

Never Ending Spring

Darrell Case



Proverbs 11:30

Leaning Tree Christian Publishers

Farmersburg, IN. 47850

Never Ending Spring

Never Ending Spring

Copyright © 2012 by Darrell Case

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means – electronic, mechanical, photographic (photo-copying), recording, or otherwise – without prior permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America
ISBN: 978-1481054478

All quotations are from the King James Bible

Learn more information at:
www.darrellcase.com

Dedicated to

The Lord who loves me and shed
His blood for me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks go to those who helped put this book together. To my wife who urged me to keep going when I wanted to quit. To Justin Davis of Davis Designs for creating the wonderful book cover. Special thanks to Ariana Kelsheimer for modeling the cover. To Tim Woodward who did an excellent job of editing. To my Lord who guided me through the process of writing and publication. And of course to you the reader, without whom there would not be a reason to write. *Never Ending Spring* is completed. Let's pray God will use this book for His glory.

Contents

Chapter 1	Page 7
Chapter 2	Page 24
Chapter 3	Page 29
Chapter 4	Page 38
Chapter 5	Page 45
Chapter 6	Page 54
Chapter 7	Page 60
Chapter 8	Page 66
Chapter 9	Page 71
Chapter 10	Page 77
Chapter 11	Page 83
Chapter 12	Page 90
Chapter 13	Page 97
Chapter 14	Page 105
Chapter 15	Page 109
Chapter 16	Page 116
Chapter 17	Page 124
Chapter 18	Page 130
Chapter 19	Page 136
Chapter 20	Page 142
Chapter 21	Page 150
Chapter 22	Page 156
Chapter 23	Page 163
Chapter 24	Page 170

Chapter 25	Page 176
Chapter 26	Page 185
Chapter 27	Page 191
Chapter 28	Page 197
Dear Reader	Page 211

Never Ending Spring

Prologue

May 17, 1949

Pulling the patrol car off Mill Creek Road into the weed-infested driveway, Sheriff Bob Curry said a silent prayer, "Lord, they don't need this right now. You know the Browns have enough trouble." He sighed and switched off the engine.

The curtains in the front window moved. Someone was watching. Such an action any other time would make Curry wary, but not today. The Browns were harmless. He hated death notifications, especially this one. He felt it was his fault their son Dennis was dead. He was the one who had suggested old man Miller press charges.

"You know, Sheriff, that fence ain't worth much. A little paint might do it some good," Miller had said.

"Well, with the words that young scalawag wrote on it, it's gonna have to be painted," Curry said, wagging his head. "Tell you what. I know the Browns can't afford the paint, so I'll see if the county can spring for it and we'll let Dennis cool his heels in jail for a couple of nights and paint your fence during the day."

The deal had been struck, and now Dennis was dead.

The front door opened and Katy Brown stepped onto the rickety porch. She clutched her threadbare robe to herself with one hand and held onto the peeling railing

with the other. She searched the interior of the patrol car with a mother's eyes as Bob Curry walked across the overgrown lawn.

"Morning, Mrs. Brown," he said, squinting up at the gray-haired woman.

"Where's Denny? I thought you said he finished the fence yesterday."

"Well, yes ma'am, he did."

"Then why ain't he with ye? You said you'd bring him by in time for school and its nigh onto ten o'clock."

"I'm sorry Mrs. Brown. I've got some bad news for you. Can I come in and talk to you and Don?"

"Now, Sheriff you know well's I do that fight weren't Denny's fault. Them big boys at the jail goaded him into takin' the first swing. You ain't gonna hold him because of that, are ye?" She stood to the side to let him enter. Removing his hat, Bob ducked his head and stepped into the dingy living room. Don Brown sat on the shabby couch, his face lined with pain.

"How's the back this morning, Don?" Bob asked.

"Not good. I didn't get much sleep last night with it a-painin' me."

Sucking in his breath, Curry said, "Well folks, there's no easy way to say it. Dennis hung himself last night. The night man found him about five this morning. We tried to bring him back, but it was too late."

"You're a-funnin' us," Don said, tears misting his eyes.

"You're wrong, it's gotta be some other boy. Denny wouldn't do that. Not over some rickety old fence," Katy Brown said.

"I'm sorry. There's no mistake. It's Dennis all right," Bob said, turning his hat by the brim.

"NO, NO, NO!" Katie screamed. "Not my baby! No!" She collapsed on the couch, bawling hysterically.

Don raised his cane and pointed it shakily at the sheriff. "You mark my words, somebody killed my boy. Iff'n I was half the man I used to be, I'd be down at that jail and I'd find out who they is."

They laid Denny out in the living room in a pine box hastily constructed by his Uncle Jimmy. Feeling awkward about facing the Browns in their home again, Bob waited on the roadside while they loaded the casket into an old station wagon. When they pulled out of the yard, he turned on the bubble and led the three-car procession the mile and a half to the small cemetery where Denny's granddaddy and grandma lay.

After they put Denny in the ground, Jimmy approached Curry. They had known each other a long time, although throughout that time Curry was on one side of the law and Jimmy on the other. As much as he tried, Jimmy could not stay off the alcohol.

"You got your nerve coming here, Curry," Jimmy said, bringing his face inches from Bob's. The smell of cheap beer was overpowering.

"I came to pay my respects."

"Iff'n you had any respect, Denny wouldn't be in that box." Jimmy took a step closer, his nose almost touching the sheriff's face.

"Go home, Jimmy. I don't want to have to arrest you today." Turning away, Bob opened the door to his patrol car.

"This ain't over, sheriff. No sir, it ain't over by a long shot." Jimmy stood staring at the patrol car until it disappeared over the hill.

Chapter 1

The man glanced at his watch and cursed under his breath. If he didn't leave soon, he'd be trapped. This was the latest he had waited. The preacher always came to his office in the church before daybreak, letting his wife and daughter sleep while he studied the Bible. Yet for the last two days, this murderer had waited in vain. In another 20 minutes, the sun would be up. Gray light streaked through the cathedral style windows, casting shadows off the old wooden pews that made the man see snakes in his head.

"This place is creepy. Can't wait to get out of here," he whispered. Even the sound of his voice seemed alien in this place.

In the parsonage, a single light burned. The sweet smell of roses wafted through the open windows to mix with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. Light from the gorgeous sunrise was becoming stronger. The man paced the aisles, pausing every few minutes to stare at the little house across the churchyard.

A painful memory returned. He shivered. As a small child, he would hide in his secret place, barely moving, waiting there for hours to avoid a beating from his father. To pass the time, he would play games in his mind. He did that now, mentally picturing Denny Brown's killing over and over again. This was the third night in a row he would wait in the darkness. With each moment passing after dawn, the danger of being found out became greater.

What if that stupid preacher talked? He was terrified that if Mays told anyone, he'd be arrested. Even if by some miracle he didn't go to prison, his life would be ruined.

If only he hadn't been drinking that night. If only he'd kept his mouth shut. The death of Dennis Brown weighed on his mind. He felt he had to tell someone, and pastors were supposed to hold everything you said to them in confidence. He tried to explain to the preacher that it was an accident. He never meant to kill Dennis. Mays gave him an ultimatum: Go to the sheriff or else he would.

Well, it was too late for that now. Last Monday, he saw Pastor Jim sneaking around the jail talking to Curry. He tried to weasel what they were saying out of the sheriff, but Curry just smiled and said it had something to do with the church. They could try to fool him, but he knew, yes sir, he knew.

The voices in his head started up again. He was tempted to answer them, but that would just cause an argument. There was only one way to handle the problem. He got up and stretched his cramped muscles. He paced the aisle, always staying in the shadows. His whole life that's where he'd been, living in the shadows.

In the parsonage, Kristie Mays poured herself a second cup of coffee. She smiled at her husband as she added sugar and cream. "Which way should we go?" she asked, looking over Jim's right shoulder. Her crystal blue eyes sparkled with excitement.

Smoothing the crinkled map, Jim replied, "I'd like to take the scenic route through Illinois, then cross the river at Hudsonville and go south. But it'll cut out several miles if we take Highway 41. I have to be back by seven to put the finishing touches on my sermon."

"Honey, you work too hard. Please try to slow down this summer," Kristie said, massaging his back and shoulders.

"I'll try, sweetheart," Jim said, turning to take her in his arms. "If you promise to do the same."

"Hey, I told you first!" Kristie said, smiling. She pushed herself back as her fingers danced across Jim's ribs.

Jim dropped the half-folded map and made a grab for her, his hands closing on empty air. He chased her through the house five times before he caught her, but when he did Jim was unmerciful. He tickled until she was screaming. Kristie tried unsuccessfully to defend herself.

"I give, I give," she cried between tears and laughter. That was their signal she'd had enough. Pulling Kristie to her feet, Jim wrapped his arms around her.

"Oh, honey, I'm so glad I married you. I love you so much," she said, burying her head in his chest.

"I'm glad you did too, sweetheart," Jim whispered, kissing her lightly. "I love you."

"Last night was wonderful, the dinner was magnificent, the moonlight walk. How do think Emily will react when the baby comes in December?"

"She'll love him, like she does everyone."

"Hey, how do you know it's going to be a him?"

"Because I asked God for a son," Jim said, grinning and patting Kristie's stomach. "My own little preacher boy."

The man cringed at the laughter coming from the parsonage. He hated it when people laughed. He knew he was the butt of their jokes. He rose and stretched his cramped muscles. He would be back tonight. Maybe the preacher would be working late. He wished there was

some other way but, well, he'd already committed one murder. What was one more?

He was about to sneak out of the church when he heard the parsonage screen door slam. Drawing deeper into the shadows, he looked out the side window at the parsonage. Yes, there was Jim strolling across the adjoining lawns, whistling a tune the man recognized from his childhood.

He snorted. "Amazing grace. Yeah, you're gonna need amazing grace today," he huffed as he eased the hunting knife out of its sheath.

Reverend James Mays, "Pastor Jim" to his congregation, loved pastoring Elm Grove Community Church. The country people were so kind and hard-working, yet they always had time for the Lord. Jim's blonde hair and blue eyes were an exact match to Kristie's and their six-year-old daughter, Emily's. Some of his people jokingly said they looked like an advertisement for a popular brand of hair coloring. Jim's patient, gentle manner made him the perfect shepherd for the laid-back country church.

Jim smiled. What a great day to be alive. The warm rising sun felt good on his face. The early morning light filtered through the leaves of the tall oaks behind the church.

With their daughter staying at her grandparents' home last night, he and Kristie had been able to spend a rare night alone. His dear little wife went all out creating a superb meal. It was his favorite: pork chops, corn, baked potato, green beans and apple pie. Afterwards they strolled hand-in-hand down the road in the light of a full moon. As they passed Kristie's parents' house, they could hear Emily singing.

Jesus loves me, this I know

For the Bible tells me so

Little ones to Him belong

They are weak but He is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me

Yes, Jesus loves me

Yes, Jesus loves me,

The Bible tells me so.

Husband and wife, mother and father listened intently, smiling in the moonlight. Before the end of the year Jim would be a father again. What a great Christmas gift.

As Jim reached for the doorknob, Kristie called, "Hon, don't forget the cooler. It's in the closet of your Sunday School room."

"Okay, dear." Turning, Jim saw something flash in the sunlight and felt a sharp, agonizing pain in his chest. "Ahhhhhhhh!" he screamed. In shock and disbelief, he saw his murderer withdraw into the church.

Looking out the kitchen window, Kristie saw her husband fall to the ground. She dropped the plate she was washing and it shattered on the floor. Heart attack. The thought ripped through her mind. Tearing out of the

kitchen, she screamed, "Jim, Jim, oh, dear Lord help him!" Running to his side, she dropped to her knees and cradled her dying husband in her arms. When she saw the blood oozing from his chest, she screamed in horror. Caught up in shock and anguish, she didn't notice the man step from the church with a hunting knife in his raised hand. He brought it down, stabbing Kristie again and again in the back. She fell across her husband, their blood mingling as it pooled on the ground.

"How much longer will they be, Gram?" Emily asked for the third time in as many minutes. Her eager blue eyes shone up at her grandmother. She hugged her doll close to herself.

"Soon, honey, soon," Ruth Johnson said absently as she washed the breakfast dishes. She kept her face turned away, trying to hide her worried expression from the little girl. From where she stood, she could see the spire of the Elm Grove Community Church rising over the sea of corn in the surrounding fields.

"Why is it taking so long? Mommy and Daddy are going to see Mrs. Skinner this morning before we go to the zoo," Emily said. "She's been sick, you know." Emily liked Mrs. Skinner. Whenever Daddy and Mommy would take her with them to visit with her, she always gave Emily a cookie and a glass of ice cold milk.

"Yes dear, I know. Emily, why don't you watch for Mommy and Daddy on the front porch? You can sit on the swing, but wait 'til Daddy stops the car before you run out to them, okay?"

"Okay Gram."

Emily picked up her Bible storybook, hugging it to her. It was the one with the pictures of all the animals, including the two lions, going into the Ark. She struggled to carry both her doll and the book. Today at the zoo she would see a real lion. Daddy had promised her, and Daddy always kept his promises.

Shutting the wood framed screen door carefully so it wouldn't slam, Emily perched on the edge of the swing so she could run to her parents as soon as Daddy stopped the car.

Watching her granddaughter, Ruth stepped to the back door. "Jack, something's wrong. They should have been here forty-five minutes ago," Ruth said, concern lining her face.

Avoiding his wife's eyes, Samuel "Jack" Johnson continued to whittle the ax handle he was making to replace the one broken last week. A tall, muscular man in his mid-50s, his white hair and deeply lined face made him look older.

"Now dear, they probably just got delayed, or maybe they had another sick call to make." Jack tried to sound convincing, but he couldn't shake the sickening feeling he'd had since he realized how late they were. It reminded him of the day Rickie died.

"It's not like Kristie and Jim not to call if they're delayed. They know how much Emily's been looking forward to this."

"I'll call the Skinners. Maybe they went there first. Mary might have taken a turn for the worse," Jack said, laying aside the handle. Stepping into the kitchen, he picked up the receiver on the old wall phone and spun the

crank. "Harriett, get me the Skinners, would you please?" he said into the mouthpiece.

"I'll be happy to, Jack. How's everybody at your house this fine summer day?"

"To tell you the truth we're kinda worried. Kristie and Jim were supposed to pick up Emily an hour ago. You haven't heard anything from them, have you?"

"No I haven't, Jack. Let me know if you hear from them. I hope everything's all right."

"I'm sure he probably just got to talking."

"I'll connect you, Jack."

Bill Skinner answered on the first ring. "Bill, how's Mary doing this morning?" Jack asked right away.

"Oh, she's doing a lot better, thank you. Are Pastor Jim and Kristie going to stop by before they go to the zoo?" Bill asked.

"Why? Haven't they been there yet?" Jack asked, his anger rising.

"No. I hope everything is all right," Bill said.

"They're probably still at the house."

"I called but there was no answer," Bill said.

"Maybe they're over at the church. I'll drive down and see. Thanks, Bill."

Jack slammed the phone back on its hook before Bill could answer. "What's wrong?" Ruth asked, nervously wiping her dry hands on her apron.

"That stupid son-in-law of yours is still fooling around at the church. I told Kristie not to marry a preacher. You stay here with Emily. I'm going to have a talk with him."

"Now Jack, take it easy," Ruth said. Her words were lost on him as he was already out the door and halfway to his old pickup. Starting the engine, he backed out of the driveway carefully while keeping an eye on his granddaughter. On the short drive to the church, he tried to calm himself. He never wanted Kristie to marry a preacher. All they cared about was money.

Pulling into the driveway of the parsonage, Jack parked behind Jim and Kristie's green Buick. Glancing into the open trunk, he saw it was crammed almost to capacity with balls, bats, blankets and a picnic basket.

After hammering on the front door and receiving no response, Jack walked into the living room. "Jim! Kristie! Where are you?"

No answer.

As Jack called out, his apprehension grew. The house was eerily quiet. Entering the kitchen, he noticed the table littered with dirty dishes and the coffee pot still on. Apprehension became fear. A flawless housekeeper like her mother, Kristie would never leave her kitchen like that. Jack's heart jumped into his throat when he noticed the shattered dish on the floor. Opening the back door, he saw two figures lying on the ground at the back door of the church. A cry as piercing as a wounded animal's tore from his throat.

"Kristie! No, no! Kristie!" he screamed. Falling to his knees beside his daughter, he shuttered to see the back of her white blouse drenched with blood. His heart torn open, Jack gently turned her over and held her in his arms. Her eyes opened slightly and she searched his face, smiling weakly.

"Dad, is that you? Please tell me, is Jim alive?" Her voice was so weak Jack had to nearly press his ear to her mouth to hear.

Laying her gently on the ground, Jack said, "Stay with me, honey, you hold on. I'll be right back." Feeling Jim's wrist for a pulse and finding none, Jack stumbled back to the house. Whirling the crank, he shouted into the phone, "Harriett, send an ambulance and the sheriff down to the church! Hurry!"

Not waiting for an answer, he slammed the phone onto its hook and ran out. Flying across the yard, Jack knelt at Kristie's side and cradled her head in his lap. He made no attempt to stop the tears from flowing down his cheeks.

"Dad, what about Jim?" Kristie moaned, weaker this time. "He's gone, isn't he?" she whispered, her eyes filling with tears.

"Yes, honey, I'm sorry, he is."

"Dad, tell Mom I love her. Please take care of Emily."

"Yes, yes, of course, honey. We'll keep her with us 'til you're out of the hospital."

"No Dad, the Lord is taking me home. I can feel it. Dad, turn your life over to Christ. He's the only one who can comfort you and Mom."

Jack swallowed hard but was unable to answer. Looking beyond him, Kristie smiled faintly. "Yes. I'm ready," she said, her eyes taking on a heavenly light.

Glancing behind him, Jack saw no one.

Turning her eyes back to her father, Kristie said, "Dad, I love you. Jim and I will be waiting for you, Mom and Emily on heaven's shore." Her voice trailed off and her body went limp.

Nearly retching with sobs, Jack clung to his daughter. He was still hugging her when the ambulance arrived with the sheriff right behind.

Twenty years ago, Bob Curry had joined Elm Grove Community Church. Now, seeing his pastor and Kristie lying dead, a rage unlike any before shook him to his core. Motioning to a deputy to move Jack away from the bodies, Curry began barking order.

"I want tape around the church, parsonage, car, everything! I don't care if you have to go to Evansville to get more! Nobody, and I mean nobody, goes in or out without my say-so! Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," the three deputies echoed at once.

At that moment, a figure streaked past. The deputy nearest the church made a grab, but missed. Breathing hard, her gray hair in disarray, Ruth ran to where Jim and Kristie lay covered with blankets.

Before the ambulance attendants could stop her, she pulled the blankets back. Looking into their dead faces, she reeled and toppled backward to the ground.

She came to as a tall, lanky man in a white uniform leaned over her waving smelling salts under her nose. Jack picked her up and hugged her to his chest.

For the next few moments, Jack and Ruth held each other as their world crumbled around them. Finally, Ruth managed to stifle her sobs. Lifting her tear-stained face to her husband, she said, "Jack, I left Emily on the front porch. She saw the police cars and ambulance. We have to tell her."

"Can't we wait?" Jack said.

"Oh, honey, I wish we could. I know the Lord Himself will comfort her as only He can," Ruth sobbed. "We have to tell her." She started to say more but the words caught in her throat.

"God!" The word erupted from Jack's mouth in a burst of scornful rage. "What kind of god takes a little girl's parents and makes her an orphan?" Ruth had no answer for him, at least nothing he would believe.

"Harris!" Bob Curry called to his chief deputy. "Run these folks home. Jack, I'll have one of the men drop off your pick-up later. We'll get your statement then." The sheriff laid his hand on Jack's shoulder. "We're gonna get this guy, Jack. Believe me, we're gonna get him."

"You better Bob, because if I find him, I'll kill him with my bare hands," Jack said, tears still streaming down his ruddy cheeks.

Tired from waiting, Emily had made her way into the living room to snuggle with her book in Gramps' recliner. Hearing the door open, she lifted her head and smiled. "Gramps, they'll be here soon, won't they? I hope we can see all the animals but I 'specially want to see the lions."

Collapsing onto the couch, Ruth buried her face in her hands. Tears seeped between her fingers. Laying the book aside, Emily scrambled out of the chair and ran to her grandmother, throwing her tiny arms around her neck. She cooed softly, "Gram, Gram, don't cry. I don't care about any old lion. I'll tell Mommy and Daddy I want to stay with you and Gramps. Please don't cry."

Standing helplessly beside his wife and granddaughter, Jack's eyes flooded over again. First his son, now his daughter. Gone.

For years, he had worked to own his own farm. Building it up, he was very proud of his accomplishment. The year Rickie was born, they brought in a bumper crop and paid off the mortgage. They put up the new barn that fall. Things were going so well Jack even let Ruth talk him into attending church occasionally.

"Too much religion can spoil your life" was one of Jack's favorite sayings. Neither Ruth nor the pastor could sway his attitude. As soon as Rickie could walk, Jack took him everywhere—first to town for supplies, then to the barn to do chores, then on his fifth birthday, out to the fields. Father and son were inseparable. To see the tall man was to see the small boy.

No matter how he tried, Jack could not forget that day in the early spring of '31. It was still too wet to work the fields. "Ruth, I'm going to take down that oak by the south pasture gate before it falls on the fence," Jack had said at breakfast that fateful April morning.

"Don't take Rickie. He might get in the way."

"Now, Ruth, don't worry, I'll watch him. If he's gonna be a farmer, he has to learn." On their way out, Jack gave Rickie the task of carrying their lunch.

Beaming, Rickie said, "Daddy and me are gonna have a picnic."

Ruth watched until they disappeared behind the barn. The tiny boy jogged along, the sandwiches and fruit held tightly at his side, as he struggled to keep pace with the tall man carrying the ax, saw and water jug.

As Ruth mopped the kitchen floor, she prayed that the Lord would help her reflect the love of Christ to her husband. She had just finished her chore and was relaxing with a cup of warmed-over coffee when she heard a bone-chilling scream. Dropping the cup, she flung open the back

door. Jack was racing full speed toward the house, carrying something wrapped in his denim jacket. He stumbled and fell. He held the bundle outstretched in his arms to prevent it from hitting the ground. Regaining his footing, he ran on, his long legs eating up the distance.

"Ruth!" he screamed. "Ruth, Ruth! Help!"

Ruth flew across the back yard, almost colliding with him in the cornfield. Laying Rickie gently on the ground, Jack unwrapped the coat from his face. Rickie's eyes were closed and blood seeped from his ears, nose and mouth.

"I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop it, I couldn't stop it! I tried, but it was too late." Jack sat in the mud and moaned pitifully as tears streamed down his cheeks.

"What happened?" Ruth choked out the question as pain ripped through her heart. She reached out her hand and caressed Rickie's cold face.

"I made sure he was out of the way. I always do, you know that, Ruth. But just as the tree started to fall, a baby rabbit ran right under it and Rickie chased after it. I yelled at him to stop. I don't know if he even heard me. It happened so fast. I couldn't stop the tree from falling. I just stood there like a fool." He drew his knees to his chin, buried his face and sobbed his heart out.

After examining the child's body, Doc Prichard told his parents, "Rickie's neck was broken. He never knew what hit him."

After the funeral, Ruth steered her husband away from the small grave, saying, "It's not your fault, Jack. No one could have loved Rickie more than you did."

Jack refused to be comforted. For months, Ruth would awake in the middle of the night to hear the rocking chair seesawing on the porch or watch Jack's silhouette walking the fields and pasture in the moonlight. One

morning she waited for him until the breakfast eggs were cold. Going to the barn, she found Jack halfway through his chores, staring blankly at the field through which he had carried Rickie's body.

Laying her hand on his arm, she said, "Honey, I know it's hard, but we have to remember our little boy is in God's heaven right now running and playing just like he did here on earth."

Jack dropped the full bucket of milk he'd forgotten he was holding. Its contents splattered his shoes and overalls as he whirled on Ruth. "Don't you ever mention God to me again!" he shouted, pointing a shaking finger in her face. "I don't want anything to do with a god who kills a child." Turning on his heel, he stomped into the woods behind the barn.

Ruth spent the rest of the day in prayer, listening for his footsteps but not hearing them until nightfall.

Two years later, Kristie was born. Her presence was like a salve to soothe their troubled hearts. She was such a sweet, lovable child. Ruth's fears that Jack would spoil her proved unfounded. She knew he loved Kristie, but the same strong bond he'd had with their son never seemed to fully form. It was as though something within him had died along with Rickie.

Ruth made sure that Kristie attended church every Sunday and said her prayers before meals and at bedtime. She read Bible stories to Kristie until she could read them herself. Ruth could hardly contain her joy the day her 10-year-old daughter received Christ as her Savior. As she matured, it was obvious to anyone who came into her sphere that Kristie's beauty wasn't merely skin deep, but rather radiated from a heart full of love for Christ and those around her.

Chapter 2

Located in the western part of central Indiana, Elm Grove is a typical midwestern farming community, founded in 1816 by John Blye, his wife Maddy and John's two brothers, Everett and Jeremiah. Separating at Fort Harrison from a westbound wagon train, they traveled south until they settled on a rise of ground just east of the Wabash River. As the community grew, the streets were not so much planned as randomly added to accommodate houses as they were built. Consequently, the town developed in a crazy quilt pattern.

Descendants of the original grove of elm trees for which the town was named still stand encased in the city park in the center of town. "Imported Elms"—as the townsfolk call trees not indigenous to the area—as well as oak, chestnut and sycamore shade the village streets.

Approaching on State Road 63 from the south, one encounters Grey's Farm Supplies and Grain Elevator, owned by Eric Grey. His inventory consists of everything from barbed wire to corn and soybean seed, the most common crops in central Indiana.

Anytime he's asked why he doesn't sell other types of seed, Eric recounts the story of a guy from Chicago who bought 30 acres of river bottomland on which to grow rice.

"He was doing okay until the Wabash started rolling. When she starts moving, you'd best get out of her way," Eric always says with a laugh. "Anyway, she came up, took his crop, the shack he'd put up to live in, his car and almost took him! He left on the bus the next day. Haven't seen him since."

When the corn and soybean crop cycle is completed, a farmer can bring in his harvest and Eric will give him a fair market price.

On the west side of the park sits a low building with white clapboard siding. Gold lettering on the large plate glass window declares it to be The Crossing Restaurant. A passing hobo persuaded the owner, Mildred Hardesty, to let him paint the sign years ago in exchange for three meals a day while he completed it.

Proud as a peacock, Mildred will sometimes wash the window two or three times a day when the dust is flying. At her own expense, Mildred installed three benches and two picnic tables across the street in the park. Many of the old timers gather there to discuss and solve the problems of the world—if only the world would listen!

Many years ago, Mildred began the tradition of serving coffee to the bench-sitters from spring until winter's chill chases the elderly men inside. Mildred enjoys serving picnic lunches to families who want to relax in shady comfort at her tables. "Gives me a chance to get out of the hot kitchen," she says with a laugh.

The elementary school is at the end of the block, facing the park from the north. The one-story brick structure is the pride and joy of the people of Elm Grove. It boasts a large gym that doubles as an auditorium. During inclement weather, social events that would normally be held in the park take place there.

Behind the school is a huge playground. When the school was built five years ago, the board wanted the students to take recess in the town park. The parents argued against it, saying they were concerned about their children crossing the street. After several meetings the school board relented and the playground was built.

On the east side of town is Clem's Hardware, owned by Clem's son, Harry Blackburn. Harry never changed the sign after Clem's death 10 years ago. When asked why, Harry says, "Dad worked so hard to build this business, his name deserves to be on the building."

Next to the hardware is T.J.'s Grocery, owned by Mildred's brother, Tom Hardesty, and his wife, Janice. Here a shopper can find everything from fresh vegetables to homemade jams put up by Janice herself.

The post office and bank occupy the rest of the block. Postmistress Gertie Higgins tells anyone who'll listen that her job is more important than the bank's.

Although not verified by county records, rumor has it that at one time the town park was the Blye family's front lawn. But the mansion sitting on the south side has long since ceased to be a residence. The Wilson family bought it 40 years ago and converted it to Elm Grove's first and only funeral home.

Elm Grove Community Church has been an active part of the community for over 120 years. Upon their arrival, John and Maddy Blye held worship services in their cabin every Sunday. Soon new neighbors began to join them. Some came to Indiana from as far away as England, Scotland, and Germany. John found that the house he had built was too small to hold everyone who wanted to join his family for worship. To accommodate the growing numbers, services were held outside during

the summer and the congregation broke into small groups to meet in various homes during the winter.

At a meeting in June 1828, Isaac Turner surrendered to preach. He was installed him as the first pastor, and in turn donated three acres of land five miles outside the small village on which to build the church and establish a cemetery. Everett Blye gave a stand of timber; Jeremiah volunteered to cut it at his mill without charge. That meeting lasted until well after sunset, but by the time everyone departed for their homes, Elm Grove Community Church was born. During the years that followed construction of the church, the city of Elm Grove continued to blossom.

First came the Mercantile run by Willie Potts, later known as William during his tenure as mayor. Next, Alexander Blye, John and Maddy's oldest son, established the Livery Stables. In the ensuing years, other businesses sprang up until Elm Grove was a thriving community. Now, over a century later, the pioneer spirit continues to inhabit the founders' descendants.

Situated on a gravel road, with the exception of Sunday the church sees very little traffic. That changed this morning as numerous State Police and Sheriff's Department vehicles, as well as those of rubber-necking onlookers, kicked up dust clouds that had no time to settle before more cars coming through stirred them up again.

Jim and Kristie's assailant had left his car hidden in a stand of trees on a secluded lane half a mile across the fields from the church. Now as he sat behind the wheel mulling over the attack, the murderer tried to calm his

labored breathing. Had he missed anything? Left any clue the police could pick up on?

Pulling the car onto the gravel road, he stopped to remove the canvas covers from each wheel. Popping open the trunk, he placed them inside and shut the lid softly. Back in the car, he removed the canvas covers from his moccasins. Pausing, he listened carefully.

Was that a siren? How could it be? How could they have found them so quickly? The sound came closer. He exhaled loudly as an Indiana State Police patrol car screamed past a quarter of a mile away on the blacktop road.

The killer's plaid shirt and blue jeans were soaked, not so much from the dew that clung to the ground as from the cold sweat that formed on his skin. He had prepared himself mentally to kill the preacher, but not the woman. It was her own fault. She shouldn't have come running just because Jim screamed.

The man was familiar with Elm Grove and the surrounding area. He had eaten in the restaurant, shopped at the grocery store and played in the park as a child. He knew many of the people in town. He also knew that right now the shops would be teeming with customers. He had no desire to be seen by any Saturday morning shoppers.

Swinging wide of the village, he threaded his way out through the network of back country roads.

Chapter 3

By late morning, word of the deaths of Pastor Jim and Kristie had spread through the tightknit community. The residents of Elm Grove reacted with shock, horror and fear. Farmers searched their outbuildings, fields, and woodlots with loaded shotguns in hand. Merchants nervously checked their storage rooms. Calls offering condolences and assistance poured into the Johnson household.

Jack met his loss with stone-faced stoicism. If this was God's way of reaching out to him, it wasn't going to work. He would not cry, nor would he turn for comfort to a god who could take his loved ones so callously.

With an aching heart and struggling with her own grief, Ruth faced the task of telling Emily her parents were dead. Unable to bear any more of their pain, Jack had retreated to the kitchen to answer the endlessly ringing phone.

"Emily," Ruth began, wiping her eyes on the corner of her apron, "Mommy and Daddy went to heaven."

"To see Jesus?" Emily loosened her arms from around Ruth's neck and gazed into her eyes.

"Yes, honey, to see Jesus." Ruth stifled a sob. "To see Jesus and to be with Him."

"Gram?"

"Yes, honey."

With her eyes lowered, Emily picked at the hem of her dress. "I know I said I'd stay with you when Mommy

and Daddy got here, but would it be okay if I went with them when they get back from seeing Jesus?"

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry." She uttered the next words as gently as possible, but the sound of her own voice saying them made her fear she would faint again. "They're not coming back."

"That's not true! I know they'll be back," Emily cried. "Daddy promised, and Daddy always keeps his promises." Wriggling out of her grandmother's arms, she bolted through the door, letting it slam behind her. Flinging herself down on the top step, she buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Jack's heart wrenched in his chest as he stood in the doorway watching his granddaughter. He struggled to disguise his anguish as he spoke. "How are we going make that sweet little girl understand that her parents are dead?" He choked on the last word. Hearing himself say it made his knees go weak.

"I don't know, Jack. I just don't know," Ruth sighed.

Sitting on the step beside Emily, Ruth tried to explain why her mother and father couldn't take her to the zoo. Shaking her head, her blond curls bouncing, Emily insisted, "I know they had to go to heaven to see Jesus, but they'll be back. I just know they will!"

Sheriff Curry dropped off the pickup at 11:30 and took a brief statement from Jack and Ruth. Deputy Ike Harris sat in his squad car waiting to take Curry back to the church.

Angry and grief-stricken, Jack followed the sheriff out of the house. "Who did this thing?" he demanded.

"Jack, I don't know. But I promise you, I'll find out."

"You better, Bob, because if you don't, I will. And if I find them, I'll save the state some money."

"Now you listen to me, Jack. I don't want you going after them on your own. Just let me do my job."

"Then do it," Jack snapped. Turning, he stomped off toward the barn.

Ike waited until they were out of the driveway before voicing his opinion. "How do you know the old man didn't do it himself? It's common knowledge he never liked his son-in-law."

Curry gave him a withering look but was silent until they pulled into the gravel parking lot at the church. Ike switched off the engine. Twisting his body to face the deputy, Curry said, "Harris, you're a good man, one of best law enforcement officers I've ever known. But there's something you don't understand. Jack Johnson's a tough old bird, and you're right, he never liked his son-in-law. But he loved his daughter. He would have given his life for her."

"Maybe so, but you know as well as I do sometimes people do crazy things."

The rest of the day passed in a slow gloom. Emily could not understand why her parents were so long in coming. She insisted on spending the day on the porch or the front lawn so she could watch for them coming down the gravel road that led to the parsonage.

Jack pattered around the house so he could keep an eye on her. Each time Ruth checked on them the tears would come unbidden. At the end of the day, they put Emily to bed in Kristie's old room.

Throughout the day, friends and neighbors stopped by to express sympathy and drop off food. As grateful as

she was, Ruth would have preferred to prepare the meals herself just to keep her mind occupied. She put the food away and worked on Kristie's old room all afternoon, changing it back to a little girl's room while driving herself to exhaustion to avoid thinking of the days ahead.

She and Jack spent the night in restless sleep. Every time Ruth closed her eyes she would see Kristie's dead face. Finally falling off, she dreamed she saw Kristie in the middle of a wheat field calling to her for help. Each time Ruth approached her, the distance between them widened. It was as if Kristie was a leaf blowing in the wind. As Ruth watched helplessly, a dark shadow enveloped Kristie and she disappeared. Ruth awoke in a cold sweat, crying out her daughter's name. Jack enfolded her in his arms and let her cry.

"Why did God have to take her?" Ruth moaned. "She was so sweet and loving."

Unable to answer, Jack gritted his teeth in the dark. If it were possible, Jack hated God more at this moment than ever before.

As the day of the funeral drew closer, the parade of people visiting the Johnson farm surged. Members of the Ladies Missionary Society brought food and stayed with Emily while Ruth and Jack made the arrangements. The men fed the livestock and finished the haying.

The church received a thorough cleaning and waxing until the pews and hardwood floors glistened under the light of the chandelier Jim had installed just two months before

The day of the funeral dawned warm and cloudless. A gentle breeze blew from the south, rustling the curtains. Birds perched in the oak trees and tried to out-sing each other. Jack was oblivious to all of it. Up at first light, he

retraced his steps of 28 years before. At the old gate to the back pasture, he stared at the spot where Rickie died. Clenching his work-worn hands, he turned his face to the sky. "I will raise her for Kristie and Jim, but not for you. I will never trust you. For anything!" he raged in a hoarse, scratchy whisper. "I hate you worse than their killer." Turning his back in defiance, he strode with determined steps to the house.

Jack tugged at the tie that seemed to be choking him. He was miserably uncomfortable in the dark blue suit. By the time they arrived at the church, he was sweating profusely, his collar wilted and the back of his shirt soaked. The sanctuary was packed full. The overflow crowd spilled out onto the steps and front lawn. Ministers from as far away as Tennessee intermingled with the congregation. With his pleasing personality, Jim had been well-liked, and as a gifted theologian, well respected.

Reverend Barry Wells met the Johnsons at the door. He and Jim had worked at the same meat packing plant to put themselves through seminary. Both were newly married and struggling to survive on their meager wages. Upon graduating, they parted ways to serve the Lord in different areas of Indiana—Jim in Elm Grove with its congregation of 42 and Barry at Indianapolis's prestigious Grace Tabernacle with an attendance in the hundreds. Many times during the first year Barry had offered Jim the position of associate pastor. Believing God had called him to Elm Grove, each time Jim had refused.

Sheriff Curry stood beside Barry. As he started up the stairs, Jack's anger boiled over. "Why are you here, Curry? Shouldn't you be out looking for a killer?"

The sheriff stood red-faced, resisting the impulse to put Jack Johnson in his place. He stared at him tight-

lipped, but when he spoke his tone was conciliatory.

"Relax, Jack, they were my friends, too. Besides, my men and Detective Phillips from the State Police are following up any leads we have."

"Do tell," Jack said snidely. "What leads are those?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"What does that mean? You can't tell me? I'm her father!"

Still holding Emily's hand, Ruth nudged Jack's arm sharply with her elbow. "Jack, please. Think of Emily," she whispered imploringly. Jack looked down into Emily's questioning blue eyes. Scooping her up, he marched down the aisle with Ruth in tow. His outburst seemed to hang in the air as all eyes watched them pass.

With flaming red cheeks and a tightly set jaw, Jack led Ruth to the space reserved for them in the first pew just to the right of the pulpit. Electric fans set inside the frames of the open windows labored to cool the building.

Twin caskets lay at the altar. On top of the closed lids were framed photographs of Kristie and Jim, some with a wide-eyed, broadly smiling Emily nestled between them. Hoping to make the impact of her parents' transition from life to death less painful for their granddaughter, Jack and Ruth had agreed on closed caskets.

Tugging on Ruth's arm, Emily whispered loudly, "Those pictures are from our house." She repeated her observation to Jack.

A robust woman in her late 20s stepped to the piano. Ruth recognized her as Reverend Wells' wife, Norma. Her clear, melodious voice resounded through the sanctuary as she sang Kristie's favorite song:

"There is a name I love to hear,

I love to sing its worth.

It sounds like music in my ear,

The sweetest name on earth.

O how I love Jesus, O how I love Jesus,

O, how I love Jesus, because He first loved me!"

After the solo, Reverend Wells approached the lectern. "Dearly beloved," he began with tears evident in his voice, "we are gathered here today on what for us is a sad occasion. Oh, but may I say, a happy one for Jim and Kristie. They have passed from the trials and tribulations of this life into the glory of their Lord.

"History is replete with accounts of those who gave their lives so that others might come to know Christ as their Savior. And as such, they did not die in vain. And like those martyrs of the past, I personally heard Jim and Kristie say many times, 'If it takes our lives to bring one lost person to Christ, we will gladly give them.'

"The Apostle Paul said, 'For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.' Jim and Kristie were living examples of that verse. I'm going to ask you to do something today. If you were led to the Lord by Jim or Kristie, would you please stand as a testimony of their dedication to Christ?"

Throughout the sanctuary, there was a shuffling of feet. To Jack and Ruth it seemed as though the entire congregation stood.

"Look around you," Reverend Wells continued. "Here you see this verse exemplified. May I read it to you again? 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.'"

After instructing the rest of the congregation to stand, Barry led them in prayer.

"Dear Heavenly Father, how we thank you for the lives of Jim and Kristie. May they continue to win others to you, not just those who are saved today because of their ministry, but those who will be led to the Lord by these disciples in the future. In Christ's name, Amen." A chorus of "Amens" echoed through the room.

Reverend Wells looked up to address the congregation. "A few weeks ago, Jim called me. He asked that I officiate at his service if he were to be called home. At that time he said he hadn't discussed it with Kristie, but he felt his earthly life was drawing to a close. He also asked if I would have one special song performed in tribute to his Lord."

Reverend Wells took his seat as a group of five men and two women filed onto the platform. For the first time, Jack noticed the stringed instruments leaning against the wall. Mrs. Wells sat down at the piano. The triumphant strains of the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah* brought the service to a close.

Seated on the porch in his favorite rocking chair, Jack surveyed the fields spread out before him. The rich green of the corn and soybeans seemed to have lost their luster. Silence had never bothered him before. In fact, he had always voiced his preference for life in the hushed countryside over mere existence in a nerve-wracking city.

Today, the quiet house vexed him. When Ruth put Emily down for a nap, she asked her to lie down with her. The petite woman and little girl soon fell asleep in each other's arms.

Jack wandered through the two-story farmhouse. Sadness weighed him down like a suffocating blanket. In every room memories overwhelmed him: in the bedroom, one-year-old Kristie crying for her mother; in the kitchen, presenting him with her first batch of cookies, burned to a crisp; in the living room, whirling around as she modeled her wedding dress for him. With tears streaming and sobs wracking his body, Jack sat in a kitchen chair feeling very alone.

Chapter 4

Thinking it might stir memories of the failed trip to the zoo, Ruth secretly exchanged Emily's book about Noah's Ark for one of Jesus greeting the children. After her bath Emily climbed onto her grandfather's lap.

"Gramps, read me a story?"

"Sure, honey. How about one in the Mother Goose book?"

"No, please, from this one." She held out a thin book. On the cover was an illustration of Christ surrounded by several small children.

"All right, sweetheart," Jack said reluctantly. The scent of strawberries reached his nose. "You smell like one

big strawberry!" He tickled Emily until gales of her laughter filled the house.

"What are you two doing, having a giggling contest? Jack, I hate to tell you, but if you are, Emily wins hands down," Ruth said, smiling.

Emily was quickly engrossed in the Bible story. As he turned the pages, Jack struggled to keep bitterness and non-belief out of his voice.

Slipping into their bedroom, Ruth knelt beside the bed. "Oh, Lord, break through this hard shell around Jack's heart. Please bring him to yourself."

After tucking Emily in, Ruth returned to find Jack working on the ledgers, something he never did this late at night.

"Take a look at this, honey," Jack said, placing his finger on the bottom line. "I've been working on this, and I believe if we increase production by ten percent, even figuring in some lean years, we can have enough money to put Emily through college in about ten to twelve years."

Ruth was reminded of one reason why she loved this man so dearly. "Can we do that? Increase our profits by that much?" she asked softly as she leaned over his shoulder.

"Well, if we can find another fifty acres to farm and add five to ten head of cattle to the herd, then yes, I think we can."

"What about the Miller place? Margaret said Ernie is planning to retire next year."

"Retire? What's he going to do with all his time?" Jack said, shaking his head.

"He says he wants to spend more time with his children and grandch...", Ruth said without thinking.

"Time for bed," Jack said, pushing himself up from the desk. "It's been a long day." Still scolding herself, Ruth followed meekly.

Jack sensed more than saw the shadow enter the bedroom. He could tell by Ruth's deep breathing that she was asleep. Bracing himself, he reached for the lamp on the bedside table. He flipped the switch, flooding the room with light.

Emily stood at the foot of the bed, her blonde curls tangled, rubbing sleep from her eyes with the back of one hand while her rag doll dangled from the other. She looked so much like Kristie, for a moment Jack thought he was dreaming.

"Gramps, when are you and Gram going to heaven?"

The question took Jack by surprise. He saw it wasn't just sleep she was rubbing from her eyes. They were glistening with tears.

"What's wrong?" Ruth asked, sitting up and blinking. Emily repeated her question. "Honey, not for a long, long time," Ruth said with a catch in her voice. "Here, why don't you sleep with Gramps and me tonight, sweetheart?"

Jack tried to speak, but the lump in his throat kept him quiet.

Snuggling between Jack and Ruth, Emily said sleepily, "I hope when you go to heaven, we can all go together. I'll ask Jesus if we can." Her voice trailed off.

Lying in the darkness, Jack found sleep a long time in coming.

Ruth considered keeping Emily home for three or four weeks, but at 9 AM the following Sunday the little

girl came bounding into the kitchen. Jack and Ruth were lingering over a third cup of coffee. Her crisp blue dress was crookedly buttoned and she looked confused. "Gram, ain't we going to Sunday school this morning?"

"Aren't we going," her grandmother gently corrected. "Do you want to go, sweetheart?"

Emily nodded her head enthusiastically. "I like Sunday school. Mrs. Skinner tells real good stories. She makes everything so real."

A few weeks later, Ruth felt the Lord prodding her to take over teaching Kristie's Sunday school class. Ruth had taught Sunday school for years. However, she felt uneasy about replacing Kristie, knowing how she had loved her boys and girls.

"Mom, I'm afraid for Billy Jones," Kristie had said several months earlier. She and Ruth were sorting clothes from the missionary donation barrels to pack for shipping. "He's started running with a rough bunch of boys."

"Let's pray for him, dear," Ruth said, covering Kristie's hand with her own.

Ruth added Billy to her prayer list. Kristie not only prayed for the boy, she put action to her prayers. When he would misbehave in class, she would take him aside, put her arms around him and pray for him. A month later, when Jim gave the invitation, Billy made his way to the altar and received Christ. People said Kristie had loved Billy into the kingdom. The change in his life was so remarkable that soon after he was baptized his mother started attending Sunday morning services.

Jack declined every invitation to hear the visiting preachers. Ruth prayed earnestly, faithfully, but still he resisted. His heart seemed to have turned to stone. His love for Ruth and Emily was the only display of gentleness he ever showed. Some mornings upon rising at 5 AM, as he did every day summer or winter, he would find Emily curled up in a tiny ball on the floor at the foot of their bed.

He would pick up the sleeping child gently, being careful not to wake her. Then he would tuck her in beside Ruth and watch as Emily's arms would immediately encircle her grandmother's neck. Tears moistened Jack's eyes each time he closed the door on the sleeping pair.

A shudder passed through Ruth as she turned the key in the lock. The parsonage had been Jim and Kristie's home for the last six years. The simple two-bedroom bungalow sitting on the south side of the church was not well furnished. Always ready to help someone in need, Kristie and Jim kept second best for themselves. Standing beside his wife, Jack ran a weary hand through his snow-white hair. Over the years, they had visited Jim and Kristie dozens of times, but now as they entered they felt like intruders.

As she took Kristie's dresses from the closet and laid them on the bed, Ruth made no effort to suppress the tears running down her cheeks. Her words alternated haltingly with her sobs. "Jack, I just can't believe they're gone." She held up a blue taffeta dress with lace at the sleeves and throat. "Kristie and I made this one together for her to wear to the Sweetheart Banquet at church last Valentine's Day."

With a lump in his throat, Jack asked, "Honey, do you want to wait on this for a while? Bill Skinner said the church is no hurry,"

"No, I'll be all right. It's just hard to know the time we shared on earth is over." Leaving Ruth to go through the bedroom and kitchen, Jack went to the back of the house.

Jim's office was exactly as he left it that awful Saturday morning. The only difference was the small mountain of mail piled in the center of his desk. Sighing, Jack pulled up a chair and began sorting through the stack. Tossing advertisements and appeals for money in the wastebasket, he was about to discard a white business-sized envelope from Farmers Insurance when the words 'Policy Enclosed' caught his eye.

Tearing open the envelope, his eyes scanned the document. "Ruth! Ruth! Come in here," he shouted.

"What is it, what's wrong?" Ruth asked as she ran pale-faced into the room. Speechless, Jack shoved the policy into her hand. "Oh Jack, they did provide for Emily's education!"

Regaining his composure, Jack said, "Twenty-five thousand dollars should get her through any college she wants. We'll put it in the bank and let it draw interest 'til she's ready."

"What about the fifty acres from the Wilsons?" Ruth asked.

"We'll use that for her other expenses," Jack said. He felt relief and, for the assurance of Emily's future, joy.

No matter how busy Jack was, he always took time for Emily. However, she was forbidden to venture into the fields unaccompanied while he was working. One day in

October, he was nearing the end of the soybean harvest when he heard a sound. The drone of the combine along with the hours he'd been clocking had made him drowsy. Hearing the sound again, he jerked awake.

"Gramps, Gramps, look what I got for you." Emily stood not 10 feet from the whirling reel of the combine. She raised her arm to offer him the straggly rose she held between pricked and blood-stained fingers.

Slamming on the brakes, Jack switched off the engine. "What are you doing out here?" he shouted. "How many times have I told you to stay out of the field? You could have been killed!"

Emily's lips turned downward and tears sprang from her eyes. "I just wanted to give you the rose." Jack looked up to see Ruth running through the stubble.

"Emily! Emily! Are you all right?"

"Ruth, where have you been? I thought you were watching her! What am I going to have to do, hire a baby-sitter?"

"I'm sorry, Jack. I thought she was playing in the back yard."

Climbing back up on the combine, Jack said, "Just keep her out of the field."

"I just wanted to give Gramps the rose," Emily said, her tears flowing freely now.

"I know, honey. Let's go back to the house. We'll put some Band-Aids on your fingers and put the rose in water. You can give it to him tonight."

Chapter 5

Located in a 125-year-old, two-story brick house, the county sheriff's department sits one block east of Sullivan Courthouse Square. The house serves a three-fold purpose, the south half being the jail with a large metal cage and picnic table in the center surrounded by six individual cells. The northern portion comprises the dispatcher's station and sheriff's office. Upstairs are living quarters for the sheriff and his family.

In his office this morning, Bob Curry was not happy. For all intents and purposes, the investigation of what the newspapers were calling "The Elm Grove Murders" had reached a dead end. Sheriff Curry had ordered every known criminal living in the county brought in and interrogated. He grilled some of the more likely suspects himself. The outcome was always the same: nobody saw, heard or knew anything.

"Run down the list for me, Ike. What have we got?" Curry said, pacing back and forth, his face creased in a frown. He never liked sitting at a desk. It made him feel too confined. Now, as his chief deputy remained silent, he stopped and leaned over the cluttered surface of Ike's desk with his hands grasping each edge.

"Well?"

Harris stroked his clean-shaven chin as if coaxing an imaginary beard. "We found where he went through the woods," he said, consulting a dog-eared notebook. "He apparently parked his car in a lane on the Williams' place, but we didn't find any tire tracks. The ground was pretty hard, Chief. You know we didn't have any rain for over a month."

"What are you doing, Harris, making excuses? How do you know he parked his car there and not somewhere down the road?"

"Weeds were crushed, some broken branches led in that direction. Looked like somebody came through there in a hurry. And here's the strange thing. There were marks on the road that looked like tire tracks, but there was no tread in them.

"As you know," Ike continued, "Bill Harvey was over in Greene County searching for that lost little girl. By the time he got his dogs on the trail, it was too cold."

"Give me some good news, Ike. You got any good news, or is that asking too much?" Bob grouched, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"Well, we do have one suspect. Lonnie Greggs stayed at the church a few days before the murder."

"He's from Bloomfield, isn't he?"

"Yeah, the south end. We've had him in jail a couple of times for drinking."

"Sure, sure. I remember he was in the cell with Dennis Brown the night he died. Claimed he slept through the whole thing. Do we have a location on him?"

"We've got an APB out but he seems to have skipped town. We questioned his mother and girlfriend. They both swear he was with them the morning of the murder."

"Okay. So what about the missing tire tread? How does that happen?"

"The best we can figure, the killer put some type of covers over the tires and his shoes, too. As for the victims, the coroner said they were stabbed with a large knife, most likely a hunting knife, but we've been unable to locate it. There were no fingerprints in the church, but the doc says

from the angle of the wounds on Reverend Mays, it looks like the killer is under six feet."

"How tall is Greggs?" Bob asked.

"Five nine."

"But he has an alibi."

"Well, if you want to believe those women," Ike countered.

"So what you're telling me, Ike, is that after a month of investigating, we have nothing to go on. No hard evidence at all."

Ike looked uncomfortable. "Sorry."

"All right, look, I want you to start over. Canvas the neighborhood around the church. Maybe somebody will remember seeing something, anything. Check the stores again. He had to buy that knife somewhere. Go back to the church, walk the woods all the way to where the vehicle was found. Go to Terre Haute. Go to all the car lots. See if any vehicles from Sullivan County were traded in the day of the murder or thereabouts. Bring me back a list of who sold them and who bought them."

"What about Johnson?" Ike asked. "Can I investigate him?"

"All right, but keep it quiet. I don't want him catching wind of it."

"You know the history there, Chief. It could be that Jim made him angry," Ike said.

"Not angry enough to kill. You go ahead and investigate, but you'll see I'm right."

Jack sat across from Bob, his face an iron mask. "So you're giving up, just letting the maniac who did this go free," he said.

Curry rubbed his eyes, trying to relieve the headache that had shadowed him all day. "That's not what I said, Jack. I said we checked every possible lead."

"So now you're just going to drop it?"

"No, I'm not dropping it but I do have other cases that need my attention," Curry said.

"Hogwash."

"Jack, you're not the only one to lose a loved one. You know the Browns over on Mill Creek Road?"

"Yeah, I heard their son hung himself in your jail. Pretty careless of you, letting something like that happen. Don't you usually watch out for suicide?" Jack asked.

The sheriff refused to react in kind to Jack's biting words. This wasn't the first time he'd been used as a whipping post.

Curry calmly continued. "Pastor Jim spoke to Dennis the day before and he told me the kid had made a decision to turn his life over to Christ. Now the Browns are threatening to sue, and my only possible witness has disappeared."

"Who might that be?"

"Lonnie Greggs. He swore he didn't see it happen, but I think he's scared. The coroner ruled Dennis's death a suicide, but the Browns aren't convinced and I'm beginning to think maybe they're right."

"How do you know he didn't kill this kid Dennis and Jim and Kristie, too? He's on the run, isn't he? Sure seems like he has something to hide," Jack said.

"He had an alibi. Said he was with his mother and girlfriend that morning and they confirmed it."

"So they're lying to protect him."

"The girlfriend, possibly. The mother, no. She's a Christian. Goes to church over around Bloomfield."

"A Christian? Hah! Just another hypocrite, lying to protect her kid."

"Not every person who names the name of Christ is a hypocrite, Jack. Your wife has a wonderful testimony. Look, I've got an APB out on Lonnie for questioning. He'll turn up sooner or later. And when he does, we'll bring him back to Sullivan County."

Jumping to his feet, Jack strode angrily to the door. Turning, he pointed a shaking finger at Bob. "I'm telling you, you find this Greggs, and you'll find the murderer." He slammed the door so hard it bounced back and put a dent in the wall.

Searching through his desk drawer, the sheriff pulled out a bottle of aspirin. He shook out two tablets and washed them down with the dregs of a cup of cold coffee.

"Anything I can do to help, Sheriff?"

Setting down the cup, Bob looked up to see William Robert Strickland, "Billy Bob" to his friends, leaning against the door frame. With his small build, narrow face, and big ears, Billy Bob had been shamed with the nickname "Mickey Mouse" from his first day of grade school.

Curry smiled. Despite his comical appearance, the special deputy was a solid rock in a world of turmoil. Several times Curry had requested that the man be made a full deputy, but the county commissioners refused. It

didn't faze Billy Bob. He had just put in 12 hours without pay, and if asked he would gladly work another 12.

"No, Billy Bob, thank you. You go home and get some rest."

"Okay, Sheriff, if you're sure. I'll leave my radio on just in case."

As was his custom, on his way through Elm Grove Jack stopped to visit Eric Grey. When Eric built the grain elevator 10 years ago, he added two rooms behind the store as living quarters.

"Being a bachelor, I don't need much, just someplace to eat and sleep and listen to the radio," he had said in reply to Jack's query. Although Eric was the son of a minister, he told Jack he never gave Christianity a second thought. For that reason if no other, Jack considered him his best friend. Whenever Jack would visit, Eric would turn the counter over to one of his men. A small, wiry man in his late 30s, Eric never received any social company other than Jack.

Today, as usual, he had an opinion.

"Jack, you ought to look up this Lonnie Greggs. Did you know he stayed at the church a couple of nights before he got picked up for drinking? That's why he was in jail. Then three days after Denny Brown died, the judge let him go. And if you think Denny hung himself, I got some swamp land I want to sell you."

"What do you mean?" Jack asked.

"Greggs' mom kicked him out because of his drinking, told him he could come back if and when he quit. Now Jack, you know I never said too much about your late

son-in-law.” [Actually, over the years, Eric had had quite a lot to say about Jim.] “But if you ask me, he made a mistake letting Lonnie stay at the church, and that mistake cost him and Kristie their lives.

"You know Lonnie used to work for me," Eric continued without pausing for a breath. "I had to fire him. He came in drunk one morning and started a fight with one of the guys."

"Do you know where he's living now?" Jack asked.

"Yup. Back with his mom on Pickering Street in Bloomfield. Bob Curry says he can't find him, but I don't think he's looking too hard. I got her address around here somewhere." Stepping to a small desk in the corner, he shuffled through the jumble of papers piled high on its surface.

"Ah, here it is!" he said halfway through the pile. "You going over to see his mom?"

"Yeah, I think I will. I gotta get home right now but I might just run over there tomorrow."

"You be careful. This Lonnie Greggs, he's dangerous."

With the approach of autumn, Ruth began teaching Emily how to bake. "Are they done yet?" Emily asked, her face inches from the window in the oven door.

"No honey, cookies take a while to bake. You'll hear the bell when they're ready."

"Gram, will they be done before Gramps gets back from town?"

"I believe they will," Ruth said, brushing a wisp of hair out of Emily's flushed face. Pushing a chair a couple of feet from the oven, Ruth said, "Sit here, sweetie. I'm afraid you're going to burn yourself."

Ten minutes later, Jack opened the door, bringing a blast of cold air in with him. "Weather's turning cold. Must have dropped ten degrees in the last hour."

"Here, Gramps! Gramps! I baked them myself," Emily said, dancing around Jack's feet with a plate of warm chocolate chip cookies. "Gram showed me how," she said, glancing at Ruth.

"Mmm," Jack said, biting into one. "Best cookies I ever ate. You deserve a reward for this." He hugged the little girl and kissed the top of her head.

"I love you, Gramps. You're the best Gramps ever," Emily said, smiling.

Chapter 6

With the onset of winter each year, Jack would spend his days winterizing the house, barn and outbuildings. These were projects he looked forward to and enjoyed.

When he and Ruth bought the farm in 1931, the barn was so dilapidated it would sway in the wind. The house wasn't much better. Many times that first winter, Jack and Ruth awoke to find snow in their bed. They stuffed rags and newspapers in the cracks in the walls and around the windows. Their efforts were futile as the snow still sifted in.

Five years later, Jack started building a new house. He had replaced the barn after it collapsed during a small tornado. Determined to build a comfortable home for his family, Jack designed and redesigned the house several

times before he finally settled on a two-story frame farmhouse common to the area. The inside was anything but ordinary. Most farmers were still feeling the effects of the depression. If they built at all, they chose a simple layout. Scrimping and saving all they could, Jack and Ruth built a house strong enough to withstand the cold winds of winter with an interior that surprised and delighted everyone who entered. Working day and night, Jack constructed a spacious kitchen, dining room, living room and entry hall downstairs. Three bedrooms and a good-sized bathroom made up the second floor. The hardwood floors throughout the house required months of sanding. When the varnish was dry, Ruth was astonished by their glimmering beauty.

"One thing I really want is a big front porch," Jack had said. "I want to sit there and look out over our land."

When the house was finally finished, Jack's dream was realized. Ruth had a screened-in back porch where the family could eat during the warm months. Jack built the front porch he wanted and bought the hundred-acre parcel across the road. That purchase increased the Johnsons' acreage to 500, making it one of the largest farms in Sullivan County.

Today, thoughts of putting up storm windows were the furthest thing from Jack's mind. "Ruth, I'll be gone most of the day. I will be home in time to do the chores," he stated without further explanation.

Having grown used to Jack's long absences, Ruth didn't question him. Sometimes he would walk down by the pond and into the woods or to the cemetery behind the church. "Okay dear," was all she said.

Clearing the table of the breakfast dishes, she watched Jack climb into the truck. Backing onto the road,

he headed south. Filling the sink, Ruth's tears mixed with the dishwasher. The emptiness she felt was almost unbearable.

How she missed her precious daughter. Most days if Kristie was not too busy, she and Emily would walk down to the farm. While the little girl played nearby, Kristie and Ruth would sit on the porch drinking coffee and talking and simply enjoying each other's company.

These days Jack seemed distant and difficult to read. For reasons unknown to Ruth, he had recently insisted she learn how to use the shotgun. When she protested, he became angry and petulant. Feeling obliged to appease him, she gave in. The weight of it left her with a sore shoulder and the sound of the explosion hurt her ears and frightened the cattle. She plunked it down on a barn workbench and refused to touch it again.

Still, each time before he left, he checked the gun to make sure it was loaded, put it in the hall closet and warned Emily to stay away from it.

Entering Bloomfield on Route 54, Jack had no trouble finding Pickering Street. Large, well-maintained two- and three-story homes lined both sides of it. The manicured lawns and vivid gardens with their colorful autumn blooms put the crowning touch on the homeowners' proud achievements.

Number 3465 was a thorn among the roses. The two-story Colonial with fading paint and ragged lawn sported a weather-worn 'For Sale' sign swinging on rusty chains beneath a larger 'Room for Rent' sign suspended from the porch rail.

Leaning on the bell, Jack heard footsteps coming toward him. The door swung open and a diminutive gray-haired woman with paper-thin skin and hollow eyes stood

before him. A flicker of disappointment crossed her face before she smiled at Jack. "Come with me," she said, turning and hurrying up a massive staircase.

Not knowing what else to do, Jack followed. At the end of a long hallway, she opened the door to a small room that was neat but impossibly over-furnished. In addition to the old-fashioned, slightly sagging single bed, a small couch was jammed against one wall. Gobbling up the space on the other three were a wardrobe, dresser, nightstand and oversized chest of drawers topped with an ornately framed, foggy mirror.

"I'm sorry. It's probably kind of small for a man of your size, but it's the only one I have left. It rents for fifteen dollars a week, but that includes meals. For an extra three dollars, I provide maid service." She paused and looked at Jack expectantly.

"I'm afraid you misunderstood, ma'am. My name is Jack Johnson. I wanted to speak to you about your son."

"Oh dear, I thought you were Mr. Paxton. Have you seen Lonnie? Do you know where he is?" she asked hopefully.

"No. I was hoping you could tell me where I could find him."

For the next half-hour, Jack learned the sad tale of Lonnie Greggs. As the owner of a shoe store, Lonnie's father had worked long and hard. The hours he spent with his son were few and far between. By the time Lonnie was 12, the store had grown profitable enough for Orville Greggs to hire a manager.

"Now Lonnie and I can finally spend some time together," he said jubilantly. He planned fishing and camping trips and other outings. However, by that time Lonnie had lost interest in being with his father.

"You know how kids are when they get to be that age," Mrs. Greggs said. "They'd rather be with their friends. Only problem was Lonnie's friends were the proverbial wrong crowd. His father was incensed, and whenever they were together they would argue."

Orville couldn't understand why his own son had rejected him. Suddenly he had time on his hands and he spent it in the bars. Sadly, the only times they got along were after Lonnie turned 18 and they started drinking together.

"It seemed like they were always at that dirty little bar on Main Street," Mrs. Greggs said sorrowfully as she stared out the window. "That's what they were doing the night Orville died. Only this time they had a terrible fight."

"What about?" Jack wanted to keep her talking.

"What?" she asked, looking at Jack as if she had forgotten he was there.

"Why were they fighting?"

"Oh. Lonnie was driving on the way home and hit a mailbox. His father was upset because the headlight got broken. They were at the top of the stairs still arguing when Orville tripped and fell all the way to the bottom. He was in the hospital unconscious for two days, then he died. Lonnie has never forgiven himself. I tried to tell him it was an accident, but he wouldn't listen to me. He still blames himself. I thought he was making progress. Then that poor boy killed himself and it set Lonnie off again."

The doorbell interrupted her. "Excuse me please," she said, rushing out of the room.

Realizing he'd gotten all the information he could for now, Jack followed her. As he squeezed past her and a man in a dark business suit, she called out to him. "Mr.

Johnson, if you find my son, please tell him I love him and that God loves him too and will forgive him."

As Jack's eyes adjusted to the dim interior of the tavern, he had to agree with Mrs. Greggs. Cigarette butts littered the floor. Thick clouds of acrid smoke nearly made him choke. The one window was so grimy that kids passing on the sidewalk had used their fingers to write their names across the pane in the dirt.

Slouching behind the bar was a chubby man wearing a grease-spotted apron. His teeth clamped the stub of a cigar. He eyed Jack suspiciously. "What'll you have?"

"Information," Jack said, leaning on the bar. "I'm looking for Lonnie Greggs."

The man eyed Jack contemptuously. "Yeah? Who isn't? I don't know you and I ain't telling you nothin'." He started to turn away. Jack's hand shot out, grabbing him by the shirt collar. He muscled the man face down onto the bar.

"Now you listen to me, you little pipsqueak. I'm gonna find Greggs. And you're gonna tell me where he is or you're gonna eat that cigar."

The man struggled to speak with his mouth jammed against the sticky wood. Jack's iron grasp was keeping his neck immobilized. Grunting like a stuck hog, he wiggled his head back and forth until he was facing Jack's scowl. His jerky movements were so comical Jack had to force himself not to laugh. "Look mister," Pipsqueak sputtered as he spat out the crumpled stogie, "all I know is the last time he was in here, he was really scared and was talking about going to Ohio. Dayton, I think. Yeah, Dayton."

Chapter 7

Billy Bob's hands trembled as he strapped on the gun belt. In his excitement, he almost dropped his new .38. He had finally made it. He still couldn't believe it was real. Last week just as he came on duty, Sheriff Curry called him into his office. He felt as though his nerves would snap.

"Shut the door," the sheriff commanded.

Curry flipped through a file folder as Billy Bob anxiously crossed the office to stand before him. "How long have you been working here?" the chief asked without looking up.

Swallowing hard, Billy Bob answered, "Three years sir."

"You don't have to 'sir' me, son, I knew your father a long time before you were even born. Best law officer Sullivan County ever had. Why, if he hadn't been killed he'd probably be sheriff today."

Yes sir," Billy Bob said. He looked down at the floor as thoughts of his father flooded his mind.

"Sorry, didn't mean to bring up bad memories. Hey." Curry stood and stepped around the desk. He slapped the younger man on the back. "Hey, cheer up, this is a happy occasion. Randy Farley called from Elm Grove. You remember Farley."

Billy Bob nodded. Randy Farley, an overweight, jovial man in his mid-60s, was president of the bank and chairman of Elm Grove's town council.

"They're looking to hire a town marshal and I recommended you."

"Me?" Billy Bob shouted. "You really mean it? Me?" He grabbed Curry's hand in both of his, pumping it up and down. "I won't let you down, Sheriff."

"Now hold on," Curry said, laughing. "You still have to meet with the town council. But don't you worry," he added quickly as Billy Bob's face fell. "I'm sure there won't be a problem."

But there was. Eric Grey didn't think Billy Bob was 'law enforcement material,' as he put it. The council members sent Billy Bob out of the room while they decided his fate.

"Yes, I agree his father was a good deputy," Eric said grudgingly. "But I have a feeling."

"I laid him out myself," Jake Wilson interjected. "Biggest funeral our home ever handled."

"If he hadn't stopped those two miscreants, we could have lost every last nickel in that bank," Randy added.

"He wouldn't let me go near him 'til the other deputy arrived. Just laid there on the sidewalk, bleeding to death while he held his gun on them. Time they got here, it was too late," Doc Pritchard said, shaking his head sadly.

"I understand," Eric argued. "But Billy Bob's not his father. You forget, he worked for me."

"There's no comparison between working at a farm supplies store and enforcing the law. That boy is dedicated, just like his daddy was," Jake Wilson said.

"What precisely do you know that we don't?" Randy

asked, looking Eric in the eye. "Is he punctual? Is he a responsible employee?"

"Yes, he was always to work on time, and he worked hard when he was there, but I just have this feeling."

"We can't rely on feelings, Eric. We have to rely on facts. The facts are he's got a clean service record and was recommended by Sheriff Curry. And, he's willing to work for what we can pay." Randy Farley tapped the table with his pen for emphasis.

"You mark my words, you'll be sorry," Eric squawked, pounding his fists on the table and making the soda bottles jump.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Doc Pritchard scolded, spreading his hands as if smoothing a sheet. "I suggest we take a vote."

"I vote no," Eric growled, stepping to the window overlooking the street.

"All in favor," Randy said, raising his hand. Doc and Jake raised theirs. "Motion is carried," Randy declared. "Shall we call Mr. Strickland in and give him the good news?"

Sweat trickled down Billy Bob's back. For the last 10 minutes he had waited outside the bank president's office, agonizing over what they were saying. When Randy called him in, he knew instantly how the vote had gone. Randy, Doc and Jake smiled and shook hands with him. Eric stared out the window, frowning.

Too bad, Eric! Here he was: William Robert Strickland, Marshal of Elm Grove, Indiana! He stuck out his chest and gazed at himself in the full-length mirror. He had purchased it when he became a special deputy. Before that, he never liked looking at his reflection. But now—the belt holding his pistol, the handcuffs and nightstick, the

dark blue shirt, black hat, spit-shined shoes. Everything was perfect. But somehow, careful as he was, a glob of mayonnaise had dropped on his pants during supper. Tears welled up in his eyes as the messy stain stared back at him.

"Your appearance is one of the most important aspects of law enforcement," he remembered his father saying in his usual formal, officious tone. "If you look like a bum, people will treat you like a bum."

Hurrying to the bathroom, Billy Bob wiped away the mayonnaise with tissues, leaving a dark smear. Dabbing at the spot with a damp cloth helped but didn't remove all of it. Frantically, he kept rubbing and finally got it all out. Only now there was a big, dark wet spot.

Later, he maneuvered his new Chevy Impala down Main Street, stopping in front of the bank. He walked to the corner of the building where his father had died. "I made it, Dad. I'm a real police officer," Billy Bob said, his voice barely a whisper.

He drove around, patrolling the streets. Glancing at his watch, he saw it was 2 AM. Two hours to go. With his shift running from eight to four, the town council had agreed with his suggestion of checking on the church once a night.

"At least 'til the murderer is captured," Randy Farley had said. Everyone concurred except, of course, Eric.

Shutting off the headlights, Billy Bob eased the car into the parking lot. A figure stepped behind a large oak tree at the edge of the cemetery. Shielded behind the open car door, Billy Bob trained the spotlight on the tree with his shaking right hand while he held the cocked .38 in his left. "Freeze!" he yelled, his voice high to the point of cracking.

The figure stepped into the circle of light. Billy Bob relaxed as he recognized the tall, muscular figure of Jack Johnson.

Pointing the gun into the air, he pulled back the hammer to release it. His thumb slipped. The explosion reverberated through the trees. Jack dropped to the ground. Running to the prone man, Billy Bob grasped him by the arm. "Mr. Johnson, are you hurt? I'm sorry. I didn't know it was you."

"Is that why you tried to shoot me?" Jack said, regaining his footing.

"I thought it was the killer, you know, returning to the scene of the crime. Please don't tell anyone about this, Mr. Johnson. I could lose my job."

"I won't say anything as long you tell me everything you know about Lonnie Greggs," Jack said.

"Why?"

"Because I'm going after him, that's why!"

"But you don't even know where he is."

"You just leave that to me."

"I can't let you do that," Billy Bob said, backing up.

"I don't see you have much choice. If you tell anyone, I'll have to report you for trying to kill me," Jack said with a smug smile. "Boy, you're nervous as a cat. You better put that gun away before you shoot yourself in the foot."

Cautiously, Billy Bob replaced the .38 in its holster. "If you don't mind my asking, Mr. Johnson, what are you doing here?"

"I always come down and check on the church. Someone has to keep an eye on it, the church members don't seem to care. Every time I say something to them about it, they say God will take care of it. If that's true,

where was God the morning my daughter was killed?" Jack's tone was tinged with bitterness and resentment.

"I don't know," Billy Bob murmured, clearly uncomfortable with the subject. "But you don't have to worry, I'll be patrolling every night."

"Fine. I'll still be coming down here, though. I don't sleep as good as I used to. So don't shoot me, you hear?" Jack said, grinning.

"Yes sir," Billy Bob said, smiling.

Chapter 8

Ruth reached for the old wind-up alarm clock. Its illuminated face read 2:35. She didn't know what woke her. She thought she heard an explosion of some kind. She felt for Jack. Not there. She wasn't surprised. Snapping on the small bedside lamp, she went to the window. A figure ducked out of sight behind the tool shed. The man watched Jack cross the moonlit yard and enter the house. Ruth was reaching for her robe when she heard the back door open and close, then the familiar tread on the stairway.

"Jack, where have you been?" Ruth asked, laying her robe back over the chair.

"Out," he said.

"I can see that."

"So what's your question?"

"I thought I saw you by the tool shed."

"What is this? The third degree?" Sitting on the edge of the bed removing his shoes, Jack stopped and stared at his wife. His confrontational expression was something she'd never seen.

"Jack, I'm worried about you. You hardly sleep at all anymore," Ruth said, sliding into bed and pulling the covers up to her chin.

"I can take care of myself."

"Jack, there's a killer loose," Ruth said, tears forming in her eyes.

"Don't you think I know that? You want to know where I've been? I'll tell you. I've been down at the church."

"Why, Jack? Why would you go to the church at this hour? There's no one even living in the parsonage."

"You're just like the rest of them. I'll tell you one thing, Ruth. If it takes the rest of my life, I'm going to find whoever killed my daughter and make sure they die."

"Why can't you let the police handle it? They're trained for this."

"The police!" Jack spat out the words, his face twisting in rage. "The police couldn't find their nose in a hailstorm. It's been months and they're no closer than the day she died. Phillips has given up and Curry's put it on the back burner." He dropped a shoe to the floor with a bang.

"They haven't given up, Jack. Detective Phillips said the case won't be closed until they find the person responsible. Bob said the same thing."

Jack turned to look at her. "When did you see them?"

"I called Detective Phillips the other day when you was gone to town and I saw Bob Curry at church Sunday," Ruth answered.

"You didn't tell me you talked to Phillips."

"I tried to but you brushed me off. You started in about Lonnie Greggs again." Jack vaguely remembered a brief conversation where Ruth had mentioned Phillips.

"If they're so interested in finding the killer, why don't they go after Greggs?"

"Bob said they've cleared him as a suspect. His mother said he was home the night before and all that morning."

"His mother, his mother. Why does everyone believe her? I met the woman and she didn't impress me as someone who even knows what day it is."

"When did you meet her, Jack?"

"I went to Bloomfield the other day and I'll tell you, Ruth, the woman rents rooms and she thought I was a new boarder."

"Did you tell her you didn't want a room?"

"Not at first."

"Then that was just a simple mistake."

"Whose side are you on?" Jack snapped, jumping up from the bed.

"Jack, please. You'll wake Emily."

He lowered his voice. "I asked you a question, Ruth. Whose side are you on?"

"I'm on your side, of course. I just want them to arrest the right person."

"I know the right person. He was living in the church just a few days before they were killed. His only alibi is his mother and a girlfriend who want to see him get away with it."

"But why would he kill them?"

"Most likely he was robbing the church and Jim caught him."

"But the police said nothing was missing."

"Maybe the guy was drunk. Maybe Jim spooked him. I don't know yet, but I will. If Curry isn't going after him, I am."

"Oh, Jack, no!" Ruth's hand flew up to cover her mouth. "You can't!"

"Yes I can and I will! I've got to get out of here."

As he left, Emily appeared in the doorway. Her sleepy eyes followed Jack down the stairs. "Where's Gramps going?" she asked.

"He had to leave for a little while, but he'll be back. Come sleep with me," Ruth said, patting the bed.

"Okay Gram," Emily said, yawning.

Within two minutes, Emily was fast asleep. Lying in the darkness, Ruth tried to pray for her husband. The fear that he would never be saved kept nagging at the back of her mind. 'Oh Lord, I know you can do the impossible.'

As Jack threw open the barn door, a cow looked up and lowed softly. "Are you going to give me a hard time too?" he asked the animal. The cow stared at him, then went back to chewing her cud. Climbing to the loft, Jack settled down in a large pile of hay. Silver streaks of moonlight streamed through the open window, making the landscape almost as bright as day.

Jack closed his eyes, but sleep would not come. Thoughts ran through his mind until a plan began to form. A hundred yards away the murderer grinned as the light winked out in the house.

Chapter 9

In a far off city, Lonnie Greggs shivered on his cot as the nightmare unfolded. Dennis Brown chased him through fields of mud, nude except for a pair of white briefs, his denim jeans knotted tightly around his neck. With every step, the gooey earth beneath him sucked Lonnie's feet down deeper, yet Dennis seemed to fly at him unhindered. Prison bars flashed in front of Lonnie, squelching his attempt to escape. Turning, he faced the apparition.

His head swollen to three times its normal size, face blue, Dennis choked out, "Help me, help me, help me." His hands curled around Lonnie's throat. Squeezing, he repeated, "Help me, help me, help me."

"Go away, you're dead! Go away, leave me alone!" Lonnie screamed.

"Shut up!"

"Hey kid, knock it off."

"Go back to sleep."

"If he keeps making noise, let's kick him out."

Angry shouts came from every corner of the Mission's dorm room. Lonnie tried to act tough, but inside he trembled. "Yah, you just try it," he said in a rough voice. "We'll see who gets kicked out."

They was coming after him, he knew it, and this made the third mission he had stayed at in as many days. Tomorrow he would hitchhike to another city. Just keep moving, he told himself. They can't find you if you just keep moving.

Unable to sleep, Lonnie contemplated how far he had come in just a few short years. Scenes from his childhood, happy times, flashed before him. There was his father coming home from work late, Lonnie running to meet him and being swung up into his arms. With Lonnie perched on his shoulders, his father would march into the warm, cheery kitchen where his wife would have his supper plate warming in the oven.

The scene changed to one of horror. He and his father drunk, fighting; Lonnie striking his father and watching him lose his balance and tumble head over heels in slow motion down the stairs. His mother screaming. The doctor facing them in that sterile waiting room, telling them his father had expired. Expired. What kind of word was that? The kind of word you would use for a driver's license or a grocery store coupon. Not the kind of word you would use for the man who raised you, who tucked you in at night or tiptoed into your room after you had fallen asleep waiting for him. No, not a word you would use for a loving father and husband.

Tomorrow would be another day of walking, hoping for a ride, trying to ignore his growling stomach and chattering teeth, praying no cop would stop, walking until he dropped in a ditch. At least he would have one good meal before he left. This mission served oatmeal. He thought of all the times his mother had tried to get him to eat it and he had refused.

"This stuff is made for horses, Mom," he complained.

"You eat it. It'll stick to your ribs."

"Yeah, it probably will. It sticks to everything else," he would answer, holding his spoon upside down over the bowl. He could still hear his mother's laughter echo through all those years.

Through the only window in the room, he watched the sky turn pink, then gold. Soon a man in a dark gray suit entered the dorm. At the sight of him, some of the men got up and started to dress.

"Good morning, gentlemen, I'm Arthur Caldwell, director of Good Shepherd Mission. If you would please gather in the chapel when you're dressed, we will have our morning devotions. Then breakfast will be served in the dining hall. The Lord has blessed us this morning. A benefactor has given us enough eggs and bacon for all of you gentlemen and the staff as well."

By the time Reverend Caldwell was halfway through the story of the Prodigal Son, Lonnie's mouth was watering. The smell of sizzling bacon wafted through the building. After the final amen, everyone filed into the mess hall.

A smiling man in a white uniform with the word, 'Volunteer' stitched over the pocket of his shirt poured Lonnie a cup of coffee. Breathing in the scent of the steaming liquid with his eyes closed, Lonnie thought he heard a familiar voice. Glancing to his right, he saw Jack Johnson speaking to the director.

Jerking around, Lonnie upset the cup of hot coffee and watched it spill all over the giant of a man sitting next to him. The man howled in pain. Grabbing Lonnie by the collar, he punched him in the jaw and sent him spinning

into the wall. "You ain't been nothin' but trouble since you got here!" he growled.

"Hey, it was an accident. Leave him alone," a blonde-haired man in baggy clothing said as he came around the table.

"Oh, you want some of it too?" Catching the blonde man off guard, the giant socked him in the gut. The man stumbled backward, crashing into a nearby table. A huge pot of coffee flew off its base. The pot hung suspended in the air for a split second, then plunged to the floor with a loud bang. Two gallons of coffee splashed against the white wall, staining it brown as it dripped down and puddled on the linoleum. Instantly, the usually quiet dining room became a battle zone with men choosing sides, flailing at one another, or climbing on tables for a better view.

In the midst of the chaos, a few men remained seated and ducked flying chairs, plates, and cups as they wolfed down the food on their own plates, then grabbed for those abandoned by the combatants. With Jack two steps behind, Reverend Caldwell rushed into the melee.

"Men, men, please!" Reverend Caldwell shouted to no avail.

Barging into the midst of the brawl, Jack began pulling men apart, tossing them left and right. Finally, he worked his way down to the big man, pinning him against the wall. The man swung wildly, hitting Jack in the eye.

Reverend Caldwell ran up and grabbed the man's arm as he tried to swing at Jack again. "Stop this immediately!" he demanded.

Escaping through the kitchen, Lonnie didn't slow down until he was two blocks away. Looking over his

shoulder, he hurried around a corner and melded with the crowd on the sidewalk.

Once order was restored, Rev. Caldwell sent one of his staff to look for Lonnie. Returning to his office, he said regretfully, "I'm sorry, Mr. Johnson, we've searched the building but Lonnie isn't here.

"Are you sure? Or maybe you're hiding him somewhere 'til I'm gone?" Jack needled, his face turning red.

Reverend Caldwell was taken aback. "I assure you, Mr. Johnson, Lonnie isn't here. You're welcome to search the building if you like," he said.

Since leaving his home, Jack had chased Lonnie clear across Indiana and halfway through Ohio. After scouring the mission himself, Jack now had to face the fact that Lonnie had eluded him once more. After searching the city all day, Jack returned to the mission in time for the evening meal.

Arthur Caldwell met him with a smile. "Mr. Johnson, I'm so glad to see you. I feared you had already left our fair city."

Jack frowned.

"One of our men spoke to your stepson last night. He tells me Lonnie informed him that he was going back to Indiana, possibly Indianapolis."

Jack felt ashamed for telling the minister that Lonnie was his stepson. Lying went against everything he stood for. However, after being truthful with the director of the last mission, the man had refused to give him any information.

Jack gassed up the truck and headed for Indianapolis.

Chapter 10

"What's your dolly's name?"

Emily had not heard the man approaching. She looked up into his smiling face. "Sarah," she said shyly, hugging the doll to herself. "Are you a policeman?"

"Yes honey, I am," Billy Bob said, trying to stretch his five feet six inches height to more than it was.

"Daddy said policemen are good and we can trust them."

"That's right, you can," Billy Bob said reassuringly. "Where's your grandpa, honey?"

"He's not here. He went on a long trip. But Gram is." Before Billy Bob could react, Emily took hold of his hand and was tugging him into the house.

Ruth was taking an apple pie out of the oven as Emily came in followed by the small man in a police officer's uniform. Known for her pies throughout the county, Ruth had won many blue ribbons at the county fair.

Today she was baking just to keep busy. Jack had been gone for eight days. During that time he had called only twice. Ruth knew that was to keep expenses down,

but it did nothing to soothe her nerves. This afternoon, she had let Emily play outside, the November day being unseasonably warm.

"Well, who do we have here?" Ruth asked Emily as she gave the man a friendly smile.

"Billy Bob Strickland, ma'am." Billy Bob held out his left hand as his right was still in Emily's grip.

"You're the new town marshal Jack was telling me about." Ruth tried not to stare at his ears.

"All good, I hope," Billy Bob said with a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. There was something about his eyes Ruth didn't like. She turned back to the oven.

"Oh yes. Jack was good friends with your father. They grew up together."

"Yeah, Dad was quite a guy," Billy Bob said. His tone was a little too cheerful and struck Ruth as more sarcastic than sincere.

"Emily tells me Mr. Johnson went on a trip."

"Yes," Ruth said, her face showing concern. "He's looking for Lonnie Greggs."

Billy Bob's heart stopped. He hoped Jack had been bluffing. "That's a very dangerous thing to do," he said, his voice rising.

"I know. I tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn't listen."

"Do you know where he is now?" Billy Bob asked more calmly.

Before answering, Ruth turned to her granddaughter. "Emily, why don't you play with Sarah on the porch? I'll call you when the pies are cool and we'll have some together."

"Will you have some too?" Emily asked, smiling up at Billy Bob. "Gram makes the best pies."

"Yes, please do," Ruth said. "I'm not sure they're the best, but I'll put on a pot of coffee if you'll stay."

"I'd be glad to," Billy Bob said, winking at Emily. "Thank you."

With Emily out of earshot, Ruth replied to Billy Bob's question. "He called two days ago from Ohio. He wouldn't tell me where, but he said he had information that Lonnie was staying at a mission there." She stood up. "Coffee's done. Do you take cream and sugar?"

"Ma'am, I'm sorry. I just remembered a call I have to make." With that, Billy Bob abruptly walked out, leaving Ruth holding the coffee pot in one hand and his cup in the other.

Back in the patrol car, he picked up the mike and held it for a moment. "Nope, I'll take care of Lonnie Greggs myself," he said, smiling self-importantly as he replaced it. A dark cloud scuttled overhead. "As for Jack Johnson? The old man could get hurt."

"Gram, when is Gramps coming home?" Emily asked between bites.

"Real soon, sweetheart."

The little girl got up and stood at Ruth's side, her innocent face etched with worry. "He didn't go to heaven, did he?"

"Oh honey," Ruth said, gathering Emily up in her arms and nuzzling her hair. "No, Gramps did not go to heaven."

Lonnie's head buzzed. He had made it almost to the Indiana state line near Richmond by a little after midnight when a semi pulled up alongside. He was grateful for the ride, but the truck had no muffler, just a rusted piece of pipe welded onto a second pipe that disappeared under the cab. He tried to make conversation but was growing tired of yelling over the noise.

"How long you been a trucker?" he shouted.

The man took his right hand off the steering wheel and cupped it around his ear. "Huh?" he yelled back with a clownishly quizzical expression.

"How long you been driving?" Lonnie repeated, louder this time.

"Long time. Over twenty years." Suddenly, the man leaned forward and hung over the wheel, pressing hard on the gas pedal and jerking the wheel from side to side. Lonnie watched the speedometer climb to 70, then 75. The man grinned mischievously at Lonnie and broke into a high, shrill laugh that soared over the roar of the engine. Choking down terror, Lonnie braced himself, clutching the seat as the big rig thundered through the night.

Twenty miles back, Jack laid the .38 Eric had loaned him on the seat beside him, covering it with his heavy coat. "Jack, if you're serious about going after Lonnie, you'd better have some protection," Eric had said as he handed him the gun.

"I can handle him," Jack countered, trying to give it back. In the end, he let Eric persuade him to take the pistol. Now he wished he hadn't. He doubted that Lonnie was armed. He'd run off without his bag containing his few worldly possessions. Reverend Caldwell had insisted

Jack take it. Inside were two pairs of underwear, a shirt, a pair of pants, three dollars and a gold pocket watch. That seemed to be the extent of everything the man owned.

Rummaging in the bottom of the bag, Jack found a letter written in a tiny feminine hand. The letter had been forwarded to the Good Shepherd Mission from an address in Indianapolis. Jack felt relief wash over him. As big as Indianapolis was, Jack hadn't a clue where to start looking. Thanks to the letter, now he did.

Dear Son,

I love you and miss you so much. Please come home. The police were here again today. They just want to talk to you. I know you didn't kill that minister and his wife. Come home, Lonnie. I'll do all I can to help you. Please. I have forgiven you and God will too if only you'll ask Him. Love, Mom

Feeling as though he'd invaded Mrs. Gregg's heart, Jack folded up the letter and pushed it back into the bag.

Still barreling along at 70, the semi careened into Greenfield. "Don't you think you should slow down?" Lonnie asked in a trembling voice as he watched a looming stoplight turn from green to yellow to red.

"You telling me how to drive?" the man snarled. Glaring at Lonnie, he didn't see the white Ford station wagon until it was almost too late. He whipped the rig to the side, missing the station wagon by inches. Lonnie caught a glimpse the man and woman inside, their mouths agape with horror as the semi hurtled past. He saw the Ford swerve wildly before it disappeared from sight. Out of control, the huge truck wiped out two parked cars, crushing them like tin cans. The back right wheel of the trailer came to rest on the hood of the second car.

The driver shook his rattling head. "Quite a ride, huh, boy?" He smiled crazily at Lonnie.

Lonnie fumbled for the door handle. Finding it, he yanked open the door and tumbled to the ground. He was on his feet in a flash, racing into the night with the man's maniacal laughter ringing in his ears. From the crumpled station wagon sitting crossways in the street, Lonnie could hear the woman screaming.

Chapter 11

Jack drove around for hours trying to find 685 Holt Street. Finally, he pulled up to an old, run-down two-story brick apartment house. The once black wrought-iron railing was now mainly rust and wobbled under his grasp. Stepping into the tiny entrance, Jack found the mailbox he was looking for.

After receiving no answer at the apartment door, Jack returned to the pickup. He had parked on the same side of the street as the building where he had a good view of its front and back. With parking places at a premium, he felt lucky to have found this spot.

As soon as he switched off the engine, doubts began to crowd his mind. What if Lonnie recognized him? Would he recognize the pickup before Jack could get close enough to hold the gun on him? Maybe he should call the police. No, he was taking Lonnie back himself. And why

worry about any of that now? Lonnie might not even show. But this was the best lead he had. Jack settled back in the seat, pulling his hat down over his eyes. A light snow started falling as if God was trying to cover the filthy street.

Ruth awoke to the freshness of a crisp winter day. A pink sun was just peeking over the horizon. She loved winter almost as much as spring. The world seemed so bright, clean and unspoiled with its covering of new snow. There was no hint that a cruel world lay out there, a world that allowed Kristie and Jim to be murdered and leave Emily an orphan.

Ruth cried in her heart as she looked out at the breathtaking landscape. Oh Jack, I miss you so much. Lord, please protect him.

Looking in on Emily, Ruth found her still sleeping peacefully. Donning her heavy work coat, she stepped out into the crisp morning breeze. The air was filled with the lowing of cattle waiting to be fed.

Ruth smiled ironically as she headed toward the herd. "So much for the peace and quiet of the country," she said aloud. At the sound of her voice, the cattle hushed, then resumed even more intensely.

Trudging to the barn, she climbed to the loft. Before leaving, Jack had stacked several bales of hay around the trap door over the feeding trough. Ruth pulled five of them from the dwindling pile, cutting the wires that bound them together. As she dropped the last bale, she lost her balance. She would have fallen to the floor below but for the rough frame of two-by-fours Jack had built around the opening

for that very purpose. Falling to the floor of the loft, Ruth twisted her ankle. Crying out in pain, she felt faint. After lying there for a few moments, she was able to climb down the ladder, grimacing in pain.

By the time she finished milking the cows and feeding the chickens, her ankle had swollen to twice its normal size. Limping back in the house, she filled a galvanized bucket with warm water and several teaspoons of Epsom salts. Lowering her foot into the soothing liquid, she groaned.

At that moment, Emily came into the kitchen. Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes with the back of her fists, she ran to her grandmother and knelt down, tenderly touching Ruth's swollen ankle.

"What happened, Gram?" she asked worriedly.

"Oh nothing, honey, I just twisted my ankle. What would you like for breakfast?"

"I'll get it," Emily shouted. Before Ruth could stop her, Emily darted to the refrigerator. Opening the door, she lugged the big glass jar of milk from the shelf. Struggling under its weight, she maneuvered it toward the table. Ruth reached out her hands to catch the jar just as it slipped from Emily's grasp.

With Emily taking as much charge as her six years could manage, they finished breakfast and washed the dishes. Although Ruth did most of the work, Emily followed her grandmother's instruction and contributed enough to win Gram's praise. Ruth had just sat down with a second cup of coffee when the phone rang. She hobbled over and lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hello, Ruth, how are you?" Mary Turner asked.

"I'm okay, Mary, just a little lonely." Ruth sighed. It was too much to hope Jack would call this early in the morning.

"Jack's still not back?"

"No."

"Gram hurt her foot," Emily said loudly as she stood at Ruth's elbow.

"What happened, Ruth?"

"Oh, I just twisted my ankle. I'll be fine."

"You stay right there. I'll have Jacob drive me over."

"No, Mary. That won't be necessary. I've already done the outside chores."

"Not another word, I'll be right there."

A half-hour later, Mary Turner was in Ruth's kitchen mixing up a poultice of yellow clay. Turning to Ruth's outstretched leg, she applied the mud to her ankle and foot.

"My mother used yellow clay on me when I was a child," Mary reminisced. "She said God blessed Indiana with the medicinal properties of clay because it wasn't much good for farming."

Not wanting to trivialize Mary's efforts, Ruth didn't mention that she'd used the same mixture all her adult life. "How long should I leave it on?" she asked.

"'Til it dries. I'd say around couple of hours. Oh dear, I guess I should have asked you if you wanted to go into the living room with Emily and Jacob before I put it on." Before Ruth could respond, Mary was helping her to her feet. "Lean on me," she said, slipping her arm around Ruth's waist.

Jacob Turner was sprawled on the floor. Except for his gray hair and gnarled hands, he looked like an oversized boy. Brightly colored pieces of a board game were spread out between him and Emily. As Mary helped

her into a chair, Ruth heard Emily remark in a lost little girl voice, "Gramps don't play games with me anymore."

In Indianapolis, Jack jerked upright. A man was walking toward the apartment house. His long hair, scraggly beard and filthy clothes almost disguised his identity. Mounting the steps, his head turned in all directions, then his gaze froze on Jack. Their eyes locked. It was Greggs. Despite his appearance, Jack recognized him from the picture in his high school yearbook. Vaulting over the iron railing, Lonnie's foot rolled on a beer bottle and he landed smack on his back.

Scrambling to his feet, he was about to take off when Jack's hand clamped down on his shoulder and spun him around. "You murdered my daughter!" Jack bellowed.

A terrified look splashed across Lonnie's face just before Jack's fist smashed into it, crushing his nose. Blood sprayed across the pavement. "Please don't hurt me," Lonnie cried, covering his face with his hands.

"Hurt you? You rotten, stinking coward, I'm gonna kill you right here!" Jack pulled Eric's gun from his belt.

Lonnie's face turned deathly white. "No, Mr. Johnson. I swear I didn't kill them."

"You filthy liar, you might as well tell the truth, you're gonna die anyway," Jack said, laying the muzzle on the bridge of Lonnie's bleeding nose. Staring straight in the quaking man's eyes, Jack cocked the hammer.

"God help me," Lonnie said in a faint whisper.

As he squeezed the trigger, Mrs. Greggs' parting words rang in Jack's ears. "Mr. Johnson, if you find my

son, tell him I love him, that God loves him too and will forgive him." ... *forgive him ...forgive him.*

Uncocking the pistol, Jack shouted, "Get on your feet!" When Lonnie didn't immediately obey, Jack hauled him up by the nape of the neck and pushed him toward the truck.

Holding his hand over his throbbing nose, Lonnie whimpered, "Where are you taking me?"

"Back to Sullivan County to stand trial for murdering my daughter and son-in-law," Jack said, shoving him into the truck. Reaching under the seat, Jack pulled out a rope made from bailer twine.

"But I didn't do it, I wasn't anywhere near there. I was home," Lonnie sobbed, his big tears carving streaks in his dirty face and catching in his beard.

"Hold out your hands," Jack ordered.

Lonnie held out his hands palms up as a child would when expecting a treat. Winding the rope around Lonnie's wrists, Jack wrapped it around his legs and secured it with a solid knot.

Lonnie was silent until they were nearing Plainfield. "Mr. Johnson, I want you to know, I didn't kill them. I really liked Jim and Kristie. They treated me like part of their family."

Jack shot him a contemptuous glance.

"I ate with them, I played with Emily. Because of them, I really believed I was going to make it this time."

"Sure, you had this wonderful time with them, took advantage of their good nature, then went and got drunk and wound up in jail. Then you got out, and killed them!" Jack's harsh, accusatory tone made Lonnie cringe.

"No I did not. Please listen to me. I was helping Pastor Jim in the garden one morning when Kristie called

to me that I had a phone call. I thought it was my mom wanting me to come home. But it was a man. He told me to keep my mouth shut. If I didn't, my mother would end up like Denny Brown. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't tell Jim about it. I was afraid to cuz this guy would kill my mother. So I went for the same solution I used for years. I got drunk."

Jack eyed him with a half-smile, half sneer. "You expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth, Mr. Johnson. When I heard they were dead, I knew that guy killed them." Lonnie lapsed into silence and stared out the window.

"Yeah, the voice on the phone." Jack's mocking tone made Lonnie's heart sink. He knew he didn't believe a word he had said.

Chapter 12

They were traveling on US 41 a mile south of Farmersburg when the shots rang out. Lonnie slumped over in the seat as shards of glass showered them both. A small hole in the side of his head oozed blood. Swinging the pickup into the northbound lane, Jack almost collided head on with a blue Oldsmobile.

The next shot shattered the windshield and came within inches of Jack's right ear. Whipping the truck back into the southbound lane, he pounded the gas pedal as a semi roared by with its air horn screaming.

Jack pressed the pedal harder and the speedometer climbed to 70, then 80. He passed a milk truck on the shoulder, almost losing control as the right wheels rumbled in the ditch. It wasn't until he entered Sullivan that Jack felt the danger was past. Stopping the truck on a side street, he removed the rope from Lonnie's wrists and legs. Lonnie was unconscious, his breathing shallow. Jack swallowed hard and fought back the urge to vomit.

Pulling back into traffic, he sped to Mary Sherman Hospital, blowing the truck's horn as he approached the emergency entrance.

"Here now, quit blowing that horn! This is a hospital!" a heavy-set nurse yelled as she exited the building and hurried to the truck. She took one look at Lonnie and began shouting orders to the staff members who had followed her.

Forty-five minutes later, Jack was sitting in the waiting room when Bob Curry entered with Ike Harris and Billy Bob right behind him.

"Jack, I want an explanation and I want it now! They tell me you brought in Lonnie Greggs with a broken nose and all shot up. You'd better have a good story or a good lawyer," Curry growled.

Jack bristled. "Did you see the windows of the truck? If you had done your job, I wouldn't have had to bring him in myself. If you look at my pickup, you'll see I was shot at, too. Now unless you're going to arrest me, I'm going home." Without waiting for an answer, Jack started for the door.

"Don't you even want to know about Lonnie?" Ike called after him.

"Why should I care? Just don't let him get away this time. I want him nice and healthy to stand trial."

"There won't be any trial," Curry said.

"What?" Jack shouted, turning on his heel and starting toward them. "What do you mean?"

As Billy Bob reached for his revolver, Curry quickly laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"He's dead, Jack. He died five minutes ago," Ike said matter-of-factly.

Jack sank into a chair, the color draining from his face. "I never meant for this to happen. Yeah, I wanted him dead, but not like this."

"What did Lonnie tell you? Did he admit he killed them?" Curry asked.

"No. He told me how much he liked Jim and Kristie." Jack didn't mention the phone call Lonnie said he had gotten at the parsonage.

"I suppose you don't have any idea who shot at you either?" Ike said, giving Jack an icy stare.

"No, Harris, I was a little busy staying alive to ask the bullets who sent them. Why don't you take a ride up there? Maybe they'll shoot at you."

"Don't get smart with me, Johnson. I'll run you in."

"For what? Doing your job?"

"Ike, I want you and Billy Bob to go to Farmersburg and see what you can find," Curry interrupted.

Ike gave Jack a threatening look as he and Billy Bob headed out the door. Curry sighed. Jack asked him, "What's he got against me, anyway?"

Curry plopped down in the chair across from him. "Ike thinks you killed Jim and Kristie and now you're trying to cover your tracks."

Jack's jaw dropped. "Me?" He wagged his head in astonishment. "Bob, we've known each other a long time. You can't believe I would kill my own daughter."

"I don't, Jack, but you're in a tight spot and I may not be able to help you if anything else happens. My advice to you is go home, only leave the farm if you absolutely have to and do not, I repeat, do not leave the county for any reason."

Jack felt unfairly chastised but didn't care to argue. "Thanks Bob," he said as they both got up to leave.

Stopping at the mill, Jack didn't see the familiar red pickup. "Where's Eric?" he asked the man behind the counter.

"He said he had some errands to run in Terre Haute. He should be back any time now."

Fifteen minutes later, Eric came through the door, breathing hard. "Whew! I think I'd rather unload a semi than go to town," he exclaimed, wiping his brow.

"Customer waiting to see you," the counter man said.

"Jack!" Eric said, genuinely surprised. Ushering him into his living quarters, Eric closed the door. "Did you get him?"

"Yeah," was all Jack said as he handed Eric the .38.

Eric put the barrel to his nose and sniffed. "It hasn't been fired. Then he must still be alive?"

"No, he's dead."

"Dead? How?"

"Somebody shot at us just south of Farmersburg. Killed Lonnie, almost got me too."

"You're kidding."

"That's not something you kid about, Eric. Come take a look."

Seeing the windshield, Eric said, "Jack, I'm sorry I talked you into it."

"I made my own decision."

"Well at least Lonnie paid for his crime," Eric said.

"I'm not so sure."

Eric raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean if Lonnie was the killer, then who was shooting at us?"

Eric knitted his eyebrows and thought for a minute. "Someone who wanted to make sure he paid for it, you know, an eye for an eye," he ventured. "I don't think those church members are all as docile as they appear."

"But if that's true, why did they keep shooting after they hit him?"

"Maybe with the truck weaving around they couldn't tell if they hit him or not. If I were you Jack, I'd go home and get some rest. You look beat."

"I have to clean up this truck before Ruth sees it," Jack said, looking at the blood-splattered interior.

Once Jack was gone, Eric hurried through the store toward his private quarters. "Phil, go ahead and close up. I'll see you tomorrow," he called over his shoulder to the counter man.

"Sure thing, Mr. Grey," Phil mumbled to his boss's back.

Pulling a beer from the refrigerator, Eric pried off the cap. Taking a long swig, he sat down. It had been a long time since he'd been drunk, but he would be tonight.

As anxious as he was to get home, Jack forced himself to drive slowly. When he finally turned onto the gravel road leading to the farm, he wondered if he was mentally prepared to face Ruth and Emily. He hadn't bargained for an outcome even remotely resembling this. In a roundabout way, he had caused the death of another human being. He shivered at the thought.

What if Lonnie had been telling the truth? What if he wasn't the killer? That meant the person responsible for the

murders of Jim and Kristie—and Lonnie, Jack suddenly realized—was still out there, and whoever it was didn't want Lonnie to talk. Well, the murderer had silenced Jim, Kristie and Lonnie, but he wasn't going to stop him.

Jack smacked the dashboard with his fist, causing more of the shattered windshield to drop around him. With a new determination in his heart, Jack shut off the motor and let the truck coast to a stop on the back side of the tool shed.

Stepping inside, Jack grabbed a whisk broom and some rags. After sweeping out the glass, he had just dabbed handfuls of snow on the bloodstains dotted around the cab and was congratulating himself on not having to explain all this to Ruth. A loud gasp behind him snapped him out of his reverie.

"Jack, what happened? Are you all right?" Ruth stood wide-eyed, staring back and forth from the shattered windshield to the red-tinged rags lying at Jack's feet.

Jack hesitated. No, he wasn't all right. His insides felt like Jell-O. His daughter was dead, as was his son-in-law, and the person he was sure killed them had been killed as well. Most likely all three by the same person. Jack's family was still in danger.

"Yes Ruth, I'm okay," Jack lied. There was no use in making her worry.

"You found Lonnie Greggs, didn't you?" When he didn't answer, she pressed. "Jack, please tell me you didn't kill him," she said. Tears started flowing down her frozen cheeks. "Jack, please answer me!" she cried, her voice rising.

In one giant step, Jack stood over her and grasped her by the shoulders. "Keep your voice down," he said softly. "No, I didn't kill him. Someone else did."

Chapter 13

Jack prided himself on being able to deal with whatever life dished out, but facing Lonnie's mother, well, that was something else again.

"I'll go with you," Ruth offered. Grateful for her support, Jack agreed.

Mrs. Greggs was standing beside the casket. Her red eyes landed on Jack and Ruth as they entered the visitation room.

Freshly shaved, his hair cut and combed, Lonnie was wearing the same suit he wore in his yearbook photo. He looked almost 18 again. Jack expected a wild tirade; however, Mrs. Greggs greeted him in the same gentle manner he remembered.

"Mr. Johnson. I'm so glad you came," she said, taking Jack's extended hand in both of hers. "And you must be Mrs. Johnson," she said, turning to Ruth.

"I'm so sorry," was all Ruth could think to say. Images of Rickie's funeral ran through her mind.

The lump in his throat growing by the second, all Jack could choke out was, "I'm sorry."

"It'll be all right. I knew it would come to this someday. I have the Lord and He'll comfort me."

After a few minutes, Jack excused himself and went outside. Leaning against the railing, he drew in great gulps of frigid air, oblivious to the stares of passersby. How

could that poor grieving woman be so kind? If it wasn't for him, her son would still be alive. I wish I could be like that. The thought surprised him.

The journey back to the farm was wordless. Seeing the strained emotions playing across Jack's face, Ruth knew he was deep in thought and prayed within herself.

For days, Jack walked the farm, barely eating, lying down only to rise again within the hour. Yet he never neglected the chores.

One afternoon, Jack brushed off the snow on the concrete bench under the huge white birch in the cemetery. The giant tree was said to have been planted by a grieving father over 100 years before. Its bare branches reached heavenward as if inviting angels to recline in them. For a long time Jack stared at the stone before him, his eyes tracing the words.

Jim and Kristie Mays, United in Life,
United in death, by faith in Christ

Jack addressed Jim's side of the stone. "How could you do this to me? To allow someone to stay in the church. To risk the lives of your wife and daughter."

His chin dropped to his chest and he lapsed into silence. After several moments, he talked to Kristie. "Emily misses you. The other day she asked me what heaven is like. I started to tell her there is no heaven or hell, there is just this life. But when I looked into those big blue eyes and remembered the day you asked me the same

question, I just couldn't do it. I couldn't see her cry like you did when I told you there was no heaven. So I told her to think of the happiest she has ever been and that's what heaven is like. That seemed to satisfy her. Later I heard her telling Ruth there are weddings and babies born every day in heaven, because her mommy said those were the happiest days of her life."

Across the fields, he could hear Randy Green calling his cows in for milking. Shadows on the old sundial said it was time to go. Standing, Jack started to leave, then paused and said to Jim and Kristie, "I hope Lonnie Greggs is there with you."

Ruth both dreaded and welcomed the coming of the holidays. Emily was convinced her parents would be back from heaven, if not for Thanksgiving then no later than Christmas. Nothing Ruth or Jack could say would dissuade her.

"Mommy said she and Daddy and me would always be together for Christmas."

On Thanksgiving Day, Ruth tried to interest Emily in helping her prepare the meal, but gave up after an hour. The child wanted nothing but to stand at the window and watch for her parents.

The sight of the tiny, dejected child broke Ruth's heart. The year before as she and Kristie worked in the kitchen, Emily had watched, her eyes wide with wonder as the huge golden turkey bursting with cornbread stuffing, vegetables and pumpkin pie were lovingly and skillfully prepared. She kept getting underfoot until Kristie sent her into the living room with the men.

Ruth was making the final preparations when there was a knock at the door. "I'll get it!" Emily shouted as she tore through the house and threw open the door. Before her stood a man in his late 20s with a woman a few years younger holding a five-year-old boy by the hand. All were attired in their Sunday best. Emily's disappointment turned to confusion. "You're not my mommy and daddy."

Standing behind her, Ruth greeted the young family and said, "Emily, this is Mr. and Mrs. Green and their son, Jeffrey. They just moved into the house at the end of the road. You remember Jeffrey from your Sunday school class."

"I saw you in church," Jeffrey said, cocking his head to one side. You sat with the girls."

"That's because I am a girl," Emily said, putting her hands on her hips.

"Yeah, you're right," Jeffrey said, looking Emily over from head to toe, taking in her curly blonde hair, frilly dress and patent leather slippers.

The statement broke the tension and caused the adults to laugh. Soon everyone was settled. The women were in the kitchen comparing recipes while Ruth kept an eye on the turkey. The men sat in the living room before a crackling fire Jack had lit in the fieldstone fireplace. He was giving Randy some pointers on farming.

In the corner of the dining room, Emily served Jeffrey Thanksgiving dinner on her doll table, seeming for the moment to have forgotten her vigil.

Jack kept stealing glances at Jeffrey, thinking of his own son. How old would he be now? About Randy's age. Jack found that hard to believe.

After the meal, Jack suggested he take Randy and Jeffrey on a tour of the farm. Having grown up in Terre

Haute, everything Randy knew about farming came from books.

"How many acres of soybeans are you figuring on putting in?" Jack asked as they walked a bean stubble field.

"I don't know," Randy admitted. "I've always heard you need to rotate crops and the farm had a hundred acres of corn this year. But I got a new book by a professor of agriculture. He says if you put enough chemicals on you can grow the same crops every year."

Jack snorted. "You need to listen to someone who's been farming for twenty or thirty years, not some guy who never set foot on a farm for more than five minutes."

The afternoon passed quickly. Ruth loved having a young wife in her kitchen again. She was aware of something stirring deeply within her that she hadn't felt in months.

"My biscuits don't bake up so flaky," Peggy said in a shy voice. "I baked a batch the other day that were so hard you could drive nails with them," she confided.

Ruth smiled. "The first time I made biscuits after Jack and I were married he almost broke a tooth on them. We gave them to the hens and they couldn't eat them either!" She laughed.

By the time the young couple was ready to leave, Jeffrey had to be carried to their truck. Having fallen asleep on the couch, he stirred as Randy lifted him. He opened his eyes and smiled, then cuddled deeper into his father's arm and closed them again.

Ruth's heart ached. She remembered how Rickie would respond the same way when Jack kept him out late while he finished some task.

Worn out from play, Emily dozed at the other end of the couch. After the Greens left, Jack tried to carefully pick her up to put her to bed for a nap before supper. When he touched her, she woke up with a start. "Did I miss them? Are they here?" she asked, yawning widely.

When her grandparents didn't answer, Emily's chin quivered and tears ran down her face. Kneeling down, Ruth gathered her granddaughter close. Finally the tears stopped. Emily wriggled out of Ruth's arms. Backing away, she declared, "I don't want to go to church anymore. God is mean. He took Mommy and Daddy and He won't let me see them anymore."

"You don't mean that, honey. You'll change your mind." Ruth said.

"No I won't! I won't! I won't!" Emily shouted, stamping her foot. "Even Gramps said God's mean, always taking our loved ones." With that she ran up the stairs to her room and slammed the door.

Ruth turned a reproachful eye to Jack. "Well thank you, Jack Johnson. I'm so glad we have an expert theologian in our home."

"I was just telling the truth," he answered quietly.

"You mean what you consider the truth, and now you're destroying the faith of your own granddaughter! Kristie worked so hard to build Emily's faith and you destroy it in one day!"

Ruth's eyes were blazing. Jack was startled. The mild-mannered, even-tempered woman he married rarely became angry. "I'll have you know something, Jack Johnson. I lost a daughter too, and despite what you thought of him, a wonderful son-in-law."

"I didn't think..."

"No, you never think of anyone's feelings but your own." Heading for the stairs, she paused. Her voice softened. "Someday you're going to find you need the Lord. I... I just hope it's not too late." Spinning on her heel, she hurried up the stairs to Emily's room as tears moistened her eyes.

On Sunday morning as Ruth dressed for church, she asked Emily again, "Please won't you come to church with me? All your little friends will be there."

"No," Emily said, her face creased in an angry frown, arms folded in front of her.

"Mrs. Hardesty will miss you. She says you're her best student."

Emily thought for a moment and almost relented, but again cried, "No!" this time with bold defiance. "I'm staying here with Gramps." Ruth sighed and left the room.

"Where are you going?" she asked Jack as he put on his coat.

"I'm driving you to church."

"I'll walk," Ruth said determinedly.

"Don't be foolish, Ruth, you'll freeze," Jack said, buttoning the last button.

"I said I will walk!" she said sternly, slamming the door behind her.

That afternoon as Ruth was reading, there was a knock at the front door. She opened it to find Janice Hardesty standing there. "Hello, Ruth, I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Of course not, Janice, please come in. I was just about to have a cup of coffee. Will you join me?"

They had just sat down at the kitchen table when, having heard the knock, Emily came downstairs to

investigate. Seeing Janice, she tried to frown but a smile broke through.

"I'm sorry," she said to Ruth. Then to Janice, "I'm sorry."

"I accept your apology, Emily," Ruth said, "but I'm not the one you offended."

"I'm sorry, Jesus," Emily said somberly.

Chapter 14

On the first Saturday in December, Jack came in after finishing the morning chores. Shaking the snow off his boots, he set them on the back porch. "It's coming down heavy, looks like we'll get a foot or two!" he called.

"Can we build a snowman, pleeease?" Emily cried, running to the window.

"You know, that's just what our yard needs to make it look like Christmas," Ruth said.

"Okay, let's hurry!" Emily said, running to the table. Climbing into her chair, she turned over the cereal box and filled her bowl to the brim. Ruth took the bowl and poured half of it back into the box.

"Your eyes are much bigger than your stomach," she said, laughing.

By the time Ruth had washed the breakfast dishes, Emily was becoming more and more impatient. Dragging Ruth's coat into the kitchen, she said, "I got your coat, Gram."

"So I see," Ruth said with a slight grimace as she dried her hands before retrieving the coat from the little girl's grasp.

The snowman went up quickly.

"Sure is a good looking snowman," Jack said, pushing in the carrot nose.

"It needs something," Ruth said, her head cocked to the side. "I know!"

Snatching Jack's hat, she shoved it down onto the snowman's head and sprinted across the yard with Jack in pursuit.

"Hey! That's not fair," Jack yelled, scooping up snow as he ran. Catching her by the back gate, he dumped the snow on her head.

"Oh, that's cold!" Ruth said, throwing a snowball squarely into Jack's chest.

"So you want to play rough, do you?" Jack said, grinning. The air was quickly filled with snowballs and laughter. Emily danced around the snowman, clapping her hands with delight.

Returning to the warmth of the house, they enjoyed hot chocolate made from Ruth's special recipe.

"I think it's time we get our Christmas tree. I wonder who I could get to go with me?" Jack said, rubbing his chin as though in deep thought.

"Me! Me! Me!" Emily exclaimed, waving her hand in the air.

"Yeah, I guess you'll do," Jack said. "But first we have to get that chocolate ring off your mouth." Before either of them could stop her, Emily wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her sweater. After putting her in a clean one,

they set out. Jack insisted that Ruth and Emily ride on the sled while he pulled.

"Honey, I'm afraid you'll hurt yourself," Ruth protested.

"No, I'll be okay. Don't forget, you'll have to walk all the way back."

The powdered snow made it difficult to pull the small sled. Pausing on the footbridge spanning the frozen stream, Jack's eyes swept across the back pasture. "Well, what do you think?" he asked, breathing heavily.

Emily jumped off her grandmother's lap and scampered over the snow to a seven-foot blue spruce at the edge of the woods.

"This is OUR tree. It's per-zactly right!" she announced, her eyes shining. After Ruth and Emily scooped the snow from around the trunk with their hands, Jack cut down the tree with a bucksaw and lashed it to the sled. He and Ruth pulled the sled back to the house while Emily bounced across the snow in front of them. They hauled it into the living room and while Jack and Emily fitted it into the stand, Ruth went to the attic to get the ornaments.

When she didn't return, Jack went looking for her. He climbed the attic ladder to see Ruth kneeling by a box, holding one of Kristie's handmade ornaments. Her eyes were closed, tears trickled down her cheeks and her lips moved slightly. "...and Lord, fulfill Kristie's dream for her father to be saved," Jack heard her say softly.

Withdrawing quietly down the steps, Jack called, "Ruth, are you up there? We're ready to start decorating the tree!"

Drying her eyes and scooping up the box, she answered, "Be right there."

"My Mommy made that one when she was a little girl," Emily said, handing the star to Jack. "Let's put it high on the tree so Mommy and Daddy can see it from heaven."

Jack strung the lights while Ruth dug through the box and handed ornaments to Emily. Within minutes, the bottom of the tree was filled and they were ready to proceed upward to the top.

"Here, honey, let me give you a boost," Jack said. With an ornament in each hand, Emily took her time deciding where to hang them. By the time they finished decorating, Jack's arms were tired.

"Can we have a birthday party?" Emily murmured as she munched a cookie.

"Sure we can, honey, but you know your birthday isn't until April. That's almost five months away," Jack reminded her gently.

"Oh, no, not for me," Emily replied earnestly. "For Jesus!" There was an awkward pause.

"Tell you what," Ruth offered. "I'll talk to the men at the church. Maybe we can have it in the fellowship hall." She turned to Jack. "If that's all right with you."

"Um, uh, I guess, if that's what you want," Jack mumbled.

Emily was all smiles as she reached for another cookie. "Goody. And Gramps can play his fiddler."

Chapter 15

Jack and Emily were feeding the chickens when Bill Skinner came up the driveway in his pickup. "The deacons think the birthday party is a great idea. Only wish I'd thought of it," he chuckled. "They suggested we have it Sunday evening after the Christmas program."

"Hurray!" Emily shouted, jumping up and down and scattering feed as the chickens dashed for it.

"How's she doing, Jack?" Bill asked as they watched Emily run to the house to tell her grandmother the exciting news.

"Okay, I guess, but sometimes she'll stop whatever she's doing and stare down the road toward the parsonage," Jack answered sadly.

"We still have you folks on our payer list," Bill assured him.

"Thanks, I appreciate that," Jack said, not really meaning it.

"I better go. Time I get the hog feed unloaded, it'll be time for supper," Bill said as he started up the truck.

"Is your wife doing any better?" Jack asked.

Bill's hand rested on the gear shift as he gazed out at the fields. "Doctors say she's just getting old like me. They say her ticker will never get any better. She'll just have to take it easy. But," he smiled at Jack. "She'll be there Sunday night to meet the new pastor."

"New pastor?" It had never occurred to Jack that someone would be taking Jim's place.

"I'm sorry, I thought you knew. Around the middle of November, the church extended a call to Barry Wells. You remember, he's the one did the funeral. We didn't

think we had much of a chance of gettin' him, but two weeks ago he called and said he felt the Lord was callin' him here."

Jack frowned. "What about that big church he preaches at in Indianapolis? I hope he doesn't expect Elm Grove to match the salary they're paying him."

"We were concerned about that, too, but he said he knew the Lord would provide. Oh by the way, Emily told us about your offer to play your violin at the get-together. Everyone's are really looking forward to that. Well, we'll see you Sunday!" Bill backed out, waved goodbye, and headed down the road.

Jack stood stunned and highly annoyed before marching back to the house. As Emily ran into the kitchen, his stern look stopped her in her tracks. "Emily, did you tell Mr. Skinner I would play my fid... ah, violin at this party?"

"Yes," Emily said quietly, looking to her grandmother for help.

"Emily," Ruth said, kneeling down and pulling Emily to her. "You never tell anyone that someone will do something for them without asking first."

Bewildered and frustrated, Jack shook his head as he added, "Another thing you never do is give someone your word and then not fulfill it. I never told Mr. Skinner or any of the people at the church I would play for them. But because you did, I will. Next time, ask."

"I'm really sorry, Gramps." Emily stared at the floor with her mouth turned downward in a sad frown. "Next time I ask before I say anything." She looked at him and smiled. "But I know Jesus will like it."

A group of children marched onto the platform. After they were assembled, a small boy a little older than Emily stepped forward. At first his recitation was hesitant, then rose with confidence. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

Jack was surprised at the children's ability to memorize the songs and Bible verses. Standing in the front row with the smaller children, Emily's eyes searched the congregation for her grandfather. Spotting him in the second row, a big smile brightened her face. She raised her hand and waved.

Self-consciously, Jack lifted his hand halfway and waved back. He glanced around to see if anyone had noticed. All eyes were on the children. Ruth stepped up to lead them in singing "Joy to the World."

Retiring to the fellowship hall in the basement, the women moved swiftly to line the long tables with a huge variety of food. Different kinds of meat were placed at one end, then vegetables, salads and finally cakes, cookies and pies. When the preparations were complete, Jacob Turner raised his hand and called for order.

Jacob's great-grandfather had been a founder of Elm Grove Community Church and, as its head deacon, Jacob took his position seriously.

"Folks, it sure is great to see all of you here tonight. As many of you know, we've been doin' a lot of searchin' and prayin' for a new preacher since the untimely death of our beloved Pastor Mays and his wife. Some time ago, we asked Reverend Barry Wells to take over the leadership of Elm Grove. He graciously consented. Brother Wells," Jacob said, handing Barry a small white envelope, "here

are the keys to the parsonage and also a set of keys to the church. They've never been used, as Elm Grove Community Church is never closed. As head of the deacon board, I want to assure you of the absolute loyalty of the church."

"Longest speech I ever heard Jacob Turner make," Jack whispered, grinning at Ruth.

"Shhh, he'll hear you," she admonished.

With his wife at his side, Reverend Wells accepted the envelope. "Thank you, Brother Turner, I am humbled by your trust.

"Before we return thanks for all this good food and fellowship, I have two things I want to say. First," Barry looked into the smiling faces of the congregants, "I will do all I can to lead this church into a higher plane of spirituality. But I'm not here to replace your dear Pastor Jim and Kristie in your hearts, nor would I try.

"Second, all of us adults were so busy with our preparations for the holidays we forgot whose birthday we're celebrating. Except for one person, that is! Emily, come here please."

Several hands urged Emily forward. Standing with his hands on Emily's shoulders, Barry turned her around to face the people.

"If there is one outstanding quality I remember about Jim and Kristie, it was their kindness in thinking of others before themselves. It is so gratifying to see they have passed on that trait to their daughter."

After the meal, Jack played several Christmas carols. There was hearty applause at the end of each one, but Jack's stomach churned within him, fearing the sweet melody might betray the bitterness in his heart.

On their way to bed, Jack and Ruth stopped to check on Emily. As Ruth opened her bedroom door, a shaft of light fell across the sleeping child's face. Her thumb was in her mouth and with her other arm she hugged her doll.

"Her heart really is drawn to others, isn't it?" Ruth stated. "I just hope we can raise her the way Kristie and Jim would have." Jack remained silent, alone with his thoughts.

Jack had just finished the chores and put the coffee on when Emily descended the stairs with Ruth in tow.

"I guess we're opening presents before we have breakfast," he said, smiling. Not waiting for the coffee to finish perking, Jack poured two cups of the thick dark liquid with heaping spoons of cream and sugar.

Suddenly Emily stopped, then picked up a gaily-wrapped package. Struggling under its weight, she carried the gift to Jack.

"This is for you, Gramps," she said gleefully.

Relieving her of the heavy package, Jack said, "Now what can this be?"

"Why don't you open it and find out?" Ruth said, smiling.

Removing the wrapping paper, he stared in amazement at the set of socket tools.

"I saw they were gone, but all Harry Blackburn would tell me was he sold them!"

"Well he did!" Ruth laughed and Emily giggled.

Going to the tree, Jack picked up a square flat package. Carrying it carefully, he laid it in Ruth's lap.

"Jack, it's half as big as my kitchen table. What can it be?"

"Why don't you open it and find out?" Jack said unsmiling.

Seeing the seriousness in his face, Ruth removed the bright red paper from one side of the object. Kristie, Jim, and Emily smiled up at her. With trembling hands, she tore the rest of the covering from the other side of the portrait. Beside Jim stood Jack, his hands on Ruth's shoulders. Ruth was wearing her favorite blue dress, Jack had on the black suit he had worn to Jim and Kristie's funeral.

"How? How did you get it?" Ruth croaked, quickly wiping the tears away lest they fall on the painting.

"I saw an ad in the paper from an artist in Brown County. When I went to see him, I took your blue dress and the suit we bought for...." Breaking off, he watched Emily trace the outline of her mother and father's faces with delicate fingers.

"He said he could paint it from the pictures I left of them and us."

"This goes into a place of honor. Let's put it over the fireplace, Jack."

Taking down the picture of the farm, Jack hung the painting over the mantle. Hugging him tightly, Ruth said, "Thank you dear, that's the most wonderful gift I ever received."

Chapter 16

"What's wrong?" Eric asked from behind the cash register where he was counting the day's receipts. Jack had left ten minutes ago, or at least that is what Eric thought. Now he reentered the store sending the bell over the door jingling.

"Truck won't start," Jack said simply. "I knew the battery was getting old. I should have bought one a long time ago. What have you got that's cheap?"

"Sorry, Jack, I sold the last one today," Eric said apologetically. "I should get some more in tomorrow."

"I can't wait until tomorrow to go home."

"Tell you what. We'll load your feed in my pickup. You drive it home and tomorrow I'll have one of the men put a

new battery in yours. He can drive it out and pick up mine at the same time."

"What are you going to use to get around in?" Jack asked.

"Only place I'm going tonight is to the bank and you can drop me off there."

Jack had to admit the pickup was nice. Eric had purchased it at the Ford dealership in Farmersburg two months before. The truck glided over the chuckholes. Jack was so absorbed he forgot about the 'Grand Canyon', the nickname for a giantsized hole in this stretch of the road. Several of the farmers had filled it in but it kept washing out. As the truck hit the hole, it skidded sideways, then jerked back and came around throwing gravel. Fighting for control, Jack heard a loud clunk behind him.

"Oh no," he groaned. "That's all I need."

Finally, he pulled the pickup to the side of the road. With fear and dread, he examined it from one end to the other; not finding anything wrong, he heaved a sigh of relief.

"Maybe it was a rock," he muttered, opening the door. What he saw next sent a chill straight through him. Behind the seat, its barrel pointing at him, was a Winchester 30.30, its powerful scope gleaming in the winter sunlight. Underneath the rifle were several pieces of canvas neatly folded. Jack felt numb. Climbing in, he gently closed the door, then laying his forehead on the steering wheel, he wept. Though Bob had tried to keep it

from him, he had finally confided to Jack about the covers over the wheels and the killer's feet. He had also indicated the gun used to kill Lonnie Greggs was a Winchester 30-30.

Bob Curry stood in the Johnson's kitchen. They sent Emily into the living room. Jack and Ruth sat at the table before him; the chores still waited, their uneaten supper in set on the counter.

"After you called," Bob said to Jack and Ruth. "I spoke to the State Police. We were able to find out quite a bit about the man we know as Eric Grey."

"What do you mean, 'know as Eric Grey'?" Jack demanded. "That's not his name?"

"Oh his name is Eric, all right, Eric Warren. He changed his name after he was released from the state prison in Michigan City."

Jack felt as if someone had slapped him.

"What was he in there for?" he croaked.

Curry said reluctantly, "Manslaughter. He did five years for killing a man in a bar fight. He was sentenced up to twenty years but was released early for good behavior."

Their attention was drawn to Ike who had entered the room, a blast of cold air following him. Ike nodded. Curry sighed, the creases on his face deepening. To Ruth he seemed to age ten years before her eyes.

"Well, looks like we've got our man. The rifle is the same type used to kill Lonnie and the covers are the same size as the tires on the Eric's old truck."

"Ike, call Billy Bob. Tell him to meet us at the mill in five minutes. I want him involved in this."

"I'm going with you," Jack said, getting to his feet.

"Oh no you're not, not this time," Ike said. "We want him alive."

Jack's face turned red. He opened his mouth to speak but couldn't make the words come out.

"He's right Jack. Let us handle it. If he sees you, it may set him off," Bob said wearily.

Jack sunk back into his chair. The world was changing, shifting beneath him. Ruth laid a comforting hand on his arm, dabbing at her tears.

"I thought he was my friend," Jack said.

"We all did," Curry said.

Switching off the bubble and headlights, Bob guided the patrol car to a stop behind one of the grain bins. Its bulk shielded them from Eric's sight. Two minutes later, Billy Bob joined them.

Silently, they walked across the lot. Trying the door, Ike wasn't surprised to find it locked.

"We'll have to break the glass," Bob said. Turning his .38 around, he used the butt to shatter the window. In the quiet night, the breaking glass sounded like a small explosion.

In the back room, Eric turned down the volume on the radio. Was it his imagination? No, there it was again. Someone was breaking into the store. Going to his desk, he opened the drawer and pulled his pistol from its hiding place. He shut off the lights.

Jerking the door open, he caught the three police officers halfway through the store. Dropping down behind a display of handsaws, Bob Curry shouted in his most commanding voice.

"Eric Warren! Drop your weapon and come out with your hands up!"

In the light of a sign advertising seed corn, Bob could see Eric's shoulders slump. His gun crashed to the floor and at that moment, a shot rang out, the sound echoing around the walls of the small store. Eric dove behind the counter that ran the length of the store.

"Hold your fire! Eric, come out with your hands up!"

"No!" Eric shouted. "If I do, you'll kill me."

"Give it up Eric; no one is going to kill you. We know all about you."

Cautiously Eric stood up. He raised his hands, expecting the bullet that would end his life.

"But Sheriff, they released me. They said I was free." Twisting Eric's arms behind his back, Ike clamped the handcuffs on his wrists.

"I don't understand you. Why did you kill them?" Curry asked angrily. "And why did you kill Lonnie Greggs?"

Eric felt as if someone had closed his coffin.

"You can't think I did it," Eric stammered. "Billy Bob, you know me. You've worked for me, tell them."

Billy Bob just shook his head and walked away. "I'm going to look around, Sheriff," he said, taking a key from a ring beside the door. Within a few minutes, he was back.

"Not a very good hiding place," he said to Eric, holding up a large hunting knife encrusted in a brownish-red substance.

"That's not mine."

"I bet you never saw it before in your life," Ike said sarcastically.

"No. No. I never have."

In his cell, Eric felt himself transported back in time to another county jail. The old feeling of despair visited him again. Why not just give up, quit trying? No, I'm not going back to prison.

"Hey preacher killer!"

"You talking to me?" Eric asked, swinging to face the man leaning into his open cell door.

Further back in the bullpen stood two other men, their stares telling Eric there was going to be a fight.

"Yeah, you rotten coward. Pastor Jim was a friend of mine.

He used to come and have Bible study with us every Saturday.

Now you killed him and he don't come anymore."

"Yeah!" the other two yelled out behind him.

"He don't come here any more."

"No one does," another added.

Jack expected to feel relieved now that the killer was in jail. After all, the murderer was even at this moment safely locked up. But all he felt was emptiness and sorrow. His friend...or the man he thought was his friend, had murdered his own daughter. Tomorrow Eric would be

charged with the murder of Jim, Kristie, and Lonnie...no, today! It was almost morning.

The knocking on the door was loud and insistent. Billy Bob stood on the porch. His uniform was askew and his hair stuck out in all directions, giving him the appearance of a scarecrow. "He's escaped," he blurted out before Jack could even open the door.

Jack could see tears in the man's eyes. He couldn't help but feel sorry for him. The biggest arrest in the county's history, now Eric was gone.

Billy Bob's aggravation came not only from Eric's escape but from Bob Curry's lecture on firearms.

"I don't know what's wrong with you. You of all people know better than to shoot at a suspect when he's already surrendered."

"I'm sorry sir; I was just trying to scare him."

"Scare him? I should say you did. That bullet almost shaved him," Bob said. "Now get out of here, I've got to finish the paperwork."

At hearing the news, Jack's anger raged at Billy Bob. "How did they let him escape?"

"There was a fight in the jail, the dispatcher went in by himself to break it up, and when it was all over, Eric was gone," Billy Bob said, his voice breaking.

"How could you guys let this happen? What are doing about it?"

"We have every available man out searching for him, and the state police too."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Sheriff Curry sent me to protect you and your family."

"I can take care of Ruth and Emily myself. You get out there and find him," Jack said, gritting his teeth.

"I'm sorry sir, I have my orders."

"Well then, come on in. You're letting all the heat out."

"No, I'll stay out here."

Chapter 17

"I just can't believe Eric killed them," Jack said to Billy Bob.

"I know it's difficult to believe, sir, but we do have the evidence," Billy Bob said, helping himself to the last two strips of bacon.

Two nights had passed without incident but that did nothing to relieve either man's anxiety. Ruth poured coffee all around, then sat down. If Curry didn't find Eric soon, it was going to diminish her winter food supply. Billy Bob had been a guest at their table for less than forty-eight hours and already she had made three trips to the basement for more canned goods.

"Delicious breakfast, Mrs. Johnson," Billy Bob said, carefully wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"Thank you," Ruth said, gathering the dishes.

"But how do we know the murderer didn't plant the evidence?" Jack insisted, refusing to be put off.

Jack saw something in Billy Bob's eyes, then as quickly as it appeared, it was gone.

"He and Jack have been friends for years, he seemed like such a nice young man," Ruth chimed in.

"I have to go but I'll be back about five. If you see anything, call the sheriff and I'll be here in a few minutes."

Jack was chopping wood when the mail came. Rightly named for his flaming locks, 'Red' Miller took his job seriously.

"Jack, if somebody wants to leave you a note, tell 'em to stick it in your door. Anything goes in the mailbox gotta have a stamp on it," Red said, thrusting a white envelope into Jack's hand. Then he sped off on his appointed rounds.

The rest of the mail fell from Jack's trembling fingers as he stared stupidly at the envelope bearing his name. Numbly, he tore it open.

Jack, I'm sorry I had to do what I did. Jim knew about my stretch in prison.

I know it's too much to ask your and Ruth's forgiveness, but Kristie and Lonnie were unfortunate accidents. I can't go back to prison.

This note is your last warning. Please don't try to find me.

I would hate to have to hurt you. Don't tell the police about this note or you'll be sorry.

Good bye, Eric.

After some discussion, Ruth persuaded Jack to call the sheriff. Within the hour, a net was thrown up, its dimensions reaching from several miles behind the farm, up to and including Elm Grove.

The usually quiet town went into a panic. Doors left unlocked day and night were now double locked. Harry Blackburn kept busy selling locks, then chains after he sold out of locks. Mothers once content to let their children wander home, stopping to play at a friend's house or at the park, came to the school demanding that it be closed. After a hurried conference with the superintendent, the principal declared classes over at one 'clock.

Yellow buses rumbled over country roads. Children stared bug-eyed as their buses were stopped at roadblocks and searched by policemen wielding 12 gauge shotguns, looking to the children as big as missiles. Farmers that normally kept busy in their fields caring for their livestock

stayed close to home. Loading their guns, they made short patrols, checking and rechecking their out buildings.

Harriet kept busy answering questions and ringing up loved ones. Guarding their homes, each man reflected on the one they called 'Eric Grey', wondering what did they really know about the man.

As darkness fell, the nervousness increased. Eric was seen everywhere. A stump became a man. Dogs, sensing their masters' moods, barked at everything and nothing at all.

At a half-hour past sunset, they called off the search until daylight. Keeping the roadblocks in place, they guarded every possible escape route. Curry stationed one man at the farm store.

"I don't believe he's dumb enough to come back here, but you never know, so keep your eyes peeled," Curry said to the deputy.

Tensions ran high among the veteran lawmen who knew the kind of criminal they faced. News crews converged on the area. The manhunt drew national attention.

With the permission of the deacons, Sheriff Curry set up a command post in the church.

Cornering him, a field correspondent from CBS asked Sheriff

Curry, "Is it true you believe the death of Dennis Brown is connected with the Elm Grove murders? Wasn't the teenager's death ruled a suicide?"

"I'm sorry I have nothing to say on the matter," he said, brushing past the man. "Now if you'll excuse me."

Taking pity on the shivering reporters, Jacob addressed them as a whole.

"Men, you are welcome to use the parsonage. There's wood out back for the fireplace. Please make yourselves comfortable," he said as he unlocked the door.

"Who does the old man think we are? He should build the fire for us," a green reporter whispered, loud enough for Jacob to hear.

An aged correspondent who had served with Ernie Pyle answered him with contempt, "If you don't like it, stay outside."

Turning to Jacob, he said, "Thank you, sir. We'll take good care of the house."

Jack felt as if he were a prisoner in his own home. Over Billy Bob's protest, he took to walking around the house and barn with his shotgun loaded and ready.

"Mr. Johnson, I'm afraid I might mistake you for Eric and shoot you accidentally."

"If you can't tell the difference between me and Eric, you shouldn't be wearing a badge."

The next morning, the hunt resumed. The lawmen trudged through fields, pastures, and woods, warning the news media who accompanied them to stay well behind, out of the line of fire.

Dogs were brought in from Vigo County. The braying of the hounds did nothing to calm each mother's nerves. Their children pleaded to go outside to play, promising to stay in their own yards but their pleas fell on deaf ears. With the net tightening around the town, it remained shut down. Businessmen stood behind locked doors, ready to turn away customers but finding it unnecessary. The only one venturing out was Doc Pritchard on an emergency run to the Wilson farm, one of the lawmen having fallen down a small hill.

"He's got some cuts and bruises and a broken arm. You want me to send an escort with you, Doc?" Curry asked.

"That won't be necessary. I've been driving these roads for thirty years and no two-bit crook is going to stop me."

"Thank you, Doc. Be careful," Curry said, hanging up the phone.

By dusk, Curry had called an end to the search. They had reached the town at noon, taking it street by street like an invading army going door to door. They had even entered occupied homes.

At six, Curry called Jack, telling him that Eric had somehow slipped by them. Listening in, Harriet alerted the town. Eric was gone.

Randy Farley waved Billy Bob down on his way into town.

"I don't think we'll need your services any more, Billy Bob.
It looks like the danger's past."

"But who will protect Elm Grove?"

"Well," Randy drew back, reluctant to approach the subject. "I think Elm Grove has proven we are capable of protecting ourselves. With Sheriff Curry and the state police's help, of course."

"But, but I worked hard. I've worked my days off. I bought my own uniform, I even moved here." Billy Bob said, close to tears as his hands gripped the wheel.

"Yes I know," Randy said, "And I hope you will consider Elm Grove your home. Of course, we will pay you to the end of the month. I'm sorry, Billy Bob. You performed your job well and you can count on me, Jake, or Doc for a recommendation."

Billy Bob's face turned ugly. "Sorry?" he shouted. "Sorry? You just wait until the kill...er. Eric comes back. You'll be sorry alright. You'll come beggin' me to take this lousy lowpaying job again and I'll laugh in your face. You hear me. I'll laugh in your face!"

Randy jumped back as Billy Bob sped away.

Chapter 18

The red glow woke all of them, dancing across the walls of their bedrooms like the very flames of hell. Jack had fallen asleep at nine, exhausted from the day's activities. Putting Emily to bed at eight, Ruth spent a quiet time with the Lord before retiring.

"Gram, Gramps! The world's on fire!" Emily cried, running into Jack and Ruth's bedroom.

Half-dressed, Jack was shouting instructions to Ruth. "Call the fire department! Keep Emily in the house!"

"Can you tell what it is?" Ruth asked, knowing and dreading the answer.

"It's the barn, Ruth," Jack answered, stomping into his work boots, not bothering to lace them.

"Oh, dear Lord!"

The flames were licking the north wall by the time Jack reached the barn. Shielding his face with one hand, he ran around the burning structure and threw open the back door. Bawling pitifully, the cows stampeded through the opening almost knocking him off his feet. Jack knew that opening the double doors in front would create a draft, making the fire move faster, but he had no choice.

Swinging them open, he propped each door open with the rocks laid there for that purpose. Above the crackle of the fire, Jack could hear the wail of a siren in the distance.

The thought flashed through his mind, "They'll never make it."

The paint on the tractor was already starting to blister. Wincing at the pain, Jack climbed onto the seat. Flipping the switch, he pushed the starter button. Nothing! He tried it again. Still nothing. He was about to give up when heard a voice at his side.

"Take it out of gear, Jack, we'll push it out!" Jacob Turner shouted, throwing his weight against the rear wheel.

"It's too late!"

"No, we can get it," Randy Green said from the other side. They pushed it thirty feet and then other hands assisted when it was clear of the burning barn. The yard was filling up with pickups and cars. Jumping from the

tractor, Jack started back into the barn. Ernie Wilson stopped him.

"No, Jack, it's gone," Ernie said. Under his hands, he felt Jack's shoulders sag.

"Did you get the cattle out?" a gray-haired man leaning on a cane asked.

The fire trucks came roaring into the yard, followed by the tanker, and they drowned out Jack's answer. Within minutes, a strong stream of water was shooting into the flames. With the outside wall burned away, Jack watched his supply of winter hay go up in smoke.

He felt an arm slip around him. He looked down into Ruth's tear-stained face.

"Mary Skinner's taking care of her," she said, answering Jack's unasked question.

Hardened farmers watched with moist eyes, each picturing what the loss of a barn would mean to them.

The gray light of dawn was coloring the sky as the volunteer firemen loaded up their equipment. Jack walked around the smoldering ruin wondering what he would do. A group of farmers approached him.

Jacob Turner stepped out from the rest.

"Jack, we've been talking and we think together we can spare enough hay to get you through the winter. Also, some of us will be over later this week and help clean up before we put up a new barn."

"Haven't been to a barn raising in years. About time we had one," the man leaning on the cane said.

Heads nodding, the men voiced their approval.

"Mr. Johnson, your barn was set on fire. I must say I found it strange that a fire would start from faulty wiring when you informed me the electricity was off. That is right, is it not?" In his years as Fire Marshall, Scot Bell had heard every excuse and then some. Three days after the fire, Bell sat on the living room couch. On the coffee table before him lay his report of the fire. Sheriff Curry stood in front of the fireplace.

"Yes, I had shut it off because the mice had chewed a hole in the wire at the corn crib and I didn't have time to fix it."

"When we dug the switch box out of the rubble, it was on," Bell continued. "If we hadn't found a small amount of accelerant, possibly lighter fluid, I would have ruled this fire electrical, but in light of what you and Sheriff Curry tell me, I believe it was arson."

"Eric! Do you think Eric did this?" Jack choked out.

"I'll let Sheriff Curry answer that question," Bell said, gathering the papers together and stuffing them into his briefcase.

"Jack, the note you got from Eric is not from him. Oh, it's a very good forgery. It had me fooled for a while," Curry said.

"You mean Eric is innocent? Somebody planted the gun and canvas?"

"It could be the note was planted by a prankster. All I can say for the moment is the handwriting isn't Eric's."

The cold steel on Randy Farley's neck made him jump. He scolded himself for being so careless and not keeping a closer watch around him. He always arrived at the bank a half-hour earlier than the first employee since it gave him time to schedule the day's activities and to pray for the ones behind in their mortgage payments. Now it was going to cost him his life.

The man had not said a word but kept shoving notes under

Randy's nose. The first one read;

This is a holdup, just act natural.

If you try anything, I will kill you.

His nerves jangling, the bank president fumbled with the lock and dropped the keys. Snatching them off the

sidewalk, he tried again, succeeding this time. As they entered the bank, the robber pulled a paper bag and another note from his pocket. Randy's eyes focused on the writing.

Fill the bag with 20's, 50's, and 100's.

Don't tell me the safe won't open or that the town marshal will be making his rounds.

I know both are lies. Now make it fast.

After stuffing the bills into the paper bag and tying Randy up, the robber made his getaway through the back door.

Fortunately, either in a hurry or very carelessly, he had tied the knot loose enough that it proved insufficient to hold a desperate man. Not bothering to untie his feet, Randy hopped to a phone. He had just turned the crank when a sound made him whirl around. Standing just inside the back door, the sun silhouetting him like a medieval knight, was Billy Bob, gun drawn, paper bag in his left hand.

"Billy Bob! Thank God! How did you know?"

"I was remembering something my father said. Always complete a job and you are paying me to the end of the month."

"It's all here," Randy said excitedly, pounding Billy Bob on the back. "You're a hero son, just like your father."

"Not quite sir. I couldn't catch the robber. But he did drop the bag and this paper."

Billy Bob held out a crumbled piece of paper.

"It's one of the notes," Randy said.

"Yes sir. I believe if we compare this with the one sent to Mr. Johnson, we'll discover Eric robbed the bank to have money to make his getaway."

"That we will. But the state police say the note in Jack's mailbox was a forgery."

Billy Bob's mouth dropped open and his face went white.

At 9:15, the Indiana State Police stopped a car on Hwy 54, two miles west of Sullivan, bearing the description Billy Bob had given them. The driver, a salesman for a food supplier, offered no resistance but claimed no knowledge of the crime.

"Sure I was in Elm Grove. I call on the restaurant there this same time every week," he said, his voice trembling. A thorough search revealed a handgun and several paper bags of the same type used in the robbery.

The next morning, Billy Bob spread the Sullivan County Democrat out on his kitchen table. Above a picture of Billy Bob and Randy Farley, the headline read, 'HERO COP REHIRED BY TOWN'. A grin spread over Billy Bob's face.

The reporter quoted Randy. "We made a mistake letting him go and we feel very fortunate to have William Robert Strickland still living in our town."

Underneath was another article: Sheriff To Make Town Marshal Special Investigator. "Today Bob Curry named Town Marshall, William Robert Strickland, as a Special Deputy. One of Mr. Strickland's duties will be the investigation of the Elm Grove murders.

Chapter 19

Three days after the fire, Jack stood in the freezing morning mist. The charred remains of the barn looked even worse than he remembered. Life had taken a deadly turn in the last six months and he felt himself going down for the count.

Walking to where the tack room used to be, he stooped down to pick up a buckle. It was all that was left of the harness from Blackie, the horse he had purchased when he first started farming.

The horse hadn't only been a means of preparing and planting the soil, he was also a friend. Some days when Jack ate his noon meal in the field, Blackie would stand by waiting for a piece of his sandwich like a dog. When Jack bought his first tractor, Blackie's heart was broken. As he passed the pasture on his way to the field, Blackie whinnied so piteously that Jack had opened the gate to let him follow. Reaching the field, Jack had lowered the

plows into the ground, giving the tractor full throttle. Blackie tried to follow but he couldn't keep up. In the end, Jack slowed the tractor down to Blackie's pace. The horse continued to follow the tractor the rest of his life. One morning, Jack went to the barn and found Blackie still lying where he had gone to sleep, never to wake again. He had cried like a baby at the loss of his friend.

Rubbing the buckle on his pants leg, Jack stuffed it deep in his pocket of his overalls. Turning back to the house, he brushed a tear from his eye. The dozer would be here at nine. He still had a couple of hours.

With two minutes to spare, Nick Bailey pulled his dump truck into the barnyard. Loaded on the lowboy trailer was the small bulldozer.

"Sure sorry to hear about your trouble," Nick said, loosening the chains holding the Cat on. "Hear tell you didn't have any insurance."

"No," Jack said, becoming defensive. "With everything else going on, I forgot to send in the payment."

"Well, don't you worry about me," he said, adding, "You just pay me when you get it."

Jack wouldn't have let him do the work if he had known Nick wasn't going to charge him. They worked the rest of the day, carefully avoiding the concrete footers. Nick pushed the burned boards into a pile where Jack poured gas on them and set them on fire.

Ruth was always nervous when Jack was using gasoline. Several years before, he had caught his clothing on fire when the gas splashed on him. He had put the fire out in seconds but he couldn't hide the charred pants leg from her.

From behind a small rise in the south pasture, a man watched, fingering the cigarette lighter in his pocket.

Randy Farley was in the middle of a phone call to a farmer behind in his bills when Jack knocked on the open door. Nodding him to a chair, he tried to conclude the conversation.

"Yes, yes. I know it's been a rough year for you," he said, looking at the papers on the desk before him. "Tell you what I'll do, Frank. I can extend your loan another six months interest free. Maybe by then you'll be back on your feet."

He paused. "You're welcome. Glad I could be of service."

Randy hung up.

"Jack, it's a pleasure to see you," smiling, he stood up and shook Jack's hand warmly. "What can I do for you?"

Jack felt like a small boy in the principal's office. He hated asking for money but he had no choice.

"Well," he began, "You know my barn burned here a couple of weeks ago."

"Tragic, simply tragic," Randy said, shaking his head.

"Well, I need to borrow to replace it," Jack said, face reddening.

"How much do you need, Jack?" Randy asked, reaching into a drawer and laying out a contract on the desk.

Taking a deep breath, Jack said, "Eight thousand dollars."

Randy never blinked an eye. Leaning forward, he wrote the figure on the form sliding it across to Jack.

"Just sign it here and I'll write you a check."

"Don't you want me to list some collateral?"

"Jack, we've known each other for over forty years and every time you've borrowed from this bank, you've paid it off long before the note was due. I wouldn't even have you sign the contract if the Board of Directors didn't make me."

Emerging from the bank, Jack felt better than he had in a long time. Randy watched him go, then reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his checkbook and wrote a personal check for the interest on Frank Moore's loan.

Walking into Clem's Hardware, Jack noticed a sign taped to the front window in bold letters.

Old fashioned barn raising at the Johnson farm, Feb. 2.

Everyone welcome. Bring your saws, hammer, and a covered dish.

Please leave your children at home.

On the appointed day, Jack rose at four. After doublechecking the piles of lumber protected by canvas covers, he entered the kitchen to find Ruth fully dressed, frying bacon.

"You didn't need to get up so early. They won't be here for another two and a half hours," Jack said, plopping down in a chair.

"I'm not going to sleep while you do your work and mine too," she said, handing him a cup of steaming coffee. "Be careful, it's hot."

At 6:30, the first pickup rolled in. Three men piled out and started unloading tools from the bed of the truck.

"Gonna be a good day to work," one of them said to no one in particular, glancing at the stars.

Jack couldn't believe how fast the barn rose from a pile of disjointed lumber. By ten, the frame lay on the ground.

Attaching ropes to the beams, a dozen men pulled it upright while others propped boards against it to hold the frame in place.

In the kitchen, Ruth coordinated the baking, cooking of desserts, and constant making and distribution of coffee to the crews.

Emily was not allowed in the kitchen or outside so she wandered the house, spending most of her day watching the men from her bedroom window or holding tea parties for her dolls. At twelve, Ruth rang the dinner bell to call the men in. Soon they were seated in the kitchen, dining room, and the living room at tables borrowed from the church. The chatter was almost deafening, but they became silent when Jacob Turner called out in a commanding voice from the kitchen.

"Men, I know our fathers and grandfathers would be proud of the work we've done this morning. But we still got a ways to go. So I'm gonna ask Randy Green if he'll say grace and then we can dig into this delicious food."

Jacob wedged in between two beefy men as Randy rose.

Every head in all three rooms bowed.

"Heavenly Father, we thank thee for the opportunity of helping our neighbor and friend, Jack Johnson," Randy's voice creaked. "Thank you for this food, Amen." He sat down abruptly, his face red.

No one seemed to notice Randy's embarrassment as the talking resumed. Ruth and the other women were kept busy refilling plates and glasses. Anxious to finish, the men wolfed down pieces of apple, cherry, and blackberry pie and were back at work by 12:30.

As they covered the skeletal structure with 1 x 10's, the barn began to take shape. Jacob and Randy nailed boards onto the floor of the loft as quickly as Bill Skinner and Ernie Wilson could cut them. Tom Hadly had been an electrician in Cincinnati before coming to Elm Grove and opening his own store. Stringing electrical wire, he installed lights and receptacles.

Jack, not used to accepting help from anyone, worked diligently all afternoon without a break.

Billy Bob, inept at any carpentry skills, acted as a gopher. When the last pickup was gone, Jack and Ruth stood together, silently looking at the new barn.

Chapter 20

Crossing the creek, the man carefully placed his feet on the stones embedded in the muddy bank. The covers over his moccasins made his feet look as though they were encased in a strange type of boot. Carrying the rifle he had used to kill Lonnie, he carefully approached the church, skirting the clearing. Dark, heavy snow clouds covered the sun making it seem later than the four o'clock hour.

For a long time, the man stared at the spot where Kristie and Jim had fallen. Turning, he continued to the woods and came out at the Johnson farm. Seating himself on a stump, he waited.

He didn't have long to wait as ten minutes later, Jack's old pickup came rambling up the road. As the vehicle came to a stop, the man raised the rifle and laid the crosshairs of the powerful scope on Jack's huge chest.

Suddenly a thought came to him. He rejected it at first, then grinning, he lowered the rifle and melted back into

the shadows. The man shook his head. The voices had started up again. "You're stupid! Stupid. Stupid. You should have killed him! You can't do anything right."

"No, no I'm not. I've got a better idea."

"You never had a good idea in your life. You can't do anything right. The old man knows it was you."

"The police didn't. The... they...couldn't find anything and he won't either."

"They don't have a dead daughter, do they? He'll find it. The one clue you left behind. He'll keep digging and digging and digging until he does. Then they'll parade you through the streets for everyone to see. They'll all know about you. They'll know about the kind of person you really are. They'll strap you in the electric chair. They may even let the old man throw the switch. Everybody will laugh at you while you burn and burn and burn."

Falling to his knees, the man buried his head in his hands and covered his ears.

"No! No! No!"

The voice continued, "You'd better stop him before he finds it."

"I'll stop him; you wait and see," he said, driving his fist into a nearby tree and skinning his knuckles.

The next day, the man returned, his dark clothing making him a part of the landscape, merging with the trees and bushes.

The thick, falling snow covered his tracks. Carrying the thick padded sack away from his body, he ran across the meadow, bending over and hoping to look more like an animal and less like a man.

Barely making it in time, he hid behind a log as Ruth emerged from the house. Wiping her hands on her apron, she called in the direction of the barn.

"Jack! Oh, Jack, supper."

"Coming, Ruth," Jack said as he emerged from the barn.

As they disappeared into the house, the man continued to lay behind the log. His body became cold and stiff as he waited till darkness fell. Venturing out of hiding, he crept around the edge of the frozen pond, then flattened himself against the back wall of the tool shed as the hens began squawking, only moving on to the house when they quieted.

Always aware of the weight in the bag, he noticed there hadn't been any movement in the last half-hour. Cautiously he shook it, and an ominous sound came from inside, causing the man to jump.

"All right, big fella, it won't be much longer," he whispered nervously.

Jack needed a warning and he was going to get it.

"Maybe it'll be the last one he ever gets," the man chuckled.

Screened by the bushes, he raised his head and peeked into the living room window. Jack sat in an overstuffed chair reading the daily newspaper. Emily was on the floor at Jack's feet playing with her dolls. As the man watched, Ruth entered the room.

"Come on Emily. Time for your bath."

"But Gramps is going to read me a story," Emily protested.

"Go get your bath, then I'll read to you," Jack said, smiling.

"Okay," Emily said, skipping to the stairs. She was halfway up with Ruth behind her when she paused. "You won't forget, will you, Gramps?"

"No, honey, I won't forget."

"Isn't that nice?" the man snarled.

"Get him now, dummy, while he's alone. You'd better not mess this up."

"Leave me alone."

"If I leave you alone, you'll never do it."

"Yes I will. I'm doing it right now."

Stepping onto the porch, the man tested the boards. There was no answering creak. Jack had built the floor well. Pulling open the wooden screen door, the man put his hand on the knob.

Jack still had his back to the door, the rustle of his newspaper covering the small groan of the hinges. Untying the top of the sack, the man dumped the rattlesnake on the throw rug of the entrance hall. Silently he closed the door and returned to his observation post at the window.

Unnoticed, the huge rattler lay for several minutes absorbing the heat of the room. The man was about to lose hope when it began to move toward the living room. Jack's attention was still diverted as he read the want ads.

"I got my book, Gramps."

Jack turned, smiling, to see Emily coming down the stairs. She had a Bible storybook held high in one hand while she held onto the rail with the other. Then he froze. At the bottom of the stairs, coiled and ready to strike lay a huge rattlesnake! Head swaying and mouth open, venom dripped from its needle-like fangs. Its shaking tail reminded Jack of a small baby rattle, its small deadly eyes following Emily's descent down the stairs.

Jack opened his mouth but even as he did, he saw it was too late.

"Emily!"

The word came out as a scream. In a blur, the rattler struck, its fangs cutting through the thin cotton gown and tearing the flesh of Emily's upper thigh.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" Emily screamed. "Gramps, it's hurting me!" Ruth was wiping out the tub when she heard the screams.

Running to the landing, she was met with a scene of horror. Jack held a piece of firewood in his hand and was pounding the rug while Emily inches away lay sobbing on the floor, her nightgown spotted with blood.

Ruth's mind refused to believe what she was seeing. Could it be true? Could he have killed Jim and Kristie and was now bludgeoning Emily to death? Running down the stairs, she shouted, "Jack! Jack! What are you doing?"

"Ruth, stop right there!" Jack commanded, holding his hand up, his eyes still on the rug.

Ruth's hand flew to her mouth as she stifled a scream. On the rug, its head a bloody pulp, laid a huge diamondback rattlesnake, withering in the spasms of death. Too stunned to speak, Ruth hugged Emily.

"Is it dead?" Emily cried.

"Yes, honey," Jack replied, opening the door and throwing both rug and snake into the snow. Pushing up Emily's gown, he examined the two puncture wounds on the outside of her thigh. The leg was already beginning to swell.

Ruth started screaming; she tried to stop, but her body could contain it no longer.

"Ruth, stop that right now!" Jack said firmly.

Ruth continued to scream. Rising, Jack grabbed Ruth by the shoulders and shook her.

"Ruth! Ruth! Listen to me. Emily needs you now. If we're going to save her, we have to act fast."

Her voice shaking, she asked, "What can we do?"

"Get me a belt, a knife, and some matches. Hurry, Ruth! Do it now!"

"It'll be okay, honey," Jack said, soothing Emily's forehead as Ruth ran to get the items he had requested.

When she returned, he tried to keep his voice calm but not quite succeeding, he said to Emily, "Listen to Gramps. I've got to work on your leg. It's going to hurt but I have to do it so you'll get all better. Can you be brave?"

Emily nodded.

"That's my girl."

Then to Ruth. "Call Doc Pritchard."

Running the belt under Emily's leg, Jack tightened it. Closing her eyes, Emily gritted her teeth against the pain. Lighting a match, Jack held it under the edge of the knife, then blowing out the match, he waved the knife in the air to cool it.

"Doc's out somewhere on a house call. Harriet is going to try to find him," Ruth said, her voice filled with terror.

Jack knew the operator would make every effort but it still might be too late.

"Hold Emily," he said, grabbing a vase off the hall table and dumping the flowers and water on the floor.

"No, her leg," he instructed as Ruth hugged Emily to her. While Ruth steadied her, Jack cut across each fang mark.

Emily screamed in hurt and surprise.

"Jack, what are you doing?" Ruth asked as Jack put his mouth on the wound.

Jack spat into the vase before answering. "We've got to get the poison out."

Five minutes later, Jack was still working on the bite when the door burst open. Snatching the piece of

firewood, Jack swung it in a long low arc, then stopped when he saw Doc Pritchard.

"What's wrong?" Doc asked, his voice both urgent and calm.

"Harriet said it was a snake bite but I told her she was crazy.

Snakes don't come out in this kind of weather."

"This one did," Jack assured him. "But it won't any more." At that moment, the phone rang. Ruth was torn between staying with Emily and answering its insistent clanging.

Finally she ran to it, snatching the earpiece off the wall.

"Hello!" she said more sharply than she intended.

"Hello, Ruth, it's Harriet. I've gotten hold of the sheriff and he'll be there in a few minutes."

Chapter 21

Ruth felt like her nerves would snap. Emily wasn't moving, her breath came in short ragged gasps and her leg had swollen to three times its normal size. Jack and Ruth laid Emily between them on the back seat of Curry's patrol car and covered her with a blanket.

Doc stuck his head in the car door. "Harriet just called and I've got another emergency. I'll stop by the hospital later." He slammed the door and slapped the trunk with his hand as he would a horse.

"Thanks, Doc," Jack called after him.

"Hold on folks," Curry said, pressing the accelerator to the floor.

The front of the car rose slightly as the engine responded. Bob had argued with the County Council for two years for permission to purchase a patrol car equipped with a police pursuit engine. After each meeting, he had felt like giving up, now he was glad he hadn't.

"Dispatch, this is Sheriff Curry. Emily Johnson's been bitten by a rattlesnake and she's in pretty bad shape. Call Mary Sherman Hospital and tell them to be standing by. I'm bringing her in, ETA is 15 minutes.

Without waiting for a reply, he jammed the mike back on its hook while with his other hand he swung the heavy police cruiser onto Route 63. With the edge of the highway rapidly covering with snow, Bob steered the car down the middle of the two-lane road. He straddled the centerline, slowing only when meeting a pickup or passing over several patches of ice.

Emily was unconscious when the car skidded to a stop at the Emergency Room entrance. A nurse and two orderlies gently placed her on a gurney then whisked her into the hospital.

Jack and Curry helped Ruth into the waiting room.

"I'm sorry, I just feel so weak," Ruth said, dropping into a black vinyl chair.

A few minutes later, Bob came in looking uncomfortable.

"I'll have a deputy here as soon as I can. Are you folks gonna be okay?" he asked. "I just got a call on my radio. A nineteen-year-old boy wrapped his car around a tree on a county road east of here. The coroner is on his way but I need to be there too."

Rising, Ruth took the sheriff's hand in both of hers.

"Bob, I want you to know I thank the Lord for you. If it hadn't been for you and Jack, she wouldn't be alive now. You go; we'll be praying for you and the boy's family."

After cautioning Jack to watch for anyone acting suspicious and promising to return if he couldn't shake someone else loose, Bob was gone. The siren drifted away to silence in the cold winter's night.

In the waiting room, Ruth jumped at every sound; it seemed as if hours had passed. Glancing at the clock, she saw it had only been 25 minutes. Ten minutes later, a young intern walked in.

"Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, I'm Dr. Hutson," he said, sitting down opposite them. "I'm going to be very frank with you. We could lose her tonight. Emily has a severe snakebite but her big problem is that it has affected the rest of her organs. If she can make it through the night, she'll have a chance. I've had a cot placed in her room for you, Mrs. Johnson. Mr. Johnson, I'm sorry we don't have a cot for you but you're welcome to sleep in the 2nd floor lounge. I'll have some blankets brought to you if this is agreeable."

"No, I'll stay in the room; I can sleep in the chair."

Ruth alternated between the chair and the bed, first holding Jack's hand and then Emily's. At three o'clock in the morning, she heard Emily cry out.

"Mommy! Daddy! I found you." Pursing her fevered blistered lips, she said, "Are they angels, mommy? Are we going to heaven now, daddy?" Emily held her arms up as if embracing someone.

For some reason that she could not explain, the night nurse felt an urge to make her rounds a half-hour early. Putting her stethoscope to Emily's chest, she jerked the phone from its cradle. Giving instructions, she threw the receiver down and began pumping on Emily's chest.

Instantly the intercom came to life. Attention: Code Blue, Room 205. Attention: Code Blue, Room 205.

Within seconds, the room filled with people in white coats. Doctor Hutson was giving orders to the team like a drill instructor as he worked frantically to save Emily.

Jack had been walking down the corridor stretching his legs when he heard the announcement. When he rushed back to the room, grief struck Ruth like a sledgehammer, making it difficult to breathe.

"Oh, Jack, I've lost her! The Lord's taking her home," Ruth cried. "How will I ever make it without her? I love her too much to let her go."

With his arms around Ruth, Jack led her to the bed. By general consent, the doctors and nurses made room for them. Jack took Emily's hand as the medical team continued to work. His voice barely a whisper, he said, "Emily, its Gramps, and Gram. We love you, Emily, Please stay with us, we need you." He added, "Please don't go... to heaven."

The deputy that Curry had stationed outside the room watched them, the tips of his fingers playing with the handle of his holstered pistol as tears ran unheeded down his cheeks.

Emily's ragged breathing returned to normal.

"She's coming back!" Doctor Hutson said, his voice jubilant. "I don't believe what I'm seeing," he added, his face filled with wonder.

"Her temperature is coming down," a nurse said.

After the rest of the team left, Doctor Hutson motioned Jack and Ruth out into the hallway. Speaking in hushed tones, he said, "I haven't been practicing medicine too long but every time I've seen a situation such as we've had here tonight, the patient has died. What we've seen here is a miracle. We were losing her and I can honestly say it wasn't us that revived her; like I've said before, if she makes it through the night, she'll have a chance of surviving."

The sun rose the next morning, spreading its rays across the snow-covered landscape.

Nevertheless, to Jack and Ruth, no spring morning ever looked more beautiful than that winter day.

Jack inserted the skeleton key into the door. Until the day Jim and Kristie were murdered, the doors were never locked. He pushed the door open and then froze. The floor was littered with books, silverware, and Emily's toys that were usually so neatly stacked in the corner.

The roll top desk lay on its side several feet from its original position, drawers askew and its contents scattered over the living room.

Randy Green had driven Jack home from the hospital. Now standing behind him, he gave a low whistle. "Don't touch anything," he said, backing out the door. "I'll go call the sheriff."

"No, don't call him," Jack said wearily.

Randy looked at him as if he had just grown horns.

"Ruth's got enough on her mind. She doesn't need this."

"But someone was in your house!"

"I can see that!" Jack snapped. "Sorry, I didn't mean that."

"It's all right," Randy said, "Let me help you clean up this mess."

Bending over, he replaced the silverware in the buffet drawer. The upstairs was strewn with clothes from drawers and closets. When the house was done, Randy and Jack had cleaned every room. After Randy left, Jack loaded his 12 gauge and leaned it against the far wall of the hall closet. He locked the closet door, then slipping the key in his pocket, he said, "I'd like to see him try this again."

Three days later, Emily was becoming restless and more than ready to go home.

"I want to go home," she whined.

"You can go home after Dr. Hutson releases you," Ruth said, spooning oatmeal into Emily's mouth.

"I like your cooking better, Gram,"

"I agree with her. This stuff tastes like cardboard."

"Jack!" Ruth exclaimed in frustration. "I'm trying to get her to eat."

"Okay, okay, but I still say it tastes like something I'd feed the chickens."

Chapter 22

Emily sprang out of bed before Ruth called her. Gramps was taking a load of cattle to the stockyard in Terre Haute and he had promised her she could go along.

"If I find one that's suitable, I'll buy her a lamb." Jack said, lowering his voice.

Shoveling cereal into her mouth, Emily stopped. Spoon in mid air, she grinned at Jack and Ruth. "A lamb? A real lamb like was in the schable when Jesus was born?"

"There's nothing wrong with her ears," Ruth said, smiling.

When Emily had finished her breakfast, Ruth bundled her in a second layer of clothing. Later the sun would warm to the mid 50's but the March morning still carried a chill.

"Watch her around the animals," Ruth said. "She's awfully tiny, Jack."

"I'll not let her out of my sight," Jack assured her.

Picking Emily up, he threw her into the air.

"Why, you're as light as a feather," he said, catching her.

Emily squealed with delight.

Ruth watched until the truck and trailer turned the corner at the end of the road. There had been another trip to the stockyard years ago, though to Ruth, it seemed like yesterday.

Walking to the old roll top desk, she pulled open the bottom drawer. She knew exactly where to look. Carefully opening the aged envelope, she sorted through the pictures and laid them out before her. Finding the one she was looking for, she held it up.

The black and white photograph was frayed around the edges. A young Jack stood with his right foot on the running board of the old Model A pickup. Rickie, unable to raise his leg to the height of the running board, rested his foot on the top of Jack's left shoe, striking the same pose as his father.

There were other pictures of Rickie, most of them with Jack at his side. Pushing the pictures aside, Ruth buried her face in her hands. As careful as she was, some of her tears dropped on the pictures. Her hand dove into her apron pocket for a hankie, dabbing at the pictures before her tears could stain them.

Emily's excitement grew as they entered the stockyard. Gramps had stopped at T.J.'s and bought her an orange soda pop. Never before was she allowed to have her own bottle! She clutched it to her.

Turning in off 25th street, Jack backed the trailer up to the dock.

"Gramps, look!" Emily exclaimed pointing. At an adjacent dock, a man in bib overalls was unloading a grey draft horse from an old grain truck, the color of the truck more rust than faded red.

"Ain't he beautiful?" Emily said, her nose pressed against the glass.

'No!' Jack thought. 'He's one of the ugliest horses I've ever seen.' Nevertheless he said, "Sure he is, honey."

In an instant, Emily was out of the truck and had almost reached the horse when Jack came up behind her. Catching her by the shoulder, he said, "Emily, be careful, he may be mean."

"Ole Willard would never hurt anyone! My younguns ride him all the time. Name's Paul Devers," the man unloading the horse said as he extended a weathered hand.

"Jack Johnson. This is my granddaughter Emily," Jack said, shaking the man's hand.

Devers was a thin man with a haggard face.

"Say, if you're looking for a horse, I kin make you a good deal. I wouldn't sell him septen we fell on hard times and it's either him eat or us."

His eyes took on a haunted look. Jack could imagine the scene that had transpired earlier that morning. Devers children gathered around the truck crying as they watched their old pal leave forever.

"Please, mister, as old as he is, I'm afraid the only one'll buy him be the glue factory," he whispered, his mouth inches from Jack's ear.

"I'll call him Gideon, cause Daddy said Gideon made the enemy flee!" Emily said, grasping the thick boards of the holding pen and pulling herself up.

Well, he probably has plenty of fleas, Jack said to himself! "Wouldn't you rather have a nice, cute little lamb?" he asked. The horse seemed to grow before his eyes.

"No, I want Gideon, Gramps! Please, he needs a friend," Emily pleaded.

The horse blinked his left eye as if winking at them.

Loading the horse wasn't an easy task. Gideon was cooperative but the trailer proved to be almost too small.

"Duck your head," Emily said, bobbing her whole body.

The horse looked intently at her then lowered his head and walked in.

"I don't believe it," Jack said, too awestruck to close the gate.

"Oh, he's a smart one all right; he'd take all three of my younguns for a ride but he always made sure they were back in time to eat. Never missed a meal for them or him!" Devers chuckled. "I'm awful glad he's got a good home."

"You're welcome to come visit him any time."

"Thank you, Mr. Johnson, thank you," Devers said, pumping Jack's hand.

Ruth expected the trailer to be empty and Emily to come out of the cab of the truck carrying a lamb. She was shocked to see the huge horse filling its narrow confines.

"My goodness, Jack! He's big enough to eat her," Ruth laughed when Jack unloaded the horse and tied him to the fence. "Where are we going to keep him?"

"There's an empty stall in the barn, I may have to enlarge it but it'll do for right now."

"Do we have enough hay?" Ruth asked.

"I never thought about it! I'll probably have to buy more," Jack said, running his fingers through his hair.

"Can I give him something to eat?" Emily asked, her voice muffled by the scarf wrapped around her face.

"Gramps will feed him; you need to get in where it's warm."

"Can I help you, Gramps? Pleeese?"

Jack glanced at Ruth. "Okay, you can help but then you have to get in out of the cold."

Things were going so well, Emily decided to push it.

"Can I ride him to the barn?"

"NO!" Jack and Ruth said in unison.

"Not until he gets used to us," Jack explained.

When it was time for bed, Ruth came running into the living room.

"Where's Emily?" Ruth asked weakly.

"What? What do you mean, where's Emily? Isn't she in her room?" Jack said, throwing down the newspaper in alarm.

"No, her bed's empty, I've looked everywhere. I can't find her."

"Go over the whole house, Ruth, the attic to the basement.
I'm going to look for her outside."

A terrified thought raced through Ruth's mind. She covered her mouth with her hand.

"Oh dear Lord! Could he have her?"

Jack ran to the closet. Grabbing the shotgun and breaking it open, he checked the loads. Snapping it closed, he hurried out the door still struggling into his coat. It was a rare night. A bright full moon was rising in the east with a light snow falling. A small set of footprints led in the direction of the barn. What Jack saw next made the hair stand up on the back of his neck! Another set of prints joined Emily's. Jack could tell by the size they were a man's.

Cocking both hammers on the gun, Jack crept toward the open door of the barn. Both prints stopped at the entrance.

"They're in the barn," Jack thought, his heart pounding. Carefully he opened the door. He stood still, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness.

Suddenly a shaft of moonlight stole across the floor then disappeared. Moving quickly, Jack opened the back door. Fifty feet away, a man in dark clothing was running through the barn lot. Coming to the fence, he grasped the top board and easily swung himself over.

Landing on the other side, he sprinted around the pond. Pointing at the fleeing shadow, Jack emptied both barrels. Twin explosions split the quiet night but the man melted in among the trees unscathed. Reloading, Jack started after him when he heard Ruth.

"Jack! Jack! Where are you?"

"I'm back here!"

"I was so worried," she said, hugging him. "Who were you shooting at? Did he have Emily?"

"I don't know who he was but he followed Emily into the barn. He didn't have her so she must be inside somewhere."

Turning the lights on, he heard sounds from Gideon's stall. Emily lay curled up against the giant horse's side.

"Gideon was lonely," she said, yawning.

Snatching her up, Ruth started to cry as Gideon looked on with gentle eyes. Examining her from head to toe, Ruth

began scolding Emily. "Don't you ever do anything like this again."

After escorting Ruth and Emily back to the house, Jack returned to the barn to follow the tracks of the murderer.

Chapter 23

It had stopped snowing and the moon spread its full light on the pasture making the landscape as bright as a cloudy day.

Approaching the church, Jack thought he heard voices.

"You did it again, didn't you?"

"I can't kill the little girl."

"What, are you getting soft? You always were a weasel."

Jack's blood froze in his veins. Both voices were coming from the same person. One was low-pitched and gruff while the other was in almost the normal tone of a child.

"She saw you."

"No she didn't. I was very careful."

"You better take care of them tonight."

"I will, I will, don't worry."

Edging along the side of the church, Jack peered in the windows but the interior was too dark. Rounding the back corner, he raised the shotgun.

"Hold it right there! Put down that gun!" Obediently, Jack laid the shotgun down on the ground and raised his hands in the air.

"Now turn around."

Billy Bob was pointing his service revolver at Jack's middle. Relaxing, Jack began to lower his arms.

"Get your hands back up!" Billy Bob ordered. "What are you doing out here?"

"I was chasing a man who was in my barn."

"I'll bet you were, Mr. Johnson. This is the second time I caught you sneaking around this church at night. I think I'll just run you in."

"Wait. I heard a voice coming from inside the church," Jack said, starting to pick up the shotgun.

"You stay here while I check it out," Billy Bob ordered.

"I'll go with you," Jack said, reaching for the shotgun.

"No!" Billy Bob shouted, snatching away the gun. "And Jack, you'd better be here when I come out or I'll hunt you down like a dog."

In the sheriff's office, Ike examined the report again; he shook his head in disbelief. Having seen the lights in Curry's quarters go out, Ike knew Bob was in bed. Okay, maybe he should wait until morning. No, if his friend in the FBI lab was right, he knew who the killer was and it wasn't Eric!

Solemnly he picked up the phone.

Five minutes later when he hung up, all his doubts were extinguished. Deep in thought, Jimmy had to call Ike twice. "Mrs. Johnson just called in; Jack is following an intruder.

He was in their barn."

Curry emphasized his door was always open, yet none of his staff disturbed him unless it was a dire emergency. Ike's hesitant knock brought an instant response.

"What is it, Ike? What's wrong?"

Silently, the chief deputy handed the report to the sheriff. After scanning the papers, Curry called down to the dispatcher.

"Jimmy do we have a location on Billy Bob?"

"Yes sir, He just left Elm Grove Church."

"Where is he headed? Back to Elm Grove?"

"No, he's on his way to the Johnson farm. He has Mr. Johnson with him. He fou ---."

"Oh Lord no."

"Jimmy, call everyone! Use the phone. If you have to radio them, tell them to go to a pay phones and call in. On duty, off duty, have them meet at the south end of Elm Grove. Tell them lights and sirens but to cut their sirens three miles from Elm Grove and maintain strict radio silence. Call Detective Phillips," the sheriff said gravely. Anticipating the dispatcher's next question, he said, "Don't call Billy Bob."

Turning to Harris, he said, "Ike, tell Phillips what we know,

I'll be with you in two minutes."

Dressing quickly he returned to the dispatcher's office.

"I've alerted everyone but Mr. Strickland. No luck on Detective Phillips, he's off duty tonight," Jimmy explained. "Ike is waiting for you out front."

"Keep on trying Phillips and make sure everyone stays off the radio."

Jumping into the car, Curry said, "Step on it, Ike, and pray we're not too late!"

They exited Sullivan on S.R. 154 doing 110.

"I tell you there was someone in the church,"

After searching the church, Billy Bob had come back in a sour mood.

"You said you heard a voice," Billy Bob said, pulling the patrol car into the Johnson's driveway. "Now it's voices."

"No I didn't," Jack insisted. "I heard one person using two voices."

Having seen the headlights, Ruth stepped out onto the porch.

"What happened?" she asked as the two men mounted the steps.

"Your husband was sneaking around the church again. He says he was following someone," Billy Bob said sarcastically.

"Young man I happen to be a member of that church and my husband is welcome there anytime day or night!" Ruth said firmly. "Someone was in our barn and Jack was following them."

And then a little voice said, "I saw you in the barn!"

All eyes turned to Emily standing just inside the open door, her robe wrapped tightly around her. In one motion, Billy Bob pulled the .38 from its holster. Pointing it at Jack and Ruth, he thumbed back the hammer.

In Elm Grove, Janice Hardesty was up late. Normally, she went to bed at ten but the novel she was reading was nearing an exciting conclusion! She had to finish it. Janice heard the roar of the engines before she saw them.

"Tom! Tom, do you hear that?"

Rolling over in bed, Tom said, "Sounds like a race."

From the window of their apartment over the store, they watched a line of police cars fly through Elm Grove. Like

ghosts in the night, their flashing lights bathed the town in an eerie red glow.

"Everyone's here," Ike informed the sheriff when they pulled to a stop a mile from the Johnson farm. Curry addressed the small band of officers.

"Men, we're going after the most dangerous of criminals. One of our own so I don't want any of you taking chances. However, I want Billy Bob taken alive if at all possible."

Laying a county map on the hood of his car, he said, "This is how we're going to do it."

Billy Bob herded Jack, Ruth, and Emily into the living room.

"It was you who killed them, wasn't it?" Jack demanded.

"Yah, I took care of your fancy pants son-in-law," Billy Bob sneered.

"But why?" Ruth cried. "What did they ever do to you?"

"Jim knew I killed Denny Brown, Kristie just got in the way.

Lonnie, he knew it was me. He said he didn't, but he knew."

Suddenly a deep voice emitted from Billy Bob, "Don't tell them anymore, you idiot!"

"I'll tell them everything if I want," Billy Bob answered defiantly, his voice becoming high-pitched like a child.

"If you do, you'd better kill them all."

"I will! I will! Just give me time. You want to know how I killed Denny Brown?" Billy Bob asked, his voice normal again.

Unable to speak, Jack and Ruth nodded.

"I drowned him yet the coroner didn't find a drop of water in his lungs," Billy Bob laughed. "They couldn't outsmart me; I fooled them all."

Jack's mouth was getting dry. He knew their time was running out.

"No you didn't." He tried to sound convincing. "You didn't fool me. I put the evidence in a safe deposit box with instructions to Randy Farley to open it in case of my death."

"What evidence, old man? Tell me now or she dies," Billy Bob said, aiming the pistol at Ruth's head.

"You leave my Gram alone!" Emily said. Running at Billy Bob, she kicked him in the shin.

Seeing his opportunity, Jack grabbed Billy Bob's hand which held the gun, driving the fist of his other hand into his jaw.

At that moment, the door burst open. Uniformed men with their guns drawn seemed to be everywhere. Still managing to hold on to the .38, Billy Bob squeezed the trigger. The first bullet grazed Sheriff Curry's arm, then passed through the wall into the kitchen and slammed into a cabinet.

Ruth pushed Emily to the floor, dropping down on top of her. Fighting for control of the gun, Billy Bob continued to pull the trigger. Clamping an iron fist around the murderer's hand, Jack shoved the barrel of the gun up. Pieces of plaster showered them as bullets tore holes into the ceiling.

When the hammer clicked on an empty chamber, Billy Bob collapsed into a sobbing heap. Several hands grabbed him. Jack slammed him to the floor as Ike secured handcuffs on Billy Bob's wrists. Hauling him to his feet, Bob Curry stood before the man he had counted as a son as blood dripped down his injured arm and formed a small puddle on the floor. He said, "Billy Bob, you're under arrest for the murders of James and Kristie Mays, Dennis Brown, and Lonnie Greggs!"

Curry's voice was strong and clear, only his eyes betrayed the pain he felt in his heart.

Chapter 24

Ike and Billy Bob set at the kitchen table in the Sheriff's

Quarters, Sullivan County's version of the Interrogation Room. Bob Curry paced the old linoleum floor, the bandage swelling his left arm.

"Why? I want to know why. I trusted you like my own son. After your dad was killed, I took you fishing and played baseball with you. I tried to be a father to you and do things with you like he would have."

Billy Bob snorted, "My dad! You didn't know nothing about him. Oh sure, he was a perfect gentleman around you, but you didn't see him at home. Nothing I did was good enough."

"He only wanted the best for you," Ike said.

"Is that why he beat me till I was black and blue? Is that why my mother was always running into doors or falling downstairs? Do you know what it's like to see your mother beat till she's unconscious and not be able to do anything about it?"

"No I don't," Bob said quietly, realizing how little he knew about David Strickland.

"So you had a rough time growing up; a lot people do but they don't go out and kill four people," Ike said.

"Why did you kill them? What about Dennis Brown?" Curry asked, setting down. Picking up a pen, he began to write.

"I did it for you, sir," Billy Bob said, taking on the demeanor Curry knew so well.

"What do you mean, you did it for me?" he asked, turning pale.

"You said you knew Dennis was involved in the burglary ring but you couldn't prove it. So I brought him out here and tied him to a chair. I held his head back, put a towel over his mouth, and poured water on it. I tried to get a confession out of him, but he was stubborn. He kept saying he didn't have anything to do with it. I held the towel over his face longer and longer each time. I must have held it on too long the last time. So I took his pants, tied one leg around his neck and the other around the bars of his cell."

"What about Lonnie, did he help you?" Ike asked.

Billy Bob laughed. "That drunk? He didn't have the guts. I gave him some knock out drops in his coffee. It worked pretty good; by the time I had hung Dennis up, he was beginning to come out of it. He said he didn't see anything but I knew better. He was just waiting for the right time and then he'd be a big hero. Well, I fixed him. I would have taken care of the old man too, if that semi hadn't gotten in the way. I'm sorry about the Mays," Billy Bob replied as he hung his head.

"Sure you are," Ike sneered.

"I am! I never meant to kill them, especially her. I was drinking one night in May and went to the church. I hadn't

had anyone to talk to since mom passed away and Jim was easy to talk to. Next thing I knew, I was telling him the truth about Dennis's death."

"Was Kristie present?" Curry prompted.

"No, and he said he wouldn't say anything. He urged me to come to you and confess. Can you imagine? That would have been the end of my career in law enforcement. I was in your office the first of June," he said to Bob. "I saw on your calendar you had an appointment with him and knew he was going to tell you even after he said he wouldn't. Some preacher, but he didn't tell anybody after I got him."

"My meeting with Pastor Jim was to discuss what color to paint the Sunday School rooms," Curry said softly.

The news media carried the story of Billy Bob's capture and confession nationwide.

"What has America become when we have senseless killings such as the Elm Grove murders and then later the slaughter of the Harris children and their father in Mississippi?" one editor from the Indianapolis Star asked.

The people of Elm Grove were interviewed time and again until they became exasperated. When a stranger would enter a business or the restaurant, all conversation would cease until after the intruder left.

At the request of both prisoners and jailers, Billy Bob was moved to a private cell in the basement. They reported hearing him speaking to someone in the middle of the night. Constant searches proved fruitless.

Having learned that all charges had been dropped, Eric reappeared at the store one morning in April with no explanation of where he had come from. Later that same day, he called an attorney and engaged him to petition the court to change his name officially from Warren to Gray.

Emily was honored in a ceremony before a packed audience at Elm Grove School. In his speech, Sheriff Curry made her an honorary deputy, speaking of her bravery in attacking Billy Bob. Several reporters requested a re-enactment, suggesting Emily tap Sheriff Curry's leg. As she started her kick, one of the men holding a microphone called out, "Look this way honey!"

Misjudging the distance, Emily hit Curry's shin full force. The audience erupted in a roar of laughter. UPI carried the pictures of Bob Curry dancing around the stage on one leg holding his shin.

Ruth had prayed that Jack would be able to relax and have some sense of peace once the killer was caught but as winter turned to spring, he continued to wander the fields at night. During the day, he worked the farm like a madman, barely stopping for meals. The only pause in his day was an hour he would spend with Emily during which they would play games or take walks in the woods, saving the last ten minutes for a bareback ride on Gideon.

The big horse would patiently wait as Jack placed the bridle on his head and Emily on his back. Then carefully stepping around puddles and holes with Jack at the lead, he carried his precious cargo.

Grace Temple had difficulty finding someone to fit the personality of the church and with the permission of the Elm Grove congregation, persuaded Barry to stay for a few weeks that quickly turned into three months. In the end, Barry felt he could delay no longer and moved into the parsonage the last of April.

Randy, Peggy, and Jeffrey Green spent many hours at the Johnson's. Randy learned the art of farming while Ruth shared her ability for prize-winning baking with Peggy. One day in late April, Peggy asked Ruth if she would show her how to sew.

"I know I shouldn't ask, after all the time you've spent teaching me to cook."

"Nonsense, dear, what is it?" Ruth asked, laying her hand on Peggy's arm.

"Well," Peggy said hesitantly. "Jeffrey is outgrowing his shirts and Randy could use some new ones too but our finances are getting low. Randy said we need to save enough to buy seed."

Peggy let her breath out slowly, "Would you please teach me to sew?"

"Why of course," Ruth said dabbing at her eyes. "I would love to."

Ruth feared the confrontation with the murderer of Kristie and Jim would trigger a strong reaction in Emily and cause her nightmares to return, but after a long discussion in which Ruth read passages from the Bible concerning eternal life, and after a week of sleeping with Ruth and Jack, she seemed to bounce back.

During the time Jack spent with her, Emily would often ask him about heaven. To avoid asking Ruth the answers to these questions, Jack would wait until she was busy in another part of the house, then secretly search her Bible. Ruth had marked many passages and reading them, Jack felt a strange tugging at his heart. Two verses in Revelation Jack read time and time again:

'And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the work of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death. Therefore, rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and to the sea! For the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.'

Each time, he would close the Bible in deep thought.

Chapter 25

Billy Bob's trial was set for May 15, a time when Jack and every other farmer would normally be in the field from first light till dark. Yet every day, the court room was packed to capacity.

Midway through the trial, Billy Bob's defense attorney requested a meeting with the prosecutor.

"David, we both know my client isn't doing well. I'd like to propose a compromise. I believe he needs help; a stay in the state asylum would do him a world of good."

"You're putting up a good defense, Al. You're a great lawyer but your client killed four people in cold blood, one a sixteenyear-old boy, as well as a minister and his wife. No, I'm sorry; I'm going for the death penalty."

Billy Bob's knees were shaking as the jury of nine men and three women filed back in. Behind him, Ruth and Jack held hands.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?" the judge asked, looking at them over his spectacles.

The foreman rose. He was a gaunt man of seventy-five with sad eyes. Now he turned those eyes on Billy Bob.

"Yes, Your Honor, we have," he said, still looking at Billy Bob.

"We the jury find the defendant guilty of four counts of first degree murder.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," the judge said. Then turning to Billy Bob, his voice became hard.

"Stand up young man, do you have anything to say before I pass sentence on you?"

"It's all a mistake, I never meant to kill anyone,"
Twisting his body to where he could see Jack, Ruth, Mrs. Greggs, and the Browns, he said, "I'm sorry, please forgive me."

"William Robert Strickland."

Billy Bob suddenly realized the judge was speaking to him. His voice was strong and passionate.

"It is the sentence of this court that you be taken to the State Prison at Michigan City where upon such a date convenient to the State of Indiana, you shall be put to death by means of electrocution. May God have mercy on your soul."

Watching the sobbing little man being carried away, Jack felt as if he had just attended another funeral.

Jack took to driving by the jail early each Saturday morning to assure himself Billy Bob was still there. He knew that if he saw little activity, all was secure. He never stopped but continued on down to the city park. One morning in June, the park seemed to be deserted.

"You gonna get wet."

In the middle of lowering himself onto a wooden bench in the park, Jack stopped halfway. The voice seemed to come from a flowering bush.

Stepping from behind a shrub, an ancient black man came over to where Jack stood. Pulling a red bandanna from the back pocket of his bib overalls, the man wiped first his forehead then the bench.

"Go on, go on, you kin sit down now."

Easing himself down on the seat beside Jack, he held out a wrinkled, gnarled hand.

"I'm Amos Moses. I take care of the flowers, been doin' it forty years. Yes sir, these flowers, they depend on me."

With a sweep of his other hand he indicated the vast array of plants, most of which were in bloom.

"I'm Jack Johnson, from over at Elm Grove," Jack said, taking his hand.

"So Mr. Johnson from over at Elm Grove, what are you doin' over here this time of mornin'?" Amos asked, his face breaking into a wide smile.

"I had to get some fresh air."

"You got a loved one in the hospital?"

"No."

"Mr. Johnson."

"Jack."

"Jack, you'd be surprised how many people I meet out here this time o'mornin'," Amos said, the smile disappearing to be replaced with a look of concern. "Last week, a woman that just lost her little boy sat right where you're sittin'. I took some time out from my flowers, they don't mind and we cried together and talked to the Lord. You might try doin' that, Jack, he listen real good."

"How can you believe in a God who treats you like dirt?" Jack snapped.

Amos recoiled as if Jack had slapped him.

"Why, Mr. Jack, my Jesus, he treat me real good. I got a wonderful wife, a roof over my head, food in my belly, and he let me take care of his flowers. But you know the best thing he done for me? He shed His blood on the cross, yes sir, He wash away my sins so I kin go to heaven. He's a-waitin' for me up there, it won't be long."

"I have to go," Jack said, standing.

"I'm goin' to be praying for you, Jack Johnson. I goin' to be praying for you to know my Jesus. Here," Amos held out a small card with black printing.

"What's this?" Jack asked, turning the card over.

"That's my name and address. Don't got no phone, I want you to let me know when you get saved."

"Well, Amos Moses, you can pray all you want but I am not goin' to get saved."

"Oh, yes sir, you gonna get saved a-right, you just let me know when you do."

A few weeks after moving into the parsonage of Elm Grove, Barry Wells had reinstated the jail ministry. Each Saturday, he would send word to Billy Bob asking if he wanted to see him for spiritual counseling but each time he refused. The Saturday before Billy Bob was to leave for death row, Ike stopped Barry on his way out of the cellblock.

"Strickland would like to see you," Ike said, unable to bring himself to address the man by his familiar name that he had called friend. "Be careful, Pastor, we don't want to add you to his list of victims," Ike warned.

When Barry walked up to the bars, Billy Bob was sitting on his bunk. His head in his hands, he hadn't heard Barry's approach which gave Barry time to observe the murderer without Billy Bob's knowing he was there. Barry wasn't sure what his feelings would be when he finally met the man who had killed his friend but now he felt only pity.

"Billy Bob," Barry said softly.

Billy Bob jerked and sprang to his feet. Barry jumped back from the bars.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't hear you."

"That's all right, how can I help you?" Barry asked, stepping back up to the cell.

"Sir, am I goin' to hell for killing Rev. and Mrs. Mays? I know I shouldn't have killed the others too, but the Mays, they were good people, and I was just sittin' here thinking...." Billy Bob's voice trailed off.

"Billy Bob, did you attend Sunday School when you were a child?"

"Yes sir, my mother would take me when dad was working. He didn't much like the idea but he would allow us to go along if we came straight home."

"Do you remember hearing about a man called the Apostle Paul?" Barry asked, opening his Bible.

"Yes, but it always confused me. The preacher called him Saul and Paul, I never knew why."

"Both names are correct; he was Saul originally but after he received Christ on the road to Damascus, God changed his name to Paul. He became a great man used mightily of the Lord. But before he was saved he was a murderer. Look at this passage." Barry said, opening his Bible to the seventh chapter of Acts.

When Barry left the jail an hour later, his heart was singing. Billy Bob would have to pay for his crime but he was assured of a home in heaven.

Standing behind the pulpit on Sunday morning, Barry surveyed the congregation. He started to make the announcement but hesitated. Emily had persuaded her grandfather to come hear her sing with the children's choir.

"What a great joy and privilege it is to see anyone receive Christ as their Saviour," Barry said, his eyes sweeping the crowded room.

"Yesterday I had the privilege of leading Robert Strickland to the Lord."

Jack's head snapped up, he had been half dozing trying not to listen to Barry when he thought he heard him mention the name Strickland.

"I'm sure if Jim and Kristie were here, they would welcome Billy Bob into the family of God."

The blood drained from Jack's face. Rising, he stomped out of the church and slammed the door. It was misting rain when Ruth and Emily left the church. On this type of day, Jack would normally be waiting for them in the truck, but as Ruth took in the vehicles in the parking lot, there was no sign of Jack or the pickup.

Seeing her dilemma, Mary Turner said, "Jacob and I will drop you off."

As they pulled into the driveway, Jacob jumped out and opened the far door for Ruth and Emily. He said, "I know you folks are going through a rough time. We'll be praying and anything we can do, just let us know."

"Thank you, Jacob, you and Mary are dear friends," Ruth said, taking Jacob's offered hand in both of hers.

Jack's mood didn't improve as the days progressed. He seemed to become more withdrawn. The time he spent with Emily became shorter and shorter until one day as he got up from game they had just started.

"Don't you love me anymore, Gramps?" she asked, her eyes filling with tears. Hugging her tightly, Jack began to cry. Great sobs shook his body and when it was over, he released her.

"I love you, Gramps," she said, touching his wet cheeks. "I pray to Jesus for you every day."

"You do that honey," Jack said, drying his eyes with handkerchief. "You do that."

Though each one of the congregation agreed that Barry was quite different from James Mays, he was, as Bill Skinner put it, 'the right man for the job.' He seemed to be at home whether playing on the floor with the beginners' Sunday School class, fishing with a farmer who was taking a day off, or preaching a powerful message. Norma took over the leadership of the Women's Missionary Society from Mary Card who had reluctantly held the post since Kristie's death.

The old ship of Zion righted itself and was sailing smoothly on after taking a direct hit the year before. Norma supplemented Barry's income by giving private voice and piano lessons. Ruth had never learned to play and Jack's expertise with the violin didn't extend to his singing. "I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket," he often jokingly said.

One day in late June, Jack came home with a secondhand piano tied securely in the back of the pickup. A car with three men in it pulled to the side of the road and stopped by the mailbox. While Ruth held Emily back at a safe distance, they helped Jack unload the piano, running it down a makeshift ramp and into a far corner of the living room.

Norma was delighted at the prospect of giving lessons to Kristie's daughter and insisted on giving them for free.

True to her word, Emily prayed often for Jack. Most of the time, her prayers consisted of one or two sentences but they would bring a look of uncertainty to Jack's face and a sad smile to Ruth's as she remembered the many times Kristie had prayed for her father.

Billy Bob was transferred to death row at Michigan City State Prison. He wrote to Barry weekly, giving glowing accounts of the Bible studies held with the chaplain. His letters never failed to bring a thrill to Barry and Norma's hearts but one in particular brought a special joy.

Dear Rev. Wells,

I have wonderful news. This week, J.D. went home to be with his Lord. Tuesday night after his lawyer called to tell him they had turned down his stay, I heard him crying in his cell. He asked me if God would forgive him so I showed him the same verses you shared with me. We stayed up all night talking about God, the Bible, and Jesus. When they came for him on Wednesday morning, he was smiling. The last words I heard him say on this earth were 'Thank you,' so I pass these words on to you, my brother.

God bless you.

Thank you,

Billy Bob.

Chapter 26

"Gramps, are you going to heaven?" Emily asked as she and Jack walked down the path leading through the woods. At eight o'clock, the July sun was already hot. Jack welcomed the coolness of the forest.

"Oh. Uh..I guess so. Look, Emily, see the deer?" Jack said, grateful to be able to change the subject. In a small clearing to their left, a doe and her fawn were grazing.

Emily stared wide-eyed; trying to get a closer look, she stepped on a twig. The sound, almost inaudible to Jack's ear, nevertheless brought the deer's head up immediately. After what seemed an eternity to Emily, the deer resumed eating.

Emily's question haunted Jack for the rest of the week. Was he going to heaven? Did he lie to Emily? Deep in his heart, he knew the truth.

On Sunday, Jack was sitting on the porch reading the paper when Ruth and Emily walked up the road from church. Emily climbed on Jack's lap and he picked up the comics. This was a ritual they performed each Sunday, but today things were different. Jack could not interest Emily even in her favorite cartoon.

"Look, Emily, Sarge is getting mad at Beetle again," Jack said, pointing to the Beetle Bailey comic strip.

"Gramps, Mrs. Norma said Jesus is the only door to God and we have to go through that door if we want to go to heaven."

Picking at a button on Jack's shirt, she said, "Mrs. Norma called it getting saved. Are you saved, Gramps?"

Jack hesitated, then decided to tell her the truth.

"No honey, I'm not. Look at what Bugs Bunny is doing," he said, trying to distract her.

"But Gramps, if you ain't, you can't go to heaven with Mommy and Daddy and Gram," she wailed, big tears squeezing out of her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Ruth asked, coming out onto the porch.

"Gramps said he's not going to heaven," Emily said. Sliding down from Jack's lap, she ran to Ruth and hugged her around the legs.

"Yes, sweetheart, I know."

"Then do something!"

"I can't. He has to make the decision himself," Ruth said, looking at Jack sadly. "Dinner's ready anytime you are."

Ruth's Sunday dinners were always a culinary delight. On this as on most Sundays, she served chicken cooked golden brown, skillet gravy, green beans, corn, and fluffy mashed potatoes, with blackberry, apple or cherry pie for desert. Jack had anticipated the taste of this meal all morning, now he picked at his food, just moving it around.

Pushing his chair back, he said, "I'll be back later."

"Aren't you going to take Emily for a ride on Gideon?"

"No, not today."

"But Jack, she's been looking forward to it all morning."

"I said not today, maybe we'll do it tomorrow."

Avoiding Emily's surprised look, Jack hurried out the back door. Not knowing where he was going, he soon found himself in the cemetery.

To placate Emily, Ruth said, "I'll tell you what, soon as we finish the dishes, we'll take some carrots and apples to Gideon.

Would you like that?"

"Sure, Gram," Emily said with a sigh.

In the months that he had been at the Johnson farm, Gideon had grown fat and content. He had also become an attraction to the neighborhood children. With her generous nature, Emily would invite every child she met to come see her horse. Each time, Emily gave Gideon a carrot or a piece of apple. Ruth had visions of her losing a finger or two but the horse was as delicate as if he were eating from fine china.

"Gram, if I ask Jesus to save Gramps, He'll do it, won't He?"

Ruth was stumped; she wanted Emily's faith to increase but she knew it might be years before Jack made a decision for Christ.

"Yes, I believe He will but it may be some time before He does," Ruth said cautiously.

"Can we pray for him right now?" Emily asked, starting for the house.

"That's a wonderful idea," Ruth said, taking her by the hand.

Kneeling with Emily by the porch swing, Ruth said a short prayer. She was about to get to her feet when Emily started to pray. Ruth had heard Emily pray at bedtime and meals but her prayer today was different.

"Jesus, I want my Gramps to be saved so he can go to heaven with us. Please save him today. Amen."

Ruth's heart sank. She had prayed for Jack for years and he was still not saved and here Emily had asked the Lord to save him this very day!

Jack walked the rows of tombstones, reading the inscriptions. The stone of his great-grandfather, John Blye, held special interest for him. Perhaps for lack of funds, only the scripture reference was carved on the headstone. Finding it quickly in the Bible he had borrowed from the church, Jack read: "And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord henceforth: Yea, said the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors: and their works do follow them."

"What will follow me?" Jack wondered out loud. His greatgrandfather had died before Jack was born but from

the stories he had heard about him, he was convinced John Blye was a man's man.

He had come into this territory when it was nothing more than a wilderness. Working daylight to dark, he built a heritage for his family but Jack could see now that the spiritual heritage he left behind was far greater than any material inheritance. He walked on, crossing the rows of stones to Jim and Kristie's graves.

"Dad, I love you. Turn your life over to Christ. Jim and I will be waiting for you on Heaven's shore," he heard Kristie say as clearly as if she were standing beside him. He remembered the day they dedicated baby Emily to the Lord. He had ranted and raved but in the end, he agreed to attend the service. He did not expect Jim to call him and Ruth to the front. Uncomfortably, he had shifted from one foot to the other as Jim read something about his house serving the Lord.

Going to the back of the church, Jack bent over and touched the spot where Jim and Kristie had breathed their last. Rising, he opened the door and entered the hallway leading to the sanctuary.

Sinking to his knees at the altar, he breathed, "Oh Lord, I've been an old fool. I should have turned my life over to you years ago, Please forgive me."

He covered his face with his hand, the tears running between his fingers and dripping onto the carpet. A great weight lifted off Jack's heart. How long he was there he

never knew but finally, he felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up into Barry's concerned face.

"Jack, is there anything I can do?"

A wide grin spreading across his face, Jack leaped to his feet and hugged the younger man. He picked him up and swung him around.

"I'm saved!" he shouted, loud enough that if Barry could have gotten his arms loose, he would have covered his ears.

"I'm saved! Saved! Saved! I've got to tell Emily. I've got to tell Ruth!"

Letting Barry down in mid-swing, he started for the rear of the sanctuary.

"Thank you, thank you!"

Running back up the aisle, he grabbed Barry's hand and shook it vigorously. Barry, head spinning and holding onto a pew for support, barely had time to say 'You're welcome.' before Jack sprinted out the door. Standing on the steps, Barry watched him run down the road and his heart rose in praise to the Lord.

Ruth was in the kitchen, still agonizing over Emily's prayer. How was she going to explain it to her when Jack didn't get saved today? About two o'clock she had put her down for her nap.

"Ruth! Ruth!"

Ruth looked out the kitchen window to see Jack running up the road. In her mind, she saw him coming across the field carrying Rickie's dead body. Not bothering to unlock the screen door, she threw it open, the broken catch flying into the yard to be lost forever in the grass.

Chapter 27

The members of the congregation took their seats that night not knowing the change that had taken place in Jack's heart. When Jack entered with Ruth and Emily in tow, carrying his violin and wearing his dark suit, everyone turned in their direction. The smile on their faces betrayed their secret. After they were seated on the third pew from the front, Ruth reached over and squeezed Jack's hand; he turned and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

After the opening song and prayer, Barry addressed the congregation.

"Brothers and sisters, I'm not going to preach tonight because something wonderful has happened this afternoon. The Lord has answered our prayers in a miraculous way. We have a man in our midst tonight who would like to speak to you. Mr. Johnson." Stepping back from the pulpit, Barry sat down.

Rising to his feet, Jack slowly walked down the center aisle. Mounting the platform, he began to have second thoughts. When he had talked to Barry just before the service, it had seemed like such a good idea but now facing the people he had offended so many times, he wasn't so sure, then he remembered what Barry had asked at Jim and Kristie's funeral.

"Several months ago," he began, his voice shaking, "I sat in this church blaming everyone of you for what had happened to my daughter and son-in-law. I especially blamed God but really, I've been blaming him for years. First for taking my own father when I was eight, then for Rickie, and this last year for Jim and Kristie. I blamed everyone, that is, but myself.

Last week, Emily asked me if I was going to heaven. I did something I never do, I lied to her. Today she asked me if I was saved. Jacob, you know I've always said my word is my bond."

Jacob Turner nodded his head in agreement.

"Well, that lie has bothered me all week so today I told her the truth. I wasn't saved, I wasn't going to heaven. This wonderful little girl started crying," he said, smiling at Emily. "I couldn't stand to see her cry so I came here. I had to get away but I found I couldn't get away from God and His love. Ruth, dear sweet Ruth. I remember the day a few years after we were married when she came home from this church so excited. She had accepted Christ as her Savior. I blew up! But for all these years she hasn't given up on me. She has been quietly living for Him, showing me the love of God, and praying for me every day. Over the years, she has been my best friend, she has always believed in me and stuck by me, never complaining. Oh, she had plenty of reason to, but she never did. I had plans for Kristie, she was going to marry a farmer but God had other plans. When she announced she was going to marry a preacher, I threatened to disown her. But she prayed for me until the day she died. Jim tried many times to speak to me about Christ but each time I shut him off. He never gave up trying and neither did you. At Jim and Kristie's funeral," he said, turning to Barry, "You asked those who had been saved as a result of their ministry to stand. I wasn't able to then but I stand before you today as a testimony to their faith."

The crowd erupted with shouts of "Praise the Lord," "Hallelujah," and "Amen," until it seemed the very rafters shook.

Jack tried to speak again but the lump in his throat and the shouts of the people would not allow him to continue. Instead, he opened his violin case. Then resting it under his chin, he began to play. At the end of the first stanza, the congregation stood and joined in:

Oh, how I love Jesus

Oh, how I love Jesus

Oh, how I love Jesus

Because He first loved me.

Bob Curry pulled his handkerchief from his pants pocket and blew his nose loudly. At the conclusion of the song, Jack replaced his violin in its case then walked down the aisle and took his seat beside Ruth and Emily. Wiping her eyes, Ruth squeezed his hand. Quietly, Barry stood and led in closing prayer.

Monday morning, Jack rose as usual at five o'clock. Dressing quietly, he went down the stairs and out of the house. At Jack's appearance, Gideon whinnied.

"It's gonna be a beautiful day, isn't it, big fella?" he said, patting the horse's neck. Going on, he walked around the bean field, crossed the pasture, and approached the remains of the old oak tree. Sitting down on the massive rotted log, he began to pray.

"Lord, I loved Rickie; he was my pride and joy. But as much as I loved him, I know You loved him more. Thank you for the years we had with him."

Jack sat for a long time lost in thought, his reflections not of anger and resentment, but of thankfulness and joy.

Later that day, Jack went to see Barry.

"Pastor, I would like to do something for the church," he said, sitting down at the kitchen table in the parsonage.

"What you did for them last night was the best thing you could do," Barry said, sipping his coffee.

"Oh, it was wonderful, Mr. Johnson," Norma said, filling Jack's offered cup.

"Thank you. Call me Jack."

"Jack, God has something for each of us to do. Each office is just as important as the other. The janitor is as called of the Lord as the pastor."

"I'll clean the outhouse if that's what he wants," Jack burst out.

Well, Jack the way we do it here is each family of the church takes turns cleaning. We'll put your name on the list if you like."

"Yes, put my name on the list and if somebody can't do it, be sure and let me know. I've wasted fifty-five years and I want to make up for them."

"Those were years of preparation, Jack," Norma said, her eyes glistening. "God was preparing you for this time."

"Amen," Barry said.

Ruth felt as if she were living in a dream, a dream for which she had prayed for half her life. Emily took everything in stride.

"I asked Jesus to save him; ain't Jesus grand?" she asked, smiling.

For all their married life, Jack had insisted on being at work at seven whether he was working in the fields with the cattle or repairing equipment. When he rose at five, he would reset the alarm for six fifteen so Ruth could fix breakfast.

Tuesday, Ruth woke with an uncomfortable feeling. Glancing at the clock, she saw to her horror that it was seven thirty. Picking it up, she realized the alarm had never been reset. Throwing on her robe, she hurried downstairs.

Pushing open the screen door, she walked out onto the porch.

"Good morning, sleepy head!" Jack said, grinning as he laid down Ruth's Bible. As he got up, the chair swayed gently.

"Oh, Jack, I'm sorry. The alarm didn't go off."

"Hmm, someone must have forgotten to reset it," Jack teased, taking Ruth in his arms.

"Randy was telling me they have family devotions every morning," Jack said. "I believe we should too."

Ruth's heart filled to capacity; how long she had been praying for this very thing. At that moment, Emily padded out onto the porch in bare feet. Ruth was about to ask where her house slippers were but held her tongue. Still waking up, Emily kissed Ruth and walked over to where Jack was now sitting in his rocking chair. Climbing into his lap, she curled up, pulled her nightgown over her feet, and promptly went back to sleep.

"I'll come for you when breakfast is ready," Ruth whispered.

"Okay," Jack whispered back, stroking Emily's golden hair with a big rough hand.

Later that day, Jack made the announcement that they would be going to Terre Haute.

"I think I've borrowed Bibles long enough," he said.

At the bookstore, Jack purchased not only a Scofield Study Bible but also a set of Matthew Henry Commentaries and a Bible dictionary.

"I want to learn everything I can about the Lord," he told the pleased clerk.

Chapter 28

A hot August sun was beating down when Jack finished the churchyard. As he switched off the lawnmower, Barry called from the back door of the church.

"Jack, come inside where it's cool."

Brushing grass clippings from his clothes, Jack entered Barry's office. Pulling his bandanna from his back pocket, he wiped his face.

"It sure is hot today."

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate the work you have done around here," Barry said, handing Jack a glass of ice water. Jack took a long drink before answering.

"Like I said, I have a lot to make up for."

Barry nervously rubbed his hands together. Clearing his throat, he said, "Jack, you have changed so much. A month ago, I wouldn't have shown you this."

Picking up a letter from his desk, he handed it to him. Unfolding the single sheet of paper, Jack began to read:

'Dear Pastor Wells,

It was a joy to hear of the shower of blessings your church is receiving. I was sharing the news of Mr. Johnson's salvation with the other Christians on the row. I hope someday Mr. and Mrs. Johnson will find it in their hearts to forgive me. I deserve to die for taking the lives I did but their forgiveness would mean so much. Please pray for J.D.'s family. I just heard the chair wasn't connected right and he didn't die right away. His mother fainted and they had to revive her before they tried again. I count myself fortunate that I won't have anyone at my execution. I believe everyone has suffered enough at my hands. Thank you for listening and caring.

God bless you,

Billy Bob

Without a word, Jack handed the letter back to Barry; walking out the door, he passed the lawnmower and disappeared into the woods.

"What have I done?" Barry asked, holding his head in his hand. "I shouldn't have shown him the letter; he's too young in the Lord."

Unknown to Barry, the letter had touched Jack deeply. Every verse of Scripture on forgiveness continually popped into his mind. "But Lord, he doesn't deserve forgiveness," he said in his heart.

"Neither did you," came the reply.

Two hours later, Emily came in.

"Gramps won't talk to me, he's sitting on a log by the pond doing nothing. I asked him to take me for a ride on Gideon and he didn't say nothing, he just set there."

Instructing Emily to stay in the house, Ruth walked to the pond. Easing down beside Jack, she silently waited for him to speak.

Finally he said, "He wants our forgiveness."
"I know."

In answer to Jack's questioning look, she said, "Barry called me."

Jack nodded. "How can we forgive him?" "Only through the Lord," he continued, answering his own question.

"I know you'll do the right thing, dear," Ruth said, patting his hand.

Getting to her feet, she said, "Supper will be ready in about an hour."

When Jack came in forty-five minutes later, Ruth knew the matter had been settled.

"I like Gramps stories a lot better now," Emily said as Ruth was tucking her in that night. "He makes them sound so real."

Coming downstairs, Ruth heard voices in the living room. Not wanting to interrupt, she paused on the last step.

"I wanted to apologize for springing Billy Bob's letter on you. I should have waited," Barry said.

"No, you were right to let me read it. I'm sorry; I shouldn't have walked out on you."

"I understand, it's been very difficult for you and Ruth."

"Billy Bob mentioned he doesn't have any family."

"Yes, I'm afraid it's quite true; that's one reason I try to write him so often."

"I imagine he doesn't get many visitors," Jack said.

"No, he doesn't," Barry answered. "I'll be going to the prison Saturday."

"I'd like to go along," Jack said hesitantly.

"We," Ruth said, taking Jack's hand in hers.

The high gray wall gave the Michigan City State Prison the appearance of a fortress. Some of the Christian inmates said it was like the walls of Jericho and they could only be brought down by faith in God.

Jack and Ruth felt a cold chill pass over them as Barry drove the car through the gates of the state prison. When Jack proposed the idea, Norma had quickly suggested she baby-sit Emily.

Barry had made a call to the chaplain the next morning. The chaplain called back an hour later with the arrangements. Now Jack felt the old familiar hatred charging in. What was he doing here? Why had he allowed Ruth to come into this place surrounded by murderers?

Guards carefully watched from the gun towers as Barry parked the car. A slightly balding gray-haired man was waiting for them at the visitor center.

"I'm Chaplain Marlow," he said, shaking hands all around.

"I know this is very hard but Billy Bob has been excited and nervous all week."

'You don't know the half of it,' Jack said to himself.

After the guards had searched and patted them down,

Marlow led Ruth, Jack, and Barry down a narrow hallway and then indicated a door to his right.

"Here we are," he said, nodding to the burly guard who accompanied them. The man inserted a large key into the lock. With a loud squeak, the door swung open on rusty hinges, revealing a small room, bare with the exception of a wooden table and five chairs. The guard backed into the corner and folded his arms over his chest.

"I'm afraid our accommodations aren't too comfortable. We don't receive many visitors on the row," Chaplain Marlow said apologetically.

Jack and Ruth heard the chains before they saw him.

Billy Bob shuffled into the room, his hands and feet bound. Guiding him to the side of the table with a lone chair, the accompanying guard helped him into the chair, then anchored his chains to a large metal hook embedded in the floor. He snapped a brass padlock closed, then after testing it, he stood and retreated to the opposite corner, taking up the same position as the first guard.

Billy Bob's appearance shocked them. His pasty white prison pallor combined with his loss of weight made him look like a sickly child.

Billy Bob smiled nervously. "Thank you for coming, I'm glad you're here."

"What makes you think I want to hear anything you have to say?" Jack snapped, biting off each word. He was

immediately astounded at his own words. He thought he had left that part of himself behind.

"I'm sorry, it's just really hard for me to believe you've changed."

"Yes sir I understand. It's hard for me to believe too. When I was little, my mother taught me about the miracles that Jesus performed. She said the greatest miracle was the new birth. When Dad came home, he would beat her for teaching me the Bible. The day Sheriff Curry came to our house and told us Dad had been killed, Mom cried but I went back behind the garage to where he used to whip me with that big leather belt he always wore. There I danced and spit on the place he would stand while he made me lean against the wall. Two weeks later, I heard his voice calling to me. Ever since then, I've heard it until I turned my life over to Christ. He sure made a difference in my life."

"Mine too," Jack said softly.

"I'm sure your mother's very happy and I know Jim and Kristie are," Ruth said, reaching across the table to touch Billy Bob's hand. The guard who had brought Billy Bob in started forward but the chaplain motioned him back.

At the end a half-hour, the chaplain stood. "I'm sorry but I'm afraid our time is up."

With the permission of the chaplain, Ruth hugged Billy Bob.

Leading them back out the way they had come, Jack saw a lone tear run down the cheek of the burly guard. The guard quickly wiped it away with the back of his hand.

Back in the car, they started the four hour drive home.

For the next hour, Jack was silent. Finally, he said, "He really has changed, hasn't he?"

"And so have you dear," Ruth said, smiling as she took his hand in hers.

One morning in September, Jack came into the kitchen looking stricken. Ruth was sating breakfast on the table and Emily was climbing into her chair. His work boots still on, he walked through the kitchen and the dining room to the desk in the corner of the living room. Ruth and Emily followed.

"What is it, Jack?" Ruth asked.

"I can't find it," he said, rummaging in the desk drawers.

"Can't find what?"

"The card the old black man gave me. I had forgotten all about him and now I can't find his card."

"You mean this one?" Ruth said, handing him the tattered card. "I knew you'd need it someday so I put it away for safekeeping."

The clapboard house was in desperate need of repairs. Several pieces of roofing lay in the overgrown yard. Jack glanced at the card; this could not be the right address, yet the card Amos Moses had given him declared it was. Jack knocked three times and was about to leave when he heard a shuffling inside. A thin black woman in her mid-eighties opened the door.

"Yes, may I help you?" she said, peering up at him through thick glasses.

Clearing his throat, Jack said, "You don't know me but my name is Jack Johnson."

A smile brightened her face.

"Why of course I know you, Mr. Johnson." She laughed at Jack's puzzled smile.

"No, not by face, but my Amos, he spoke of you many times. He prayed for you every morning. 'Lord,' he'd say, 'you save that Mr. Johnson over at Elm Grove, he sure needs you Lord,' then he'd say to me, 'Maggie, someday a big white man's gonna come to our door and tell us our prayers have been answered.' Please come in."

Tottering on a hand-carved cane, she led him into a sparse living room.

When he was settled on a faded yellow couch, Jack asked,
"Where is Amos? I'd like to give him the good news."

"Oh he knows, Mr. Johnson, he knows," Maggie said, nodding her head. "You see, my Amos, he went home to be with his Jesus last week."

Jack's face fell.

"Now don't you look so sad, Mr. Johnson. My Amos, he loved spring. He'd start walking the park in February, planning what to plant in March, and by May he'd have them flower beds a shining. He used to say," Maggie said in a far away voice, "Maggie, when I die, I'm going to a place where
there is a NEVER ENDING SPRING!"

I hope you enjoyed Never Ending Spring.

Keep reading for an excerpt of

Sluagh

Demon of the night

**In the last 20 years, 68 children have
vanished without a trace.
Where are they?
The new pastor of Waynesburg Baptist
Church knows.**

Prologue

Warm liquid spread underneath him, waking the child.
His heart thudded. Cold sweat joined the urine soaking his

sheet. Panic made his breath come in short sharp spurts. Tears welled in his eyes. He tried to calm down with no avail. He must think. He reasoned with himself. She warned him if he wet the bed again she would whip him with the cord from the sewing machine. His back still hurt from the last beating. She said she would whip him worse than before.

He knew she meant it. He had endured her wrath before. Last night after his bath, he stood before the mirror. He looked over his shoulder at his back. The red marks were fading, leaving long jagged scars. He turned away; he couldn't bear to look at the image of himself. He was ugly, his mother told him so. Loneliness and despair overwhelmed him.

Last Sunday he had been excited. The church at the corner was having a Sunday school campaign. They were inviting children in the neighborhood to join their small group.

Someone had thrown away the flier advertising the drive. He picked it up off the street. He looked around to see if anyone saw him. He hid the paper inside his shirt. Running behind the garage he eagerly read it. He decided to go. He was excited. Here at last he would be loved.

His mother would never know. As long as he was out of the house, she didn't care where he went, just as long as he wasn't bothering her. At 9 AM on Sunday morning, he walked to the church and entered through the side door.

Everyone else was coming in the front. He watched the other boys and girls stream down the hallway. They stared at him. He huddled against the wall out of their way. He wasn't sure he would be welcome in this house of God. After all, no one had given him the invitation he just found it.

He thought of all the birthday parties he was excluded from. Several times at school, he overheard others whispering about him. Their unkind comments hidden behind hands covering their mouths.

Maybe this would be different. He followed the children. One room seemed to be filling up with those his own age.

A pretty woman in a flowered dress was standing behind a small podium. She greeted each child by name. He sneaked in and sat with his back against the wall hoping they wouldn't run out this uninvited guest. The other students moved their chairs away from him, crowding up against each other. The teacher, a woman in her late twenties, actually smiled at him once or twice. It made him feel warm inside. His mother never smiled at him.

Afterward he wanted to speak to her. To tell her how delighted he was to be in her class. How much he enjoyed her stories. He approached the room thinking she was alone. He heard another female voice.

"If that child is going to attend this church my husband and I are leaving. He will attract others just like himself. I will not have my son associate with children like that."

The Sunday school teacher said something unintelligible.

"I don't care, I'll not have my Howey in the same class with that dirty little boy."

He knew they were talking about him. He left never to return. No one pursued him. No visit to his home, just a general sigh of relief from the church. If this couple pulled out their membership, the finances would suffer.

What was the price of losing one little poor boy compared with the loss of this wealthy family.

Ashamed of his ragged clothes, he closed the holes with safety pins. During rainy days, he wore plastic bags over his feet. He was aware he was different. The pitying expressions of teachers, the taunts of the children.

He came home the first day of school and didn't want to return. His mother laughed at him and called him a coward.

Soon after that, he started wetting the bed. His mother was livid. She snatched him out of a sound sleep and threw him to the floor.

"You're 6 years old, you little creep. If you do this again I will whip you," she screamed. "Now get

downstairs and wash these sheets. " She ripped off the wet bedding and flung it at him. He struggled down the stairs tripping and almost falling. Finally, he wrestled the soaked sheets into the laundry room. Stuffing them into the washer was another matter. Even with the big bird stool, he had to stand on his tiptoes. He could not reach the soap.

Running into the bathroom, he grabbed the liquid hand soap. He was pushing down the pump when her hand caught him up the side of his head. He fell off the stool his head smacking the wall. Tears filled his eyes. Reaching into the overhead cabinet, she took out the bottle of Wisk. She turned to him her face a mask of rage.

"Now get up there and sleep on the floor and if you wet on the rug I'll mop it up with you." His heart pounding he ran back up the stairs. He curled up on the floor, shivering in his wet underwear.

He didn't wet the bed that night or the next or the next. A week later, he went to bed in confidence and woke up in horror. His mother gripped his shoulder. Her fingers digging into his flesh like the claws of a cat. The pool of urine underneath him was turning cold. She jerked him off the bed and dropped him on the floor. In her hand, she clutched the electrical cord from the sewing machine. Before he could react, she brought it down across his back. He howled in pain. Five more times she struck him, the cord cutting into his flesh.

She left him blubbing on the floor, his back oozing blood.

"Clean up this mess and get to bed and don't you get blood on the sheets." Then she was gone, leaving her son weeping in pain and humiliation.

Now, five weeks later he woke in a wet bed quaking in fear. Jumping up he tore the sheets off and stuffed them under the bed. Running to the chest, he replaced the wet sheets with clean ones. He stretched them out the best he could and leaped into bed. He heard his mother coming up the stairs.

Her steps approached his room. He pretended to be asleep. She flung open the door.

"Get up and get to school." She said. Turning, she left. He breathed a sigh of relief. She would be at work when he came home from school. He could wash the sheets then and his mother would never know.

That afternoon he hurried home, running all the way. He took the shortcut through old man Bleven's yard. Rounding the house, he stopped dead in his tracks.

His mother's car was in the driveway. Ever so quietly, he entered through the front door and tiptoed up the stairs. There was thunder in the air. It boomed shaking the house. He used it to cover the squeak on the fifth step.

In his room, he dropped to his knees and looked under the bed. His heart almost stopped. The space was empty,

the sheets were gone. Suddenly a hand closed around his upper arm. There was a ripping sound as his mother tore his tattered shirt from his back.

For the next five minutes, he endured the worst whipping of his young life. Blood trickled down his back pooling in the waistband of his pants. He shrieked in agony and despair.

"Didn't think I would find them did you? You're worse than worthless." She screamed, her arm pounding away. "I should have killed you when were little, I should have given you away. Now you're too big, nobody wants you."

She finished with a cut across his shoulder that reached to his stomach catching his bellybutton. She flung him away from her.

"Now get out of here." She whipped the cord at the child catching him on the leg. Limping he ran for the stairs.

Halfway down he stumbled, falling the rest of the way. Picking himself up he charged out of the house and across the porch.

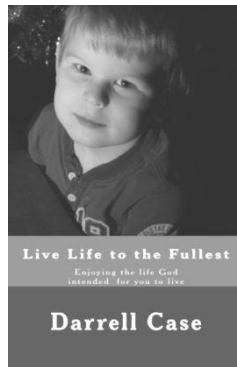
Hidden behind the garage he curled up on the ground. In misery, he began to sob. A cold rain peppered the ground. He barely felt it. No one loved him. No one cared. His own mother wished he was dead.

Mercifully, he slept. Two hours later, he awoke in the dark.

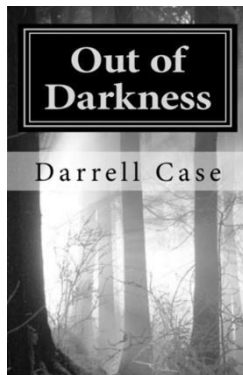
Rain still fell. He shivered. Things had changed. He was no longer the little boy everyone picked on. They would never hurt him again. He felt dead inside. They might beat his body but they would never touch his inner self. His heart was dead, unfeeling, uncaring.

Quietly, the demon entered him.

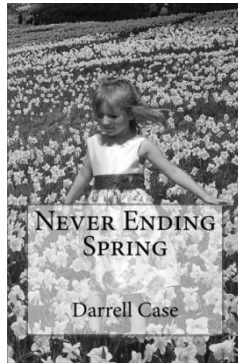
More from Darrell Case



Enjoying the life God intended for you to live
How to enjoy life in spite of yourself.

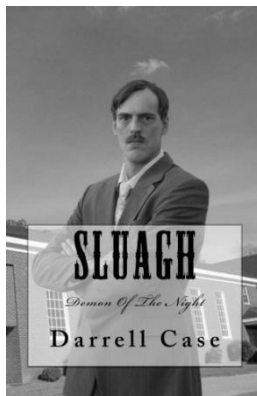


David Padgett outstanding Pastor, bestselling author,
motivational speaker, or serial killer.
“Out of Darkness is a compelling story that kept me
on the edge of my seat from the first page to the
last.”



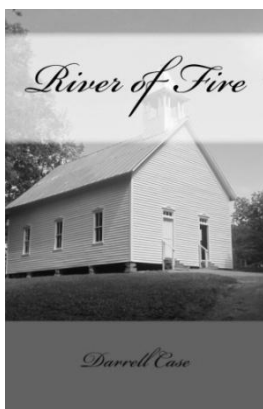
A mmurderer is loose in Elm Grove, Indiana
“Never Ending Spring” is a suspenseful, well-written
story.”

“Great story about redemption and faith with lots of twists and
turns.”



Max develops into a serial killer of children. For eighteen
years, he operates undetected burying their bodies where
they are never found.

“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.”



Together Adam and Victoria face a life of ministering, love and danger.

“I loved this book. I could hardly put it down. It is a story of suspense, drama, romance, faith, the love of Jesus as well as of the power of the Holy Spirit and redemption.”



“Miracle at Coffeerville is a wonderful collection of Christmas short stories that are very uplifting. It will become a tradition to read this book every year at Christmas. If you need something to lift your spirits and put you in the mood for Christmas, grab this book and a cup of hot cocoa, and snuggle in for a heartwarming read.”

Dear Reader:

While writing may be a lonely profession, there is always encouragement. An email note or remark from those who have enjoyed your previous works. An excellent comment from a reviewer or reader can send me back to my new manuscript buoyant to smooth out the rough edges.

Even a bad review or remark helps me to take a second look at the book I am working on at the present time. As the story comes together, the characters begin speaking and telling their own view of the account. Now *Never Ending Spring* is completed. As always, I hope you enjoyed reading this novel as much as I did writing it. May God 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 actives visit <http://darrellcase.com>

