood on the porch steps, his face drooping with sadness.

"Mr. Robert said for me to bring you right away," he said, his voice breaking. "Mr. Michaels, he won't last long."

Adam did not waste any time and dressed as quickly as possible. Within five minutes, they were on their way.

As soon as Adam was seated, Jarvis whipped the horses into a run. Adam silently prayed for the elderly man who had let bitterness rob him of joy in his life. Rounding a corner, Adam felt the carriage tip, then right itself. Jarvis did not even slow down. Jarring and bouncing, they charged into the circular drive. His face wet with tears, Robert ran out to meet them.

"Thank God you're here. Father has been calling for you the last hour!"

Jr., not a strong man on a normal day, walked ahead of them with shoulders slumped, his pale face showing signs of little or no sleep. His whole body seemed to tremble as he led Adam up the stairs.

"Thank you for calling me." he said, his voice soft.

On the top landing, Robert turned to face the minister.

"Father's a good man, Pastor. He hasn't always been this way. I remember when I was twelve, he took my whole class to the circus. He laughed harder at the clowns than we did."

As Robert ushered Adam into the room, Dr. Pear nodded to them, then rose from his chair beside the bed. Touching Adam's arm, he left the room and closed the door softly behind him.

Robert Sr. held his hand out to them. He smiled at the minister and his son, all signs of bitterness gone.

"Pastor, it's so good of you to come," he said, his voice clear and steady. "I don't have long on this old earth. I wanted to make amends."

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Adam took the frail man's hand in his. "Mr. Michaels, have you trusted Christ as your savior?"

"Yes, my young friend, I have. Many years ago, I was coming home late one night. It was raining and a man walked up to me and asked if he might share the shelter of my umbrella. I said of course. As we walked along, he asked if I had a shelter from the storm of life. Right there on the street, with the rain pouring off my umbrella, he opened his Bible

and led me to Christ. As you may have guessed, this man was D. L. Moody. I became one of his most ardent supporters."

"What happened?" Adam asked softly.

"A train wreck in Ashtabula, Ohio. At least that was my excuse. I lost my beautiful Rachel that night." The man fell silent for a few moments as he recalled the night years before. "We were traveling with our friends, Philip Bliss, and his wife. Just before we crossed the bridge, Philip commented on how heavy the snow was falling. During the terrible crash, we were both thrown clear. Except for some deep cuts, he was unhurt. However, my legs were crushed. We both realized our wives were still in the burning wreckage. He went back and I tried to crawl in but someone stopped me. I have hated the Lord and myself for years. I felt like I died that night too. I have blamed everyone for my loss and made many mistakes. I've made peace with the Lord now, and I want to ask your forgiveness too." Tears flowed freely down his cheeks and a smile spread across his face.

Adam smiled. "How could I not forgive you when all of our sins are covered by the blood of Christ?"

"Thank you Pastor," Robert Sr. said, clasping Adam's hand in his. "Robert, my son," he said, holding out his other hand as his son took it. "I haven't been much of a father to you the last few years. I must ask your forgiveness also."

Hugging his father, sobs wracked Robert's body.

"I don't have much time left. I have asked the Lord to let me live enough to see my son saved before I die. Pastor, would you show him how?"

"I would be happy to," Adam said and opened his Bible. So it was in the early morning of December 25, 1882, as his father passed from life to death, that Robert Michaels Jr. passed from death to life.



# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 17

Sunday morning, Adam walked to the pulpit feeling charged as never before. The sermon he had prepared fell by the wayside. The words rolled off his tongue. With Robert's permission, he related the events of the early morning hours.

As before, the Inquiry Room was filled. Conway surprised Adam when he walked into the room and offered to help. Adam put him to work right away. Shane O'Malley's absence from the service was disturbing. Conway was also at a loss; he promised to talk to his father.

The answer was not long in coming. As Adam entered the parsonage, he heard voices coming from the kitchen. Coming into the room, he saw Elijah sitting at the table, his hands wrapped around a cracked, yellowed cup. James sat opposite his father. Picking up a cup identical to the one Elijah held, Adam started to pour hot coffee from the pot on the stove.

"Here sir, let me get you another cup," James said, jumping up. "That's the one we colored's drink from."

"Is it clean?" Adam asked, holding the pot in one hand and the cup in the other.

"Of course!" James said, slightly offended.

Adam filled the cup and sat down. "Why the glum faces? I think things are going very well," he said, taking a sip.

"We's fired," Elijah said, looking down at his cup.

"Who fired you?" Adam asked, knowing the answer without asking.

"Mr. O'Malley," James answered.

"I'll speak to him," Adam said, struggling to remain calm.

"Too bad that there bank go bust." Elijah said, shaking his head.

"Which bank?" Adam asked, looking from one man to the other.

"I's don't remember. Do you son?" Elijah asked, turning to James.

"The White Oaks Bank," James said.

"When did it close?" Adam asked. Deep in his heart, he knew something wasn't right.

"Jest the other day. Mr. O'Malley, he came in a while ago and he say we fired. I say that's fine, we take money we's been saving all these years. He jest laugh."

"Why?"

"He say, don't you know. The bank, it done go bust this week."

Each morning, Adam ate his breakfast as James delivered the paper to him. After he read the articles he was interested in, James stored the newspapers away in a box. When the box was full, he burned the papers in the fireplace.

"Bring me all the newspapers for this week, James."

The butler carried the box in and spread the newspapers on the table. Ten minutes later, Adam looked up from the last one. "There's nothing written about a bank folding," Adam said, "How much did you have in it?"

"It's not good with figures," Elijah said thoughtfully, tapping his gnarled fingers on the table and turning to his son.

James pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket, running his fingers down the page. "About two thousand dollars, sir."

Elijah jumped up, spilling his coffee on the papers. It went unnoticed by all three as Adam and Elijah stared at each other dumbfounded.

"You think O'Malley steals our money, does you" he asked.

Adam raised his hand, palms spread out. "Let's not jump to conclusions. Let me speak to Mr. O'Malley and Mr. Cooper first."

The two times the deacon board had met, Cooper had been absent. Last Tuesday night, Adam had called at his home.

"I'm sorry, my husband is not home," the older woman told Adam as she greeted him in the parlor, her nose in the air.

Adam suppressed a chuckle. If it rains, she'll drown, he said to himself.

"I'm known as one who speaks her mind, Reverend," Erma Cooper said.

Adam nodded, unsure of how to respond.

"As you may be aware, my husband is the church's banker." She waited to be sure he understood the importance of what she was saying.

"Yes ma'am," Adam said, shuffling his hat uncomfortably. Mrs. Cooper had yet to offer to take his coat and hat or ask him to be seated.

"I was not in favor of your being offered the position of pastor at our church," she said bluntly.

"Ma'am?"

"Oh, don't take me wrong, Reverend Wakefield. It has nothing to do with your qualifications. Anyone can preach. Frederick has stated that fact many times over the years."

Adam opened his mouth to protest, a slow flush building in his cheeks.

"Many thousands of dollars come into our church every week; that is why we  
need an administrator."

"Mrs. Cooper, the office of pastor is not something I take lightly." Adam said, his knuckles turning white. "One must make sure his call is from the Lord."

"Yes, I'm sure one must but..."

"As far as the finances of the church are concerned, I believe the souls of men are more important."

Setting her jaw, Erma Cooper spat out, "You may be my husband's choice, but you are certainly not mine! Good day to you sir! Herbert!"

A dark suited man stepped out from the hallway.

"Please see Reverend Wakefield out."

"Certainly ma'am. This way sir."

Adam left the Cooper's home uncomfortable for more than just the reception he had received.

Now Adam instructed James and his father, "Don't do anything rash, I'll be right back." He set his half-empty cup on the table and rushed out.

After searching the church from one end to the other, he was almost ready to give up. If O'Malley was a thief, he covered his tracks well. Standing in front of the pulpit, his eyes swept the empty sanctuary.

"Lord, what am I going to do?"

He started to kneel when he noticed a slight discoloration in the wood on the inside of the pulpit. Inserting

the blade of his penknife into the crack, he pried carefully. At first nothing happened and he thought he had made a mistake. Then slowly the panel began to move, revealing a small compartment in the sidewall of the pulpit.

Inside was a smaller version of the church ledger. The story it told was one of lies, deceit, and fraud.

Without waiting for the flustered butler to announce him, Adam barged into the Cooper's dining room. Dumbfounded, the Coopers and their guests, Shane and Mary O'Malley, stared up at him. To Adam, the heavy-laden table reminded him of pictures he had seen of Roman feasts. The aroma of the food made his stomach rumble and his mouth water.

Dripping sarcasm, Frederick Cooper asked, "Is there something I can do for you, Pastor?"

"I believe Reverend Wakefield is here to see me," O'Malley said.

"Actually I'm here to see both of you."

When they were in the privacy of the library, O'Malley turned on Adam.

"I do not appreciate your hunting me down. As for those two Negroes, I can replace them tomorrow morning."

"How will you steal from the new employees? The same way you've done James and Elijah?"

O'Malley sneered at him.

"Nobody's stealing from them. The old man gambles. Sometimes he loses his whole month's pay at one time."

Adam felt sick.

"O'Malley, you've robbed the church for years as your father did before you."

Turning to Frederick, he said, "Mr. Cooper, do the officers of your bank know you and Mr. O'Malley are the owners of White Oaks Bank?"

Frederick turned pale; he tried to bluster his way through.

"I don't know what lunacy you are speaking of sir."

"White Oaks Bank," Adam said, removing several sheets of paper from his jacket pocket, "Is a fraudulent institution set up to bilk the church, your bank, and the employees out of thousands of dollars!"

## RIVER OF FIRE

### Chapter 18

Adam saw a glint in the corner of his eye. Wheeling around, he saw a small derringer in Shane's hand.

O'Malley pointed the barrel at Adam's chest. An evil grin spread across his face.

"Well now. You're not as dumb as you look, are you?" he said.

Adam stood frozen to the spot. Of all the reactions from O'Malley and Cooper, he never anticipated this. Frederick Cooper was white as a sheet. He dropped into the chair behind his desk.

"Why? Why would you steal from the church?" Adam asked. "You're wealthy."

"There's a good one for you," O'Malley said, laughing. "Wealthy am I? Without the money I get from the Market Street Church, I couldn't even afford this suit!" His left hand brushed up and down his side.

"Frederick. Now there's a man of integrity for you."

"Shut up, O'Malley!"

"What's the matter, Freddy? Afraid he'll find out you're stealing from the coffers?" "Don't worry, he will either



join us or be dead," O'Malley said, moving around Adam as he locked the double doors leading to the hall.

"So what's it going to be, Reverend? Do you join us in our little enterprise or do we drop you right here?" He pulled back the hammer of the gun.

"Not here!" Frederick shouted.

"Keep your voice down. I'm not going to ruin your fine rug."

Stalling for time, Adam said, "How much could I expect each week?"

"Oh, I'd say a couple hundred."

"That's chicken feed," Adam said, edging closer.

"How much would you like?" Cooper asked, perking up.

"At least \$500 and in about six months we move it up to \$750 and a year from now \$1000."

"That's ridiculous," Frederick said, slumping down again.

"Careful Preacher, you don't want to wind up like Peabody," O'Malley said, waving the gun.

A chill ran through Adam. He must be careful. If they had killed before, they would kill again. 'Keep them talking,' he told himself. "What happened to Reverend Peabody? I heard he died of natural causes."

O'Malley laughed. Cooper opened the bottom drawer on his desk, took out a bottle of amber colored liquid, and poured himself a drink. His hands shook so badly he spilled a large quantity. Pulling a silk handkerchief from his pocket, he mopped his brow and took a large gulp of the liquor.

"You talk too much, O'Malley," Frederick said. Downing the drink, he poured another.

"It's going to be hard for him to say anything. Either he's in with us or he'll be floating in the river with a bullet in the heart. What's it going to be, Wakefield?"

"Before I decide, I need to know if James is in it with you?" Adam asked, looking for an opportunity to act but seeing none.

It was Cooper that answered this time.

"You must be joking. That idiot? If he or Elijah knew, we would be in prison or hung."

"I guess I don't have much choice," Adam said, sticking out his hand to O'Malley as if to shake his.

"Not so fast, Reverend. How do I know I can trust you?" O'Malley replied backing up, refusing to take his hand.

"One thing I must know," Adam said, still holding out his hand smiling, "If James didn't help you, how did Pastor Peabody.. er .. pass away?"

"It's awful hard to breathe with a pillow on your face," O'Malley said with a smirk, "and sleeping powder in your stomach."

"Are we agreed on five hundred dollars a week?" Adam said, finally dropping his hand.

"No, Wakefield, we're not!" O'Malley said, pointing the tiny pistol between Adam's eyes. "I don't believe you."

Suddenly there was a banging on the library door.

"Frederick!" Erma Cooper called. "Frederick, Herbert has had to warm the food again! Frederick, do you hear me? Tell that impertinent minister to come back some other time."

Forgetting the door was locked, Shane lowered his gun. Seeing his chance, Adam jumped at O'Malley and grabbed for the pistol. Shane outweighed Adam by forty pounds, mostly fat but some muscle. He took advantage of his size as the two men struggled for the gun. Frederick scurried to unlock the door, intending to make his escape.

Adam's huge hand closed over O'Malley's fist. If it were a regular pistol, he would have torn it from Shane's grasp but the tiny derringer fit in the murderer's palm. O'Malley used his weight to plow into Adam; the minister grunted as he felt his ribs give. He tried hammering Shane's hand on the desk.

"Frederick, get back here and give me a hand!" O'Malley growled.

Frederick stopped. Hesitating between O'Malley and his still demanding wife, he faced the fighting pair just as the gun exploded. He was struck in the upper chest and knocked to the floor. Adam was momentarily shocked.

Pulling himself away, O'Malley aimed at Adam's chest, cocked the hammer, and fired. Missing the heart and lungs, the bullet lodged in his spine. Adam felt a fire burning

in his chest. He stared at O'Malley, not able to comprehend the sudden turn of events. Suddenly his knees buckled and he collapsed on the floor.

He turned his head toward Frederick who lay next to him. 'We're dead,' Adam thought. 'O'Malley's killed us.' He was tired, so tired. Darkness enveloped him.

"Frederick!" Mrs. Cooper called. "Frederick, open this door immediately!"

She heard another of those loud popping sounds.

"Shane!" Mary called, "Is everything all right?"

Inside, Shane was moving the bodies into position.

"Herbert!" Mrs. Cooper called. "Come here now!"

"Yes ma'am," Herbert said, rushing into the hallway.

"Break down this door."

"Ma'am?" Herbert said.

"Do it now!"

"Yes ma'am," Backing across the hallway, Herbert lunged, hitting the door hard with his shoulder. It held with nary a shudder. A pain shot through his arm.

Hearing the thump, Shane leaned over Adam and pressed the gun into his hand. Herbert hit the door again, the results the same. The solid oak door looked none the worse for wear. Herbert's shoulder however was developing a large bruise.

"Oh for heaven's sake," Erma Cooper said. Picking up a marble statue off a nearby pedestal, she swung it around, slamming its nose into the doorknobs. Astonished, Herbert stood rooted to the spot with his mouth open. Pieces of the sculpture scattered on the floor. Mary O'Malley jumped back as Erma swung the statue again. This time she went for the lock.

The statue and lock shattered, sending the door swinging open wide. Erma screamed at the sight before her. The odious smell of blood mixed with gunpowder hung in the air.

Mary took in the scene before her. Adam lay prone on the floor, his feet at an awkward angle. Her husband's pistol was lying loosely in Adam's hand. Frederick lay across from him, his life's blood ebbing out. Shane hunched over the minister as if ready to strike.

Closer to Conway's age, Shane had wed Mary two years after the death of his first wife. Her delicate features, trim figure, blonde hair, and blue eyes made her a beautiful woman. Because of this, Shane believed her naive.

The look in Shane's eyes made her shiver. Hard as flint, they sent a warning message. Her heart leapt to her throat. One hand flew to cover her mouth, the other to her chest.

"He killed my husband," Erma cried, kneeling by Frederick's side. Springing up, she snatched the gun from Adam's limp hand. Shane stepped back. Erma raised the derringer, pointing the barrel wildly. Finally she settled on Adam's forehead. In an instant, Mary lunged at the older woman.

Grabbing at her wrist, she pushed Erma's hand aside. The bullet meant for Adam plowed into the floor inches from his head. For a few seconds, the two women stared at each other.

"I tried to stop him but he was too quick for me," O'Malley said by way of explanation.

"Herbert, send the maid for a policeman and bring the carriage around. Hurry!" Erma barked.

"Yes ma'am, right away ma'am." Herbert said already moving.

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 19

Robert Michaels Sr.'s death brought no joy to Gertrude Winters. She had prayed for him daily the past seven years since his accident. At one time, he used to walk through the sewing factory every day, speaking to the women, taking time to ask about the family, and telling them they were doing a fine job. Then the accident in Ohio happened. When he returned from having spent six months in the hospital, he was a changed man.

He demanded and threatened continuously. He ordered them to do a better job or be fired. Now he was gone, his bitter heart healed by the forgiveness of Christ. During his sermon, Adam conveyed the news of his Robert's conversion. Gertie felt a thrill all the way to her soul.

"How about I make some of my beef stew?" she asked Victoria when they returned home from the beautiful service.

"Oh, that would be wonderful," Victoria, answered, her mouth watering. She hugged her aunt.

When the ladies planned the church suppers and carry-ins, several were always sure to ask Gertie to bring her delectable beef stew. On occasion, feeling they must be tired of the same thing every time, she would prepare a different dish but seeing the disappointment on their faces, she always resolved to bring her famous beef stew the next time.

Pushing back the curtain covering the pantry, she hurriedly pulled the jars of corn, green beans, and carrots from their places on the shelves. Bending, she reached for the small sack of potatoes she had purchased last week. She sighed. They were almost gone. . . but if she cut the bad spots out she might have just enough.

Several times the past week, Adam had called on Victoria but he was always careful not to arrive at mealtime.

"Victoria," Gertie said smiling, "Get out the best china."

"Oh Aunt Gertie, are you sure? I might break something," she said, biting her lower lip as she remembered when she was twelve years old.

Gertie had put very little restrictions on her niece. Victoria made up for her lack of toys by using household items. One afternoon while her aunt was at work, she set up a tea party for her doll on a rickety wooden crate.

Wanting it to be the best, she used the good china her uncle had given Gertie - - the beautiful set on their twentieth wedding anniversary. Standing up too quickly, her knee hit the crate and toppled it over, sending a cup and saucer falling to the floor, cracking the cup.

When Gertie came home she found Victoria crouching on the floor, sobbing as she tried to fit the broken pieces of china together. Gertie never punished her, feeling she had chastised herself enough already. Until today, Victoria had never touched her aunt's dishes again.



"I want the table to look nice when your young man comes to call," Gertie said smiling.

Victoria's face reddened but she was pleased in spite of her embarrassment. Then a frown crossed her face.

"What if Adam finds out about Pottsville?"

"Adam is a very intelligent man. He knows better than to listen to gossip," Gertie replied unconcernedly. She laid the slices of beef on the cutting board and sliced them into chunks. "Besides, what have I always taught you?"

Victoria repeated the lesson she knew by heart.

"Honesty in everything you do, say, or imply."

"Very good!" Gertie smiled, nodding her head.

Victoria was quiet for a time. She reflected on her new found faith. Gertie had always taught her morals, just as her mother had when she was alive. Time and time again, her aunt had encouraged her to turn her heart over to Christ but she had always thought she was capable of handling anything. That is, until the incident at Pottsville. There she had felt her very soul stripped bare. Floundering and helpless, she reached out to the Lord. He lifted her up and put her on the solid rock of His salvation. She smiled to herself. Reading her Bible now was such a joy and comfort and prayer was a time of Holy Communion. Fellowshiping with God's people, a pleasure. A smile spread across her face.

"Victoria."

No answer. She repeated her name.

"Victoria!"

"What? Oh I'm sorry. Did you say something, Aunt Gertie?" Victoria asked.

"Would you slice the bread, please?"

As she cut the bread, Victoria asked, "Have you ever heard Mr. Moody preach?"

"Oh my yes," Gertie replied with a wave of her hand as she stirred the stew. The sweet aroma filled the small house. "I remember the night of the fire." Gertie's eyes moistened.

"He gave such a wonderful appeal to the unsaved, then closed the meeting without giving an invitation. That night many went into eternity lost."

They were interrupted by a knock at the front door. Thinking it was Adam, Victoria flew to the front door. Through the glass opening in the door, she saw the slim form of Robert Michaels, Jr. A shock went through her and the old resentment rose up inside. Leaving him standing on the porch, she returned to the kitchen.

"Its Michaels Jr." she said simply.

Wiping her hands on her apron, Gertie hurried to the door.

Opening it, she greeted her visitor warmly.

"Mr. Michaels," Gertie said, surprised to see him standing on her front step.

"Mrs. Winters, I'm here on behalf of my father," Robert said, visibly shivering.

"Your father?" Victoria asked, coming up behind her aunt. Instantly she was on guard.

"Yes," he said, his teeth almost chattering. "May I come in? Please?"

Silently the two women stepped aside to let him enter. Gertie felt uncomfortable knowing their social positions were so different.

Robert removed his gloves and hat. Extending his hand toward the fireplace, he said "It's monstrously cold out today."

"Mr. Michaels, I don't mean to be rude, but why have you come to see me?" Gertie asked.

Robert sighed.

"You're aware my father passed away this morning." The man's eyes glistened with unshed tears.

Yes," Gertie answered. "I'm very sorry."

"Thank you. Before he died, he asked me to do something he said he should have done years ago."

Gertie gasped. Michaels had not changed. Victoria's face fell. He had come to fire her aunt.

"He instructed me to offer you the position of foreman at the factory."

Gertie's mouth fell open and she stared wide-eyed at the man before her.

"Actually, it won't be the current factory. We will be building a new facility with better heating for the winter and many windows for ventilation during the summer."

"He really did get his heart right with the Lord, didn't he?" Gertie said softly.

Robert smiled.

'He almost looks handsome,' Victoria thought to herself.

"Yes he did, as have I," Robert said.

"It changes your outlook on everything," Gertie said, hugging the young man.

Robert sighed. He hadn't felt a woman's embrace since the death of his mother.

"Indeed it does. My father asked me to give you this."

Reaching inside his coat pocket, he removed a large envelope and handed it to Gertie. It felt heavy to her touch. Opening it, she gasped.

Seeing her puzzled expression, he smiled.

"Back pay and raises you should have received for the past seven years!"

## RIVER OF FIRE

### Chapter 20

"I's don't know where he be," Elijah said, glancing out the window for the hundredth time. For the last hour, he had alternated between the clock and the window. "Maybe he done run off."

James was just as worried as his father but tried not to show it.

"He'll be back," he said with more confidence than he felt. "Here, go over the crates with me again."

Lifting a lid from one of the four wooden boxes, he sorted through the contents.

"We done been thru 'em a heap of times. They ain't changed any. We done lost our jobs; where we gonna go?"

"You always taught me the Lord will provide."

"I know I did, but He best hurry up!"

"Father!" James said.

"I ain't talking 'bout the Lord. It's was a 'sayin' the preacher." Elijah said quickly.

"Reverend Wakefield will do all he can, I'm sure."

Already James felt a fierce loyalty to the minister.

"He be a good man but he a fightin' the devil in O'Malley."

James could find no words to dispute his father's claim. He put his arm around Elijah and squeezed his shoulder.

As evening approached, the gloom increased in the men's hearts as well as the night's sky.

At ten after six, a figure came up the walk.

"Here he comes," Elijah, said with a sigh, his shoulders slumped.

They watched the man step into the circle of light made by the street lamp.

"It's O'Malley," James said with disgust. His eyes scanned the house that had been his home for most of his adult life. "Lord help us," he whispered.

The front door slammed, causing both men to jump. Fearing the worse, James and Elijah walked into the foyer to greet the man.

Incredulously, Shane O'Malley was smiling!

To James it looked like the snarl of a mad dog.

"Well, so you two are still here," O'Malley said as he took off his wraps.

"We un's are jest leavin'," Elijah replied, lifting one of the crates. It slipped

from his grasp and crashed to the floor, leaving a scratch on the polished wood.

O'Malley's smile faltered, then recovered.

"Now where are you going with those?" he asked, indicating the boxes.

"Mr. O'Malley, you fired us, don't you remember?" James said.

"Oh that," O'Malley replied with a wave of his hand, "was just a bad misunderstanding."

"You talk to Reverend Wakefield?" James asked, relief flooding over him.

"I most certainly did. A very enlightening experience," O'Malley chuckled.

"But you said we un's was shiftless and lazy," Elijah replied, confused.

"Yes sir, you said we weren't worth shooting," James stated, crossing his arms over his chest.

Shane O'Malley's smile vanished and his face turned to flint.

"Do you want your jobs back or not? It's awful cold on the street tonight."

O'Malley voiced the very thing James feared. At his age, his father wouldn't last the night in the freezing weather.

"We will stay sir," James said with a slight smile, making the decision for both of them.

"Good," O'Malley replied, rubbing his hands together. "Now bring me some dinner; I'm starved."

James hurried away to do his bidding. O'Malley turned to Elijah.

"Tomorrow I want you to help James clean the parsonage from top to bottom."

"Yes suh."

"And one other thing. I've found another bank. This one is much more solid."

"I think I's jest keeps my money in a jar."

O'Malley laughed.

"What kind of security does that afford?"

"It'd be better than that White Oak Bank."

"I'll speak to the other deacons about it."

"Yes suh," Elijah said, knowing he was defeated.

After putting the boxes in the hall closet, he left for his bed in the furnace room of the church.



James had put the meal for Adam on the back burner. After setting a platter of sliced ham, potatoes, gravy, green beans, and spinach in front of O'Malley, James positioned himself behind him awaiting further orders as was his custom. He watched the head deacon devour the meal with vigor and satisfaction.

Finishing his meal, O'Malley pushed away from the table and patted his stomach. Biting off the end of a cigar he pulled from his jacket, he spit it into the fireplace. He leaned over and lit it from one of the candles.

"That was a good meal, James," O'Malley said, blowing out a huge cloud of smoke.

"The Reverend doesn't allow smoking in the parlor sir," James said nervously. Actually, he had no idea whether Adam allowed smoking or not.

O'Malley took another puff and released it into the air, the smoke drifting to the ceiling.

"James, I want you to pack Wakefield's stuff."

"Reverend Wakefield's belongings sir?"

"Yes. Make sure you don't miss anything," O'Malley said, smiling at the valet.

"Where shall I put them sir?" James asked, his tone downcast.

"Leave them here in the foyer. I will send a man for them tomorrow afternoon."

"But what will Reverend Wakefield wear?" James asked. "Should I leave his suits here?"

Without answering, Shane O'Malley pushed himself up from the chair and walked to the front door.

"Get my coat and hat, James."

As he was helping O'Malley with his coat, James broached the subject again.

"Will Reverend Wakefield be coming in later tonight?"

Turning to face the servant, O'Malley adjusted his muffler.

"Reverend Wakefield will not be returning tonight or any other night. This afternoon he shot and killed Frederick Cooper. He also tried to murder me. He was seriously wounded. He's in the hospital under heavy guard."

"Nooo," James said. "Are he hurt bad?"

"Watch your language," O'Malley said, pointing a gloved finger at James. "Valets do not use that language on the street."

"But sir."

"No buts, James, remember your training."

"May I go to him sir?" James said, tears swelling the corners of his eyes.

"You may not. As I said, he's under guard and besides the doctor doesn't expect him to live through the night."

James' face fell.

"Just crate up his possessions. I'll have them shipped to his mother in Arkansas."

In a gesture of feigned tenderness, O'Malley laid his hand on the servant's arm.

"Let it go James, in two weeks we will have a new pastor."

The hand on his arm felt repulsive as James stared into the face of the devil. Turning away, O'Malley walked out of the personage and into the night.

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 21

Adam felt as though he were weightless, floating in a body of water. The sound of voices surrounded him, some angry and some soothing. The pain in his chest was gone, replaced with a wonderful peace. He saw a beautiful shore that seemed to beckon him. The grass and trees were a brilliant green; flowers of every shape and color gleamed. Their brightness almost hurt his eyes and their fragrance permeated the air, drifting to his nostrils. Birds were singing; their songs floated to his ears.

"Let's get them out of here," the policemen yelled to the stretcher bearers.

After giving the police a brief statement making himself to be the hero, O'Malley departed quickly with his wife in tow. Mary wanted to stay, if for no other reason than to comfort Erma. Shane, seeing the expression on Mary's face, was afraid she was about to make a statement of her own. If she did, he, not Adam, would be in serious trouble.

After carrying Frederick to the ambulance, the attendant returned for Adam. Erma blocked the way.

"I'll not have that murderer riding in the same ambulance as my husband!"

The attendant looked helplessly to the police officer. Kneeling by Adam's side, he was holding a cloth to the preacher's chest to stop the bleeding.

"Ma'am, if you do not step aside, I will place you under arrest," the policeman stated flatly.

"You can't be serious."

"Bill!" he called to his companion by the outside door.

When the man appeared, he said, "If she isn't out of the way in the next ten seconds, take her to jail."

"Okay Sarge," the policeman said, taking Mrs. Cooper by the elbow.

Jerking her arm out of his grasp, Erma stepped out of the middle of the door.

As O'Malley went out the front door of the parsonage, James went out the back. Sitting at a rickety table in the furnace room, Elijah was reading a passage from the Bible. It had taken James years to convince his father he could learn to read. Once he tried however, he had picked it up easily.

"Look here what it says," he said, pointing to a passage in Philippians. "It says God will take care of us. He sure doin' that." He smiled an almost toothless grin. Seeing the shocked look on James' face, he asked "What wrong?"

"Reverend Wakefield's been shot."

"Lord have mercy. What 'appened?"

"O'Malley said he shot Frederick Cooper, then was shot himself," James said shaking.

"He a liar, that preacher's not the kind to hurt nobody."

"O'Malley's a thief and a murderer,"

"What we gonna do?"

"I'm goin' to tell Miss Winters."

"They's a storm a comin'. The wind be whippin' offen the lake. Be likely to freeze ya in your tracks. You best wear my coat too," the old black man said. Scurrying to the wall, he pulled his worn coat off the nail.

"Father, I can't take your coat," James protested.

"I's too old to go my ownself. Here you wear this'un under yours."

Knowing it was useless to argue with Elijah, James put his father's coat on under his. He could barely move his upper body. When James was ready to go, Elijah took him by the shoulders, looked him in the eyes, and said, "Go with God, my son. I be a prayin' for you and the preacher."

As James opened the back door to the church, a gust of freeing wind took his breath away. Pulling his coat tighter, he plunged into the snowstorm.

Victoria pulled the covers tight against her chin. Sorrow shot through her soul like the chill in the house. Outside, the wind howled around the little cottage, finding every crack and making the windows rattle. All afternoon she had waited for Adam, her heart sinking lower with the sun.

Surely he was just delayed. After all, tomorrow was Christmas. Last week, she had taken what was left of her savings to buy him a new watch; he must come. But the hours dragged on and still he didn't come. Fighting fatigue, she went to bed only to lie there awake.

Finally she heard the clock in the living room strike twelve.

Christmas Day!

The tears flowed down her cheeks and soaked her pillow.

James's feet felt like blocks of ice. His father's prediction was right; halfway to Gertie's, the storm hit full force. The wind pushed against him, finding its way inside his layers of clothing, tearing through the rips and tears in the seams. Ice pellets stung his face, feeling like small cuts. The snow blinded him and caused him to lose his way. He considered going back.

He was close. He could almost feel it but the light of the gas lamps was almost blotted out by the driving snow. He stumbled and his hand shot out, catching himself from falling. His frozen fingers grasped a rusty iron fence. He recognized it immediately.

"Thank you Lord," he whispered through cold lips.

Victoria woke with a start. Something or someone was there. Over the roar of the wind, she heard the faint sound of snow crunching underfoot. The boards of the porch creaked under a heavy tread and a shadow fell across the window.

Cringing against the headboard, she was about to cry out when there was a rap at her bedroom window.

"Miss Winters, it's James Colburn, Reverend Wakefield's valet. I need to speak to you."

Victoria hesitated. How well did she know this man?

He rapped again, more urgently this time.

"Please, Miss Victoria! Reverend Wakefield's been hurt!"

Fumbling in the dark, she reached for her robe. Flinging it on over her nightdress, she cautiously opened the front door, her heart racing.

James pushed past her. In three big strides, he was in front of the fireplace. Shaking, he peeled off his gloves and extended his hands over the dying fire.

"I had to come see you. I knew you would want to know," James said through chattering teeth.

"What happened? Is he badly hurt?"

"Mr. O'Malley says he shot Mr. Cooper, and then tried to shoot him." James said, his tone sarcastic.

Gertie came into the room, fastening her robe.



"I don't believe it," Gertie said angrily. Going to the fireplace, she added more fuel.

"Adam wouldn't harm anyone," Victoria said.

"No ma'am, he wouldn't," James replied in agreement. The flames caught the new wood; the warmth felt like heaven to James.

"How badly is he hurt?" Victoria repeated, her emotions running the gamut from shock to concern.

James's eyes glistened with tears. It seemed like a long time before he answered.

"The doctor doesn't think he will last until morning," he said sadly.

Numbness crept into Victoria's very soul. She felt as though she would faint and she reached for the nearby chair to steady herself. At that moment, she realized how deeply she had grown to love Adam.

Gertie's hand flew to cover her mouth.

"Dear Lord! No!"

"Where is he? I must go to him," Victoria asked.

"He's at St. Luke's Hospital," James answered. He huddled closer to the fire, thinking of the walk to the hospital.

"I must go to him," she repeated, staggering in the direction of her room.

Following her, Gertie took her arm to steady her.

In the privacy of her room, Gertie said, "Victoria, you can't. The storm is too fierce."

"I must, Aunt Gertie!" Victoria replied, laying a heavy wool dress on her bed. Seeing the determined look in her niece's eyes, Gertie nodded. Hurrying, she selected some warm scarves, her heaviest coat, and some gloves.

"She can't go by herself, James," Gertie said pleading. Victoria rushed back into the room, dressed for the weather.

"I'll be happy to take her. Miss Winters, I know a short cut."

"God bless you," she said, smiling and shaking his hand. Standing on tiptoes, Gertie lightly kissed James' cheek. James sighed; her touch was like the touch of his mother.

"Please pray for him, Aunt Gertie," Victoria said, hugging her aunt.

"Of course I will dear."

With every inch of skin covered and only their eyes peering out, the two started on their journey. Soon after leaving the house, the snow swallowed them.

After they had vanished in the falling snow, Gertie knelt beside a chair in front of the fireplace. She began to pray with fervor for the wounded man of God and the safety of the two going to him. Gertie lost all sense of time. The hours ticked by like seconds in the presence of her Heavenly Father.

Leaning into the wind, the storm blinded them but the two hurried on. Stumbling, their feet and hands freezing, they prayed for a miracle.

## RIVER OF FIRE

### Chapter 22

Tom Hopkins loved his work as an orderly at St. Luke's Hospital. He felt a deep commitment to his patients. Whenever he lost one in death, he felt sorrow as if he had just lost a family member. But still he would go on, determined to make a difference in another's life. Tom didn't believe he had the intelligence to become a doctor and Dr. Matthew Samuels often agreed, usually after Tom revealed his belief in God.

"A scientific man bases his life on facts, not myths," the doctor would snort each time Tom mentioned the Lord. "I have never seen God."

"T'aint never seen air, yet I keep on breathing sir," Hopkins said. "You gotta believe before you can see."

"I can't reason with you, young man. You're totally irrational. I have patients to attend to."

Matthew Samuels would never admit it but he envied the young orderly's faith. If only he could have that type of peace. The only peace he could find was in a bottle. Tom, for his part, never stopped praying for Samuels to see the light.

In the early hours of Christmas morning, Tom made his rounds, hoping to bring some joy to the hurting.

A police officer was positioned in the hallway, guarding Frederick Cooper. Frederick's wife kept vigil by his

bedside. Despite valiant efforts, the doctor could not stop Cooper's bleeding. Each time he stopped the flow, it started again. Finally, he realized it was too late and he gave orders to make him as comfortable as possible.

At 1:45, Erma called to the policeman guarding the door. Tears were streaming down her cheeks unnoticed and dropping off her chin.

"My husband wishes to speak to you, officer," she said sobbing, struggling to gain composure.

As they approached the bed, Frederick Cooper looked up at them with eyes that were surprisingly alert and clear.

"I wish to make a confession, young man," he said to the officer.

Startled, the policeman just stared, then nodded.

"Please hurry. I don't have much time."

Pulling a notepad and stubby pencil from his shirt pocket, he licked the tip.

"Yes sir?"

Licking his lips, Frederick said, "For several years, twenty-one in fact, Shane O'Malley and I have been embezzling from my bank and Market Street Church. The lifestyle we enjoy is because of money taken from these institutions."

"Were your families involved sir?" the officer asked.

"No," Frederick answered quickly, grimacing, yet his voice was strong and clear.

"What about the minister, Reverend Wakefield?"

Cooper smiled weakly.

"No. He is not involved. Under the gun, he strung Shane along to make him think he was interested. When he was about to be shot, Wakefield jumped Shane. He's a very brave man. Is he hurt badly?" Cooper asked, coughing up blood.

Erma gently wiped his lips with a lace handkerchief, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"Yes sir, he may not make it." the officer said bluntly.

Completing some notes, he asked "Who shot you, sir?"

"Shane O'Malley shot me and I suppose I'm dying."

Erma stifled a sob.

"But I'm not the first person he's killed."

The officer stopped writing and looked up at him. His face showed utter astonishment. Finishing his statement, Frederick closed his eyes. He was so tired, so very tired.

Stepping into the hallway, the officer called to the other policeman half dozing down the hall.

"Bob!"

The man remained in his seat, not hearing his name called.

"Bob!" the officer called out louder.

Then he noticed the red stain on the other officer's uniform. Running down the hallway, he put a hand on his shoulder; the man fell to the floor dead. A noise came from inside the room. Cocking his revolver, the officer entered Adam's room. On the bed, Adam struggled for breath, a pillow covering his face. Snatching the pillow, the policeman threw it to the floor. Rushing to open the window, he leaned out. A shadowy figure ran from the hospital.

"Halt! Stop, or I'll shoot!"

Shane increased his speed, fully expecting a bullet to hit him in the back. The officer fired and the bullet struck a corner of the building, sending a shower of brick. Struck in the back by the flying fragments, Shane winced but dared not stop.

Returning to Frederick Cooper, the policeman found he had passed away. Erma lay across her husband's body, sobbing.

Pressed into service, Tom Hopkins sat by Adam's bedside, holding a rifle. A commotion in the hallway brought him to his feet. A beautiful young woman and a tall black man peered in at him, their clothing covered in ice and snow.

"May I help you?" Hopkins asked, laying down his gun. He sensed these people were not a threat to the minister.

The girl did not answer but moved with purpose toward the bed, tears frozen on her cheeks.

"We are friends of Reverend Wakefield," James replied, nodding to the orderly by way of explanation. He removed the scarf covering his face and crusted ice and snow fell off of James clothing.

Tom nodded, then moved back to give them some room. He could sense they were genuinely concerned about this man of God.

Removing her gloves, Victoria grasped Adam's hand. It felt so limp, so cold. James moved quietly to the corner of the room.

"Adam. Oh Adam," Victoria said soothingly, running a shaky hand over his hair. Leaning over, she placed a gentle kiss on his silent lips.

She turned to the orderly. "He didn't shoot anyone. You're guarding the wrong person," she said firmly.

"We know that now, ma'am. The police are after the real killer, a man named O'Malley. I'm here to protect the reverend," he said gently.

Victoria could sense that Tom was a kind man. She breathed a prayer of thanks for his help.

"What can I do? How can I help him?" she asked.

"Best thing you can do for him is to pray." Tom answered.

"Of course, but isn't there something else?"

"Well, Dr. Samuels says they can't, but I think people in his condition can hear when we speak to them."



"What should I say?" Victoria asked, suddenly aware of what he was saying. Her green eyes shone in the light of the room, her face hopeful.

"Tell him you love him. Read to him from the Bible. Here, use mine. Just don't tell Dr. Samuels," Tom said smiling.

It started as a pinpoint of light. Then it became stronger until it filled every space of Adam's being. With the light came a wonderful peace. A thrill struck Adam's soul like a lightning bolt. Something was happening; the light did not dim yet from within it a central figure appeared.

Instantly, Adam was on his knees. The outline became clearer. Behind the figure, he saw clearly a crowd of people. At the front of the assembly, he could make out his father, his grandmother and grandfather. In addition, there were some of the members of his church from Apple Valley. He recognized them as ones who had died. Beside his father, Pastor Ashmore was waving at him.

"I'm home," his heart sang. "Thank you Lord, I'm home!"

The light began to fade as he heard a voice like the rushing of many waters.

The figure said, "You must go back, my child; there is much to be done."

A great sorrow filled Adam's heart. On every side of him flowed a river of fire, its flames running like water, licking at his legs and upper body. He felt no sensation of burning, only the current pulled at him. He heard the voice again, comforting him. He recognized it as Isaiah 43:2.

'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.'

As this voice faded, another one called out.

"Adam, come back. I love you."

At six o'clock, Tom Hopkins charmed the kitchen staff out of a pot of coffee and three cups. As Victoria, James, and Hopkins sipped the strong, hot liquid they thanked the Lord that Adam was still alive.

Victoria ventured the question that had lingered on her mind for hours.

"He's made it through the night, do you think he will recover?" she asked, her eyes pleading.

Setting down his cup, Tom felt Adam's pulse.

"His heart is strong. I believe he has a good chance," he said confidently.

"How many times have I told you not to give a medical opinion?" The voice came from a middle-aged gray-haired man striding into the room, his white smock flapping in the breeze he created.

"Miss Winters, Mr. Colburn, this is Dr. Samuels. He's really a good guy, but he's much better after his first cup of coffee," Tom explained smiling. He filled a mug and held it out to the doctor.

Samuels took a big gulp of the steaming liquid.

"He's right, you know. I'm not much good until I pour down some of the eye opener they serve around here."

Victoria and James both smiled their greetings and stood back.

In two swallows, the doctor emptied the cup and set it on the bedside table. "I'm afraid it's going to take more than Bible reading and prayer to save your friend, miss." Samuels said bluntly as he bent over Adam, opening his eyelids and checking the pupils.

To his amazement, he saw the minister's eyes flicker. 'He can't be waking up, there's too much damage,' he said to himself. But even as he watched, Adam opened his eyes. They showed pain and confusion but Victoria thought they were the most beautiful sight she had ever seen.

"Adam, can you hear me?" she asked as she leaned over him, her voice hopeful.

"Yes," Adam said weakly. "I'm through the river."

"Amazing, simply amazing!" Samuels said, shaking his head, "He should be dead."

"You were asleep," Victoria said in a soothing voice.

"No."

"Oh yes, young man, you were quite out of it." Dr. Samuels assured him.

"No, I was in Heaven," Adam said, his face taking on a glow Samuels only saw on a few of his dying patients.

"It was glorious."

"Did you see the Lord?" Hopkins asked anxiously, his face brightening.

"Yes. He said he had much work for me to do." His voice trailed off and he closed his eyes, drifting into a peaceful sleep.

# RIVER OF FIRE

## Chapter 23

Adam continued to improve over the next few weeks with the exception of some severe headaches. Victoria had thought she loved Fred but now she knew what true love was. Adam's love for her grew as well until he felt his heart would burst. He had never felt this way about anyone; he felt like shouting it to the world.

Robert Jr. was true to his word. He fired the foreman at the sewing factory and hired Gertie. Gertie, as was her nature, worked with the women. She joked with them, asked about their families, and became almost like a second mother to them. Within a week, production jumped ten percent. The heating equipment was replaced and the windows were repaired. On the first of February, they broke ground for a new plant.

O'Malley continued to elude capture.

Mary went home to her mother in Pennsylvania.

Conway, brokenhearted over the whole affair, visited Adam every day to assure him constantly that his position as pastor of Market Street was secure.

With Doctor Samuels's help, Victoria was hired as a cook in the hospital kitchen. Word of Adam's recovery spread and it was often called 'miraculous'. Even the headaches

disappeared by the end of the second week. However, for all the other signs of progress, his legs refused to work.

One day at the end of January, Adam was reading his Bible. He sensed someone in his room and looking up, he saw Doctor Samuels regarding him with a grim expression.

"Come on, Doc, it can't be all that bad," Adam said smiling.

Samuels was quiet. Finally he said, "Adam, your spine is not healing properly. I'm sorry; I've done all I can do."

Adam was dumbfounded. He had been so sure the feeling in his legs would return.

"I'm afraid you'll never walk again."

The doctor turned and left but not before Adam saw his eyes fill with tears. In the hallway, Samuels leaned against the wall. What was wrong with him? As a physician during the Civil War, he had faced every tragedy unflinchingly. Now he was crying like a baby, all over a preacher who couldn't walk.

"Are you all right, doctor?"

He didn't hear the nurse come out of the patient's room.

"Yes of course. Go about your business, nurse," he said roughly, hoping his embarrassment didn't show.

Even as Adam's recovery progressed, his legs still refused to move. He grew more and more depressed. Was Samuels right? Surely God wouldn't bring him to Chicago just

to destroy him. He had refrained from mentioning his hospital stay in his letters to his mother. He didn't want to worry her and had figured he would write to her about it upon his release.

Now he did not want to write to her about his injuries and he wouldn't allow anyone else to do so. Many times he woke in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. The scenes from the dream came rushing back to him. He was walking in the hills back in Apple Valley. After a steep climb, he fished in a cool stream. Then he was falling.

During the day, he watched the traffic outside his window. Mothers pushing baby carriages, businessmen hurrying to their tasks. Young lovers walking hand in hand.

Victoria offered to push Adam around the hospital in the wheelchair, but he refused, claiming to be exhausted. One Wednesday night, she came into his room pushing a new wheelchair.

"Come on mister, get out of that bed," she ordered firmly yet gently. "I'm not taking 'no' for an answer."

He turned his back on her, his face a mask of rage.

"It's not fair!" he shouted, slamming his fist into his open palm. "I've served the Lord all my life and this is how He repays me." Adam reached down and slapped his unfeeling legs. "With these useless things."

Victoria took a step backward, surprised at Adam's sudden temper. Her face fell and the smile was wiped away.

"Why are you hanging around me? Why don't you go out and find a real man, one that can walk?"

Victoria felt as if Adam had struck her.

"I thought I had found a real man." she said quietly.

"Well you didn't . All you found was a cripple." Adam said furiously.

Bursting into tears, she fled from the room. Charging down the hallway, she ran into Tom Hopkins. The tray of dinnerware he was carrying went flying, the food and dishes falling to the floor.

Sobbing, Victoria stooped to pick up the broken pieces and promptly cut her thumb.

"Let me get them. That's a nasty cut."

After picking up the broken plates, Tom set the tray on a nearby table. "Wait here," he said and hurried away. He returned with a bottle of alcohol and a bandage and applied them to her wound. Then he took her arm and guided her to the lounge, and sat down opposite her.

"Now, what's wrong?" he asked, concerned.

"Oh Tom," Victoria sobbed. "Adam is giving up. He's becoming bitter against God. He's so much different than he was before."

"I know. I pray for him every day. All we can do is commit him to the Lord. God will bring him through this."

"I'm sure you're right, but I love him so much. It's hard to see him hurting." Victoria dried her eyes. "Will he ever walk again?"



"I don't know," Tom answered honestly. "Doctor Samuels says he won't, but all things are possible with the Lord."

After disposing of the tray of broken dishes in the kitchen and receiving a thorough tongue lashing for being so clumsy, Tom headed in the direction of Adam's room. Stepping around the bed, he looked down at the sulking preacher.

He stood at the foot of the bed for a full thirty seconds before Adam spoke up.

"Well, what are you staring at?"

"I just wanted to see what a sorry Christian looked like," Tom shot back.

"What do you mean?" Adam snarled, glaring at him.

"Did you know Victoria paid for that wheelchair with her own money?" he asked, indicating the mode of transportation in the corner. "She came to work early and stayed late for weeks. She walked to work through the snow to save car fare and you treat her like this."

"Listen, I . . ." Adam began, chastised.

"No, you listen," Hopkins said firmly. "God has given you a wonderful gift. You're a pastor, a shepherd. He's also given you a beautiful Christian woman who loves you with all her heart. If you can't see how blessed you are, I feel sorry for you."

Whirling, he stomped out, leaving Adam speechless.

"Who does he think he is?" Adam muttered to the empty room. For the next hour, Bible verses came to Adam's mind constantly. He tried to stop the flow, to deny the extent of God's love, but in the end, he surrendered.

Three hours later as Tom made his rounds, he found Adam sitting on the edge of his bed. He was picking up his legs, dropping them, and lifting them again. Seeing Tom, he smiled.

"I better get them working if I'm going to walk down the aisle with my bride."

"She'll sure make a lovely one too." Tom said, returning Adam's smile.

"Help me get into my new chair, would you, Tom?"

"Sure thing, Pastor," Tom said, emphasizing the last word.

"And would you bring me a pen and paper? I think it's about time I wrote to my mother."

"Right away," Tom said cheerfully. "I'm sorry I spoke so rough to you a while ago."

"I'm not," Adam said emphatically. "As Christians, we need to love each other enough to speak the truth."

"You just needed someone to push you in the right direction," Tom said as he started to change the sheets on Adam's bed.

"Speaking of a push in the right direction," Adam said grinning, "Would you show me where the kitchen is?"

"You bet!" Tom grinned, leaving the bed unmade. He took the handles of the wheelchair and propelled Adam down the short hall.

The next day when Victoria came to work, Adam was waiting for her. She had spent a restless night but with the dawn came a new determination. She marched up to Adam, resolved to have it out with him.

"You're not the only one that has problems," she said hotly. "A young mother brought her little boy in yesterday. He died two hours later. Then there's Miss Chapman in 105, she's all alone and doesn't even have any legs. Then. . . then... then," her voice trailed off and in spite of her vow, the tears returned full force.

"You're absolutely right," Adam agreed. "I'm very fortunate. Only one thing could make my life complete."

"What...what is that?" Victoria asked, her voice trembling. She wiped tears from her eyes.

"If the woman I love would agree to marry me. Victoria, will you be my wife?"

The tears returned but they were tears of joy.

"Yes. Oh yes," she cried, hugging him tightly.

## RIVER OF FIRE

### Chapter 24

When the letter arrived from Adam, Edna tore open the envelope. As her eyes scanned the contents, she almost collapsed on the street. The letter told all about the shooting and his injuries. Hurriedly, she made arrangements to leave for Chicago. After making plans for Paul Murray's son to care for the livestock, she boarded the first train out of Apple Valley.

James met her at the station with a horse and buggy the church had recently acquired. Edna fell in love with Victoria immediately. She could sense her gentle, kind nature, and her flashing green eyes fairly shone when she spoke of Adam. When she met Gertie, they hit it off instantly; it was as if they had known each other all their lives.

Before Adam was released from the hospital, James remade the parlor into a bedroom. Adam accepted the new living arrangements with the understanding that it was only temporary.

Adam wasn't sure what to expect his first Sunday back at the church; the O'Malleys were almost an institution there. He started to wheel himself from his office, having spent the morning in prayer. His Bible and sermon notes lay on the seat beside him. Elijah and James met him at the door, both of them unsmiling.

"You best wait here fur a little while, preacher," Elijah said and blocked the doorway.

"We'll take you out when it's time," James agreed, standing at his father's side.

Adam's heart dropped. Why did he think the people would believe him and not O'Malley? His eyes moistened; he was sure this would be his last Sunday.

They waited while Adam with each passing moment became more and more anxious. Then he heard steps coming down the hallway.

Robert Michaels and Conway O'Malley appeared behind James and Elijah. Both men seemed glum.

"We're ready," Conway reported soberly.

"What's going on, fellows?" Adam asked with a slight smile. The smile faltered and died when no one answered.

Instead, James moved behind him as he pushed him out of the office and down the hallway. Conway walked ahead of them, leading the way and Elijah and Michaels fell in step behind. Adam felt as though he were going to his execution. Conway stopped at the door leading to the sanctuary.

"Here we go gentlemen," he said and swung the door open wide.

If he could have, Adam would have turned and ran.

The auditorium was filled to capacity; chairs had even been set up in the back and sides. Every available space was covered. Victoria, Gertie, his mother, Ben Hastings, and Paul Murray occupied the front pew.

Adam's eyes scanned the church, seeing all the familiar faces, trying to read the expressions on their faces. Some were sober, some had a hint of a smile. A nod here and there. He thought his heart would beat out of his chest. It seemed like forever before they reached the front of the church. James parked the wheelchair before the altar with Adam facing the crowd.

When he was positioned beneath the pulpit, Conway, Elijah and James stepped back.

Then it happened.

As if in one motion, the congregation rose to their feet. A few began clapping their hands. Then it spread like wildfire. Everyone was on their feet, applauding, smiling. Some ladies waved their lace handkerchiefs in air. A few wiped tears from their eyes. The sound was almost deafening in the domed church.

Adam could not believe his eyes and ears. He was tempted to cover his ears, it was so loud. Adam's heart swelled in his chest. He looked behind him to see the three men joining in the applause and smiling. Conway stepped up and patted him on the back. Adam waved at the crowd. Unashamedly, he wiped tears from his eyes as well. Why had he ever doubted the Lord? The organ swelled as the choir lifted their voices in 'Amazing Grace'. As the applause died away, the congregation joined the choir on the last verse of the song.

Adam's gaze turned to Victoria. He watched as she dabbed her eyes then mouthed 'I love you'. Looking at the smiling faces, Adam opened his mouth to speak but the words would not come. Finally he managed to get his emotions under control and his voice returned.

"How can I thank you?" Adam asked.

"Make the sermon short, preacher!" Ben Hastings called out. "There's a passel of vittles back there," he said, motioning toward the fellowship hall.

His comments were greeted with a roar of laughter.

Adam smiled. Ben always had a way with words.

"Dear friends," Adam began, "the Lord has brought about a wonderful change in this church. In the second chapter of Acts, God sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in the hearts of men. The change was miraculous. Before, Peter had denied the Lord; now he became bold as a lion. Three thousand souls were saved that first day. A few days later, about five thousand men saved, we do not know how many women and children. Beyond our doors lies the city of Chicago. Can we do less than what our Lord asks of us - - to go into all the world and preach the gospel to everyone?"

Adam caught a glimpse of a hobo in the back of the church. His eyes showed hatred and distrust. The long, scraggly beard covering most of his face was caked with grime. The dirty collar of his floor-length coat was turned up against his neck and the brim of his worn hat was pulled down over his forehead.

Two months ago, he would not have been welcomed on the steps of the church, let alone inside. Hands shoved deep into his pockets, he fingered the pistol. When he had come in, Conway welcomed him and offered to take him to a pew. He shook his head, not daring to speak. Conway left after telling him to sit anywhere he could find an empty seat if he changed his mind.

Shane O'Malley smiled under the heavy beard. Even his own son did not recognize him.

As the sermon ended and the invitation began, he slipped out. The timing was not right. He would come back later.

Back in his office, Adam tried to relax. His head, neck and shoulders ached but his spirit was soaring. The food was fantastic, the fellowship blessed. The deacons' meeting was as it should be, a time of cooperation and looking forward to the things God had planned for the church. The new deacons, Ken Larsen and Frank Marshall, agreed with Adam, Robert and Conway to help out the Pacific Garden Mission.

Adam closed his eyes in prayer. A few minutes later, he heard the door open. He turned the chair to face it. Standing just inside was the hobo, his dirty coat brushing against his pant legs. Snow pooled on the floor. The man stepped further into the office.

Adam smiled his greeting. "May I help you?"

The hobo put his hand in his coat pocket. With his left, he removed his hat. His right hand came out gripping a large caliber pistol.

Adam spoke softly. "There's no need to rob us; we will help you any way we can."

The man just laughed and sneered.

"I've seen your kind of help before, Wakefield, and I'll have none of it," he said with a Scottish accent.



"O'Malley!" Adam said softly, feeling trapped.

"I can see the fear in your eyes," O'Malley snorted. "All that talk about going to heaven and not being afraid to die is just so much garbage."

"Shane, I admit that death does hold a certain amount of fear but I know that I'm

going to Heaven. Do you?"

"Heaven," O'Malley repeated, waving the gun around, "I had my Heaven right here on earth before you and Peabody ruined it."

"Peabody?"

O'Malley cursed. "Haven't figured that one out yet, 'eh? He wanted a bigger piece of the pie; all he got was a pillow in the face."

"Just like me," Adam said thoughtfully, remembering that day in the hospital.

"No," O'Malley retorted, frustrated, "he died."

"Why did you want me as your pastor?"

"Because you were a dumb hillbilly."

Down the hallway, Elijah heard the voices and signaled to James.

"O'Malley, he got a gun." Elijah whispered harshly. James eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.

"He done gonna kill the preacher."

"I'll go get a policeman." James said. Galvanized into action, he started down the hall.

Elijah shook his head. "Ain't 'nuf time, he's gonna shoot 'im now!"

"What can we do?"

Elijah thought for a minute.

"I gos in like I gots ta talk to the preacher, you sneak up behind O'Malley and

clobber 'im over the head with something."

"What will I hit him with?"

"Anything you kin find, jest you hit 'em fur all you're worth."

"I. . ." James began but his father was gone down the hallway whistling.

O'Malley cocked the gun. Adam knew his time on earth was short.

"Hey preacher, you want I should get this feller somethin' to eat?"

Elijah was in the office before Adam or O'Malley knew it. Outside, James searched desperately for something with which to hit O'Malley.

"Well, if it isn't my old friend Elijah," O'Malley said, pointing the gun at Elijah's chest.

"Does I know you?" Elijah asked innocently, leaning toward Shane.

"Of course you know me, you stupid old fool!"

James' hand closed on a heavy brass cross. Clutching it, he ran for the office.

"Let me tell you one thing, O'Malley," Elijah said, pointing a bony finger at Shane, "You don't scare me no more."

"Elijah, get back, he'll kill you," Adam cried.

"I'll finish you in a minute, right after I get rid of this minister," O'Malley said. Swinging the gun back to Adam, he squeezed the trigger.

As the gun exploded, Elijah jumped in front of Adam. In that same instant, James hit O'Malley with the heavy cross. Thrown back by the bullet in his chest, Elijah fell across Adam's lap dead.

James screamed. Adam knew if he lived to be a hundred, he would never forget James' cries, and Elijah's sacrifice.

## RIVER OF FIRE

### Chapter 25

Adam reached up and grasped the edges of the tall pulpit. He pulled himself up out of his wheelchair, his eyes sweeping the sea of black and white faces. Market Street Church was filled to overflowing. Newspapers from as far away as St. Louis carried the story of the janitor who gave his life for his pastor. People came in droves, some waited on the church steps for hours to file by Elijah's coffin.

The night before, Adam had sat beside the casket speaking to his old friend. He knew Elijah was in Heaven and could not hear him but he hoped in this case the Lord would make an exception.

"The Lord is doing a marvelous work in the people's hearts, Elijah. Yesterday, Robert Michaels donated his old factory building for the settlement house. As soon as the workers are in the new factory, he will have crews come in to fix it up at his expense. I've spoken to Shane O'Malley in his jail cell. I wish I could tell you he's sorry for what he did but he's not. The police chief says they have strong evidence he killed his first wife. Conway is taking it hard, losing his mother all over again and he is sure they will hang his father. James is really hurting, too. He blames himself for taking so long to find something to bring Shane down with. You would be so proud of him. He and Conway are comforting one another."

Now at Elijah's funeral, Adam's tear-filled eyes swept the sanctuary.

"My friends," he began, his voice choked with emotion. "I stand before you today to honor one who gave his life for me. Elijah gave me a great gift and for whatever time I have left on this earth, I will cherish his sacrifice. He was a wonderful friend who never thought twice about helping someone in trouble. Elijah gave until there was nothing left to give but his life, and then he gave that. If our friend was here today, he would remind you of one who also gave Himself for us and washed away our sins with His blood. According to the 14th chapter of John, Elijah is in his home in Heaven. Are you assured of a place there, or will the mansion that Christ is building for you be empty?"

Knowing the Inquiry Room would never hold them all, Adam asked those who would like to receive Christ as their Savior to raise their hands. People lifted their hands in the air all over the sanctuary, the choir loft, and even into the foyer. Adam raised streaming eyes heavenward.

"This is your triumph, old friend," he said softly.

That day, Elijah saw one hundred and fifty-seven souls brought into the kingdom.

Feeling it was too soon after Elijah's death, Adam and Victoria decided to postpone the wedding until June 10. Promising to be back the last week of May, Edna returned to Apple Valley. Gertie was as excited as a bride herself and insisted on making the wedding gown. Each night she would seclude herself in her room to sew for hours, coming out occasionally to share a cup of tea with Victoria.

At the end of the week, she brought out the finished dress. She held it up before an ecstatic bride. Tears filling her eyes, Victoria rushed to her room to try on the garment. She gasped at her reflection in the mirror. Made of the creamiest white material, it had a bodice of silk, pearl buttons down the front, a stand-up collar, and rows of lace on the skirt. The long sheer sleeves had cuffs with pearl buttons and a ribbon was tied in the back in a bow.

Victoria felt like the most blessed girl in the world. She had never dreamed she would have such a beautiful gown in her life.

"Oh Aunt Gertie, it's the most gorgeous wedding dress I've ever seen," she said, running out and throwing her arms around the elderly lady.

"No, no," Gertie admonished gently. "Be careful or you'll wrinkle it."

Adam thought there was nothing more to a wedding than standing before a preacher, but he quickly found out different. Aunt Gertie's minister, Pastor Clark, happily agreed to perform the ceremony. Keeping her promise, Edna arrived the 28th of May. Adam had looked forward so much to her coming, hoping to spend some time with her.

Upon her arrival, she was determined to help in any way she could.

"Adam, there's so much to do," she declared, mentally checking off a list and counting on her fingers.

"What is there to do?" he asked innocently, truly confused. "Maybe we can go sightseeing if there's time before the wedding."

"Well, for one thing, there's the guest list."

"Just tell them all to come."

She shook her head, looking at him as if he had lost his mind. A few days before the wedding, James seemed to be as busy as the women. He gave the house a thorough cleaning and supervised the new janitor. He baked for days until Adam thought he was opening his own bakery. The women of the church spent hours decorating the sanctuary. Fresh flowers were arranged in beautiful vases and placed in appropriate places. Candles were put in their holders at the altar, windows washed, and floors scrubbed.

Unable to sleep, Victoria was up at dawn. Gertie finally persuaded her to eat something. She packed, unpacked, and repacked her suitcase so many times Gertie became exasperated with her.

"For goodness sakes, Victoria," she said, "your clothes are going to have a permanent crease."

Victoria smiled. Repacking her bag, she finally left it alone.

Arriving at the church, they met Edna at the back door. She took Victoria's hands in hers.

Stepping back she exclaimed, "My, but aren't you beautiful?" She carefully hugged the blushing girl. "I always wanted a daughter," she whispered in Victoria's ear. "Today that dream comes true."

Standing at the back of the sanctuary, Victoria had a moment of panic. The wedding march was playing but Adam

was not at the altar. A movement behind her caught her eye. Supported by James on one side and Conway on the other, Adam stepped up and took his place on her right side. They smiled at each other, tears in both their eyes.

Conway moved away as Victoria took his place supporting Adam on his left side, James on the right. They walked down the aisle.



## Epilogue

"Should I get the door?" James asked, aware that Victoria liked to answer the door in her own home.

"No, I'll get it. Thank you James."

"Very good, Mrs. Wakefield," he said smiling. She could have insisted he call her 'Victoria' but she loved the sound of her married name. It thrilled her heart each time she heard it. She belonged to Adam and he belonged to her.

She was not sure what to expect each time she answered the door. A member of the congregation seeking guidance or someone from the new settlement house asking for assistance. Maybe a hobo looking for a hot meal. Now that it was summer, many were traveling through the city. Sometimes it seemed that they all stopped at Market Street but no one was ever turned away.

Upon opening the door, Victoria's heart leapt in her throat. She forced a smile.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hayman. Billy. It's wonderful to see you again," she said, hoping the Lord would forgive her for telling a white lie.

Owen Hayman held his hat in his hands, his knuckles turning white. His face was scarlet under his beard. Billy looked as if he were seconds away from bawling.

"Please come in," she said quietly.

When they were seated in the parlor, she asked, "Will you be in Chicago long?"

"No," Owen said. "I don't hold much with big cities. We've jest come up to see you."

"How nice," Victoria said, her smile becoming more strained.

"Ain't nothing like that," he said as if he could read her thoughts. "We . . ." He looked to his wife for help.

"We was wrong," Jenny Hayman said. "You didn't hurt our Billy."

Finally, Billy could stand it no more. He leapt to his feet, ran to Victoria, and threw his arms around her neck.

"I didn't want to say them things," he sobbed, his body shaking. "Whitey said he'd hurt my ma if I didn't do what he said. I love you. You're the best teacher I ever had."

Hugging the little boy to her, Victoria ran her hands over the back of his head.

"It's all right, Billy. I understand. I love you, too," she said softly. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she held the boy tightly and comforted him.

Victoria felt a sense of relief and compassion wash over her soul.

"We'un's found out who it was put Whitey up to it. They're a'paying for it

now."

"Was it Mr. Anderson?"

"Yup. Him and that scoundrel Maples."

"It was jest as you figured," Jenny Hayman said.

"How did you find out?" Victoria asked, drying Billy's tears with a lace handkerchief.

"That's the good part. Tell her, pa," Billy said grinning.

"Hurly caught 'em," Owen said smiling

"Hurley the teller?"

"No ma'am, Hurley the Pinkerton man. He was put there by the one that owned the bank. They're gonna be in prison for a long time."

"I got somethin' fur ya," Jenny replied, reaching into her handbag. She held her hand out. "I know you was a'lookin' fur it."

Victoria's hand flew to her mouth. "How did you...? Where did you...?"

Nestled in Jenny's hand was the brooch that had belonged to Victoria's mother.

"That conniving Maples had it in his desk drawer."

"Thank you," Victoria said as she hugging the couple, tears flowing down her cheeks. "Thank you all."

Adam came home two hours after the Haymans had gone. His eyes sparkling, he said, "Five more souls for the kingdom at the settlement house today."

"Oh darling, that's wonderful," Victoria said.

Laying his cane against the wall, he enfolded her in his arms. She laid her head against his chest and listened to his heartbeat. Doctor Samuels said he would never walk without the cane but they had faith to believe he would. After all, Doctor Samuels was just a babe in Christ. He had finally listened to Tom Hopkins and turned his life over to The Lord.

Later as they relaxed over glasses of tea, Adam said, "When I was in the river of fire, I didn't want to come back. I wanted to stay in heaven," he said.

Standing up, he took her in his arms and kissed the top of her head. "But then I heard your voice calling me. I just had to come back. I am so glad I did."

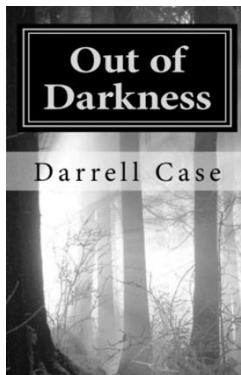
"So am I," she murmured against his chest. "So am I."

## The Beginning

## More from Darrell Case

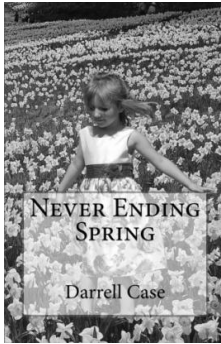


The D C Killer is hiding... in the White House. Jerold Robbins is handsome, rich President of the United States and a Serial Killer. Eighteen women have been found floating in the Potomac. Their bodies slashed and weighted down with concrete blocks.

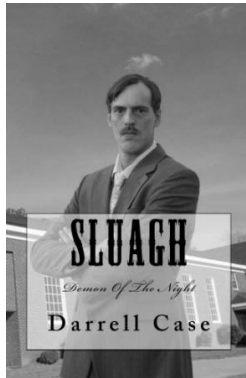


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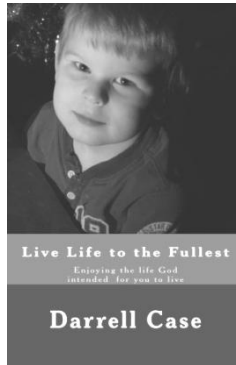
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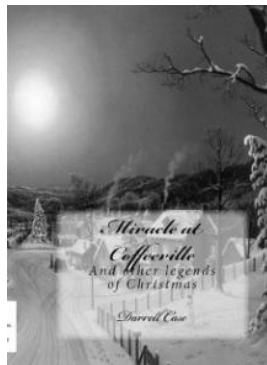
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Dear Reader:

I trust that you liked *River of Fire*. As I said, I wrote it several years ago. I put it away as I considered it too short. It would still be there if not for my wife. She felt it too good a story to be hidden. Well, it's out. I hope you enjoyed meeting Adam and Victoria. I've thought of writing a sequel, but will hold off until I see how this one does. May God richly bless you.

*Darrell*



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Darrell Case is the author of several books. He and his wife Connie live in central Indiana.

For news on Darrell's latest books excerpts and free offers visit <http://darrellcase.com>