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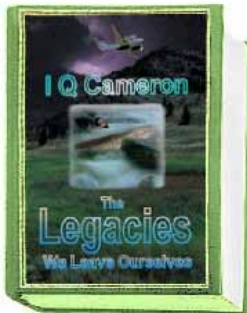
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Read the Conclusion!

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The Legacies We Leave Ourselves

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(Version: V8.0C)

(A novel by)

I Q Cameron

Introduction

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The Legacies We Leave Ourselves is a romantic, action adventure, with a particularly memorable plot. If you enjoy thrills, action and suspense, as well as the story of true love and love lost, you'll definitely enjoy this. It's romantic, tricky, impacting, and most of all, wonderfully memorable. This story is guaranteed to break hearts. It offers the reader the pleasure of trying to work out what happened in the sad and distant past, as well as what will happen when that awful past finally catches up with a very misunderstood hero.

But there's more to this heroic tale than meets the eye. There are secrets hidden here. One key character holds a dark, troubled secret. Another's entire existence is an enigma. *Heartwarming, thrilling and entirely engrossing!* The conclusion to this novel is possibly the most memorable you will ever encounter!!!

Andy's troubled and painful past lingers upon him every day for twenty years, until he has simply learned to live with the accusations against him, and his own terrible pain and loss. Now the object of his hometown's bitter blame for a bygone tragedy, he has simply learned to cope as best he can.

But now, as a Christian, it would seem that God has a plan to end Andy's deep pain, either by redeeming him, or by allowing him to simply die at the end of his tragedy. Either way, he must face this final trial to find relief.

And answers...

This is a stunning tale that will be sure to draw many, many tears. And perhaps a few questions along the way...

Now, please enjoy!

Foreword

Having been a Christian for some decades, I always found it difficult to find novels that properly captured lifelike action, terror or even romance, while still maintaining Christian values or the deep truth and freedom that having a *real* relationship with the living God brings. Often (I

found) writers sacrificed the reality or impact of life's sometimes horrible events, watering things down too far in an effort to make their story appear more 'Christian' or inoffensive.

The Bible, on the other hand, does not hide from the awful things men (and women) are capable of. Nor does it play down horrible events such as war, murder, sexual misconduct and assault, treachery, etc. Indeed, life itself can be unrelentingly offensive. With all that in mind, I have tried to keep my novels as realistic as possible without glorifying such things as violence, murder, sex, terror and every other horrifying human advent.

Jesus Christ died for us so that we could live forever (Heaven), as well as live fulfilling and meaningful lives right here and now – *true healing and true freedom!* And only He can do this, because He has the power and authority to firstly forgive us for all our wrongdoings (sins), and then to begin working inside us to change us into what He has always wanted us to be (and wanted for us).

So often Christians (in novels and in life) are portrayed as weak and 'just too good' to be real, in a world that we all know is *very real!* I would like to break that mold, since I believe a Christian hero or heroine should probably be one of the best examples of Godliness-meets-humanness we could ever find in this life.

Just like my books, such heroes are not perfect! (Smile...☺) Those who trust in Jesus for forgiveness and everlasting life (in this life) are not perfect. God is changing and working on us and in us every single day, no matter how our story looks. Like a story God is telling, we are a work in progress...

Jesus Christ has a life-changing impact on the genuine believer, because the two enter into a *real and loving relationship*. This, however, does not mean that our Christian heroes will ever be perfect, nor should they be portrayed that way. Indeed, the whole reason for Jesus Christ's intervention in history and in our individual lives is that we will always remain in need of His divine help and salvation, whether it be with external forces, internal ones, temptation, sin or any other factor.

Needing His help and forgiveness will never change. And God will never tire of giving it.

Many of my earliest writings lacked Christian input. Hence, I have done my best to withdraw most of those versions of my novels from circulation, and have replaced them with something I think that both Christian and non-adherent will find challenging to say the least. I am attempting to fill what I believe is a Christian literature void, and while some may find my stories too violent or suggestive in some areas, I have tried to write about *real* issues without shying away from reality, and yet without glorifying sexual issues, crudity or coarse language.

These things exist. I don't ignore them, but neither do I exalt them.

I have no interest in terms such as ‘have faith’ or ‘simply believe’, which are meaningless to the one who doesn’t understand them. Sometimes I may give an example, or even brutally demonstrate them. I would rather ire some readers, who judge my work as ‘going too far’, than to indulge in the usual ‘*too valiant and too true*’ hero figures. Life is real, and when there is action, it is very often brutal.

With all that in mind, I have decided not to pull punches, so to speak. My ‘baddies’ are bad, and my ‘heroes and heroines’ are human, and as real as I can make them. I avoid excess course language and sexual scenes, but make no apologies for realistic violence and faulty characters. These things are very much a real part of life, and since we are all living in the age of terror, perhaps there is a time and need for recognizing ‘real’ characters and events, even – and especially – in Christian writing.

Hence, perhaps you, the reader, will be kind enough to show me a measure of grace (should you deem that I go too far in some of the things I write, etc.), as I endeavor to explain in my own very fault-riddled way, what salvation in Christ, God’s love, forgiveness and some other key Christian values and teachings really mean to us all.

And I sincerely hope I don’t fail you too greatly... ☺

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CHAPTER 1

Merve Hillman's gaunt face turned another shade of gray as the Beechcraft rocked violently, the wind hammering rain against the dark windshield before him.

The onslaught might have remained eerily invisible, if not for the brilliant and equally terrifying flashes of lightning that streaked across the night sky every few seconds. Dazzling shards, forked and jagged, the bolts of searing electricity hacked at the darkness, slashing wildly as though seeking to destroy the tiny aircraft.

The only accurate word to describe Merve was 'skinny'. He'd progressed past 'slim' and 'lean' some time back, and while he still managed to pass his yearly physical due to good diet and exercise, the years were telling on him.

Especially tonight.

His long, thin body seemed almost pitiful each time the flashing night sky illuminated him. His physical state had not seemed overly important to his passengers as they had boarded earlier that evening, and yet now it seemed somewhat magnified due to the enormity of their situation.

Beside the shaking pilot, another man sat studying the gauges and dials before him, as though he might be able to assist. Ashley Collard appeared to be the exact opposite of the gaunt pilot, with a large, rounded body and two chins. He looked very much out of place in his business suit, overweight and balding, with little passenger experience, and none at piloting.

Collard could not hide his fear, despite his best efforts not to spook the two females seated behind him, and in the dim lights of the cabin he seemed to take on a white tinge. This paleness was accentuated from time to time as a lightning bolt would light up his face to show just how sickly he really felt and looked, accentuated by dazzling reflections from the polished, hairless portions of his scalp. His entire being rocked about as the plane was buffeted by roaring winds, regularly illuminated in a halo of dazzling light as the lightning struck out at the floundering craft.

Behind Collard, Marie Townsend hugged her daughter close, pulling the girl in so hard

against her shoulder as to cause Stephanie pain. Stephanie did not complain though, and in fact, barely noticed how much her ribs were hurting within her mother's grasp. Collard glanced back at them, as if to check that his fellow passengers were handling their ordeal satisfactorily, though it was something he knew he was not doing very well himself.

As a bright flash lit up Marie's face, Collard was impressed at how calm she appeared. On edge, he decided, but not panicking. She was a particularly attractive woman; he'd seen that the moment they had all boarded the small aircraft. He couldn't have missed it. Tall and trim, with long, dark brown hair and matching brown eyes that seemed to bore right into him, Collard had instantly dreamed of gaining her as a prize.

But he had also known better from that very first instant. He'd never had much luck with women, always on the road with business as he was, and his heart had both raced and died within him in those first few seconds of greeting. Marie was lively, more than most, with something in her spirit that seemed to want to leap out for joy. She was almost mesmerizing.

Marie's daughter Stephanie had seemed a pleasant girl, and had even managed to share a joke with the tired businessman, something that had surprised him. He remembered her saying that she was twelve years old, and how she and her mother were on their way for a holiday. She had been so looking forward to it. Secretly now, Collard was hoping that they would all live long enough for the girl to enjoy her holiday.

Like her mother, Stephanie could not take her eyes off the scene before them, the night sky full of raging fury, and a pilot who was clearly not in control of the situation. Even to a twelve-year-old girl, the situation was obviously dire. She stared back through glistening emerald green eyes at Collard, tried to smile, and then looked away.

Collard turned away and grimaced. He had grown to hate being on the road, but he hated *this* a whole lot more. Surely this was not a way to live, he decided. What had he done with his life? What did he have to show? His mind was brought crashing back to reality by the crash of another lightning bolt, and a nervous announcement from their beleaguered pilot.

"I can't get them!" shouted Merve, his voice betraying him, clearly showing the fear that was rising within him. "I can't get anyone!"

No longer was he calm, as he had been at the outset of the flight.

It would be easy, he had said. *No worries*, he had told them. *They would be safely down before the storm hit*.

But the storm had come upon them more quickly than anticipated. And they were *not* safely down, or even close to being able to land. Marie feared, as did they all, that they would be down soon enough, though not in the way she wanted. She heard Merve calling on the radio again.

“Oh, *come on!*” the old pilot finally snapped. He was clearly agitated now, and forgetting to hide it. Then he tried to show some semblance of control as he turned to face his nervous passengers. “It’ll be okay. You’ll see. I can’t get through on the radio, but that’s okay. They know we’re coming.”

Another flash filled the cabin, momentarily dousing the old man with dazzling light. “Don’t fret,” he tried to console. “I’ve seen much worse than this!”

He hadn’t.

Marie forced herself to look away from the mesmerizing windshield to check for the hundredth time that both she and her daughter were still safely secured by their seatbelts. As though to punctuate the gravity of her fears, both she and Stephanie were suddenly tossed about in their seats, remaining together only because of their restraints. She heard Stephanie begin to cry.

And for the hundredth time Marie prayed.

Ashley Collard had been studying the controls for some time, and while not understanding much of what he saw, it didn’t take an expert to understand that what he was seeing was not ideal. Outside was one of the most vicious storms he had ever witnessed, and while Collard had no way to know if storms were naturally more threatening at altitude, this one seemed particularly aggressive. Rain pelted so hard against the plane that he could barely hear the engines anymore, and most certainly, he could see nothing ahead of them. Beside him the aging pilot was clearly frightened, his actions becoming less confident with each passing minute. If Merve Hillman didn’t remain calm, Collard knew it would be over for all four of them.

Worse still, Collard noticed, was that the entire plane seemed to be suffering too. The radio had been first to fail, beginning with severe static, and then a total loss of communication. Shortly after the two compasses on the dash had begun to swing to and fro through almost ninety degrees, neither able to decide where the plane was headed.

Collard was no expert, but he knew *that* was not a good sign. Especially since their radar had also ceased to function. The aging pilot had proudly boasted that the plane had been fitted with extra technology to aid flying in difficult conditions, but any such boasting had evaporated some time back.

A blinding flash accompanied by a deafening boom wrenched Collard from his deliberations. If there had been any doubt as to whether or not to question the old man on the state of the ‘updated’ navigation equipment, it was gone.

“Compasses are haywire!” shouted Collard unnecessarily.

The old man studied them for only a moment, his gaze much more fixed on the black soup

before them. That was where his true fear resided. Besides, he had already seen the malfunctioning equipment. Merve began to shake noticeably, and it struck Collard that both the old man's plane and his aging body were failing him.

Still, Merve tried to put on a brave face.

"Doesn't matter," called back the old pilot. "I've got a rough heading, and I know this route. If I can just get a glimpse of a landmark, we'll still be right on target. Don't fret."

His words caused both men to begin searching the viscous broth below for anything that the old man might recognize.

In the rear of the plane Marie Townsend was also worried about the state of the aging pilot, but did feel a tiny ray of hope at the thought that perhaps his familiarity with their route might prove an asset. Her hope took a battering as another booming, flashing lightning trail crossed their path somewhere up ahead.

"I can't see a thing!" announced Collard. "You'd think with all the lightning we would be able to see *something*. But I can't see through the rain."

"Me neither," agree Merve. "I'm going to take her down five hundred. I shouldn't, but maybe it'll let us see something."

Collard turned another ghostly shade of pale.

"Are you sure you should? I mean, what about mountains?"

For the first time in half an hour Merve seemed sure of something he was saying. "No. It's okay. There *is* Mount Cash, but we're well away from there. All I need is one landmark, and then I'll get us back up where we should be. Trust me."

It took some effort not to argue, but Collard had no alternative. He had to trust the pilot. He glanced over his shoulder to view the two feminine faces staring fearfully back, then jerked about and cursed as another thundering crash exploded in the growling sky before them. The plane shuddered and moaned against howling winds, then slowly began to drift downwards at its master's bidding.

"Five hundred," announced Merve. "That should do it. I dare not go any lower."

He was leaning forward, as though closing the distance between his eyes and the earth by that small distance might make some difference. It didn't. All that anyone could see was blackness, filled with assaulting rain and forked shards of lightning. Even in the rear of the plane, Marie and Stephanie Townsend were doing their part, straining to see something.

Both Marie and Stephanie forgot all thought of scouring for a landmark a moment later, as did their male companions. A deafening and violent boom exploded just outside their tiny aircraft, accompanied by a blinding flash of light that seemed to last for almost a full second. The

plane shuddered, ducked and weaved for a time, and brought an audible groaning from the engines.

Merve Hillman struggled against the aircraft's desire to plummet, his gnarled knuckles turning whiter than his ashen face as he tightened his stranglehold on the controls. He strained with all his might, slowly gaining the upper hand as the craft ducked and rocked, and while it continued to be buffeted, it gradually came reluctantly into line with the old man's will. Ashley Collard held his breath, his features deathly pale as each lightning strike lit him up against a background of turbulent, lashing rain.

Merve's heart raced in his chest, his face a picture of terror as it was regularly lit up like a neon sign. He felt his chest tighten even more. *Was that the engines spluttering he had heard?* He couldn't be sure. And now he was having trouble hearing its drone over the crash of thunder and the howling of a vicious wind. His old eyes frantically searched the gauges for any sign of trouble. His entire body was tingling with fear now. He had brought the plane lower than it should have been, and he was still quite lost. He shouted into the microphone again, hoping desperately for a sign.

Anything.

But no sign came except for the frightened whimpering of a twelve-year-old girl behind the beleaguered pilot, and a few excited questions from the overweight businessman seated beside him. Merve suddenly felt completely overcome, very frightened, and quite alone. He clutched his chest.

Ashley Collard drew a long, terrified breath of disbelief as he saw the old man leave the controls of the plane to grip his chest with both hands. Watching from behind, however, it was Marie Townsend, the nurse, who was first to understand what was happening. Despite the danger to herself, she unbuckled her seatbelt and pushed her daughter aside as she made a desperate lurch for the aging pilot. Her motivation was somewhere between concern for him as a person, and for the lives of all on board should the old man die.

By the time Marie fell heavily against the back of Merve Hillman's seat, Ashley Collard was already shaking their pilot in a vain attempt to rouse him. Merve was already unresponsive, his heart attack quite severe and almost immediately fatal. As Collard shouted at the old man over the crashing of the storm, wrestling the pilot with his hands, Marie leaned over and did some shouting of her own.

"He's having a heart attack, Mister Collard! He's having a heart attack! He can't hear you!"

She reached instinctively to the old man's neck to feel for a pulse, and felt nothing. *Was it*

her own excitement and inability to concentrate? Or was the old man *already dead*? In the heat of the terrifying moment, Marie could not be sure. Another lurch of the plane wrenched her hand from the pilot's neck, and Marie knew in that instant that it no longer mattered.

With a terrifying shriek, Ashley Collard suddenly pointed forward as another deafening peal of thunder accompanied an enormous bolt of lightning, exploding close to the stricken plane and lighting up the night sky as the driving rain simultaneously gave a few seconds of respite. In that instant both he and Marie could see what lay before and below the shuddering plane, and both froze with icy, blood curdling terror.

Flying blind and lost due to instrument failure, the old pilot had led his plane and passengers directly into the path of Mount Cash. Moreover, having dropped altitude, he had ensured that any slim hope that Ashley Collard might miraculously take control of the plane was gone. Marie screamed out loud as she saw a sloping wall of trees approaching at speed, rising upward at an angle beneath them. And in that same instant she knew they would never miss it.

Ashley Collard had never even sat in the front of a plane before that day. Still, having watched the aging pilot with keen interest, he had at least managed to gather a few fundamentals – like to pull back at the control meant to gain altitude, and to push forward meant to drop. As another blinding, crashing flash caused the earth to appear like a monster raging towards them, Collard simply acted on instinct, forcing Merve Hillman back into his seat with an elbow, and then pulling back at the control. The bobbing aircraft groaned noisily over the cries of the two females behind him, the roar of driving rain and the crash of yet more thunder.

Marie Townsend crashed heavily into her seat again, pushing past her daughter in a wild rush for survival. Her hands shook with deathly terror, making the simple task of fastening her seatbelt almost impossible. Beside her Stephanie was screaming, and ahead of her Ashley Collard was chanting something at the top of his voice, cursing the small plane as he tried to enforce his will upon it.

Marie's hands shook vigorously, but years of training to remain calm during an emergency served her well, and with the aid of another lightning flash, she was able to drive the two metal fittings together.

But instead of the familiar click she expected as the seatbelt was fastened, it made the loudest sound she had ever heard.

Marie's whole world exploded, and she felt great pain as she was thrown about in her seat, straining against the restraint she had just fastened. Marie lost sight of Stephanie in another second, not because the girl was not still there, but because they were being tossed about with such force. There came the sound of shattering glass and the horrifying roar of scraping metal.

Almost instantly came another bright flash, and then the smack of debris hurtling about the darkened cabin. And all this amid the loudest, snarling crashing sounds she had ever heard.

And then Marie's world became black and silent.

CHAPTER 2

Andy Harrison stepped over the low fence of the Springcliffe cemetery, moved to the sidewalk and stood beneath a leaning pine. He stared for a long time at the worn out cemetery sign, and then up the slope to where he had just visited, and his heart felt heavy. Beside him, a familiar park bench was etched deep with the initials of young lovers, including some very dated ones of his own.

The leaning pine creaked somewhere high over Andy's head, the morning breeze shaking loose large droplets of water into a series of puddles around its base. The tree was gnarled and aged and also etched deep with the scrawled initials of generations of youth. It stood proud and strong, sentinel over the cemetery, and witness to so many lives. But even the pine and the familiar park bench did not look as inviting as they normally did, drenched in the previous night's rain.

Andy stared up at the damp sentinel pine, and his mind immediately wandered. His thoughts went back to *another* sentinel; another tree that had stood guard over many a young life, and was also etched deep with initials and declarations of true love. *That* tree stood somewhere in a forbidden, haunting mountain in his mind, and he had not dared approach it for many years. Andy dismissed the thoughts.

Carving initials seemed so long ago. And visiting the cemetery always made him think of such innocent and distant pleasures.

It was early morning, a time Andy normally loved. But not today. Not when the floods were about. Andy hated the spring floods. He took a deep breath, wishing he could clear the fog from his mind.

With one hand he brushed back a shock of unruly, sandy hair. Lines were beginning to creep in beside Andy's blue eyes, something he preferred to call 'laughter lines' rather than crow's feet, and his mouth became pursed as he mulled things over in his mind. After a time of contemplation he turned his back on the cemetery to view the Choppy River on the opposite side of the road. Andy squinted a little more than usual, as though he was studying the surging waters, looking for something.

The river meandered down from Mount Cash, normally a clean and deceptively pleasant waterway, and rather lovely to behold. But Andy knew its darker secrets. The Choppy's banks were steep and high in most places, making it difficult to escape those waters once a person was in them. And there were submerged dangers too; boulders and eddies that conspired to smash an unsuspecting swimmer who was unfortunate enough to find himself caught in its powerful flow.

But the river showed its true hidden personality during flood times, when its waters raged and the slippery banks kept any poor victim firmly in its cold, muddy grasp, buffeting and tumbling, smashing and pulverizing until the doomed swimmer had no choice but to drown in its cruel flow of murky bitterness.

A dark river with even darker secrets.

And today the river seemed even more ominous than he remembered.

The Choppy was brown and muddy after the heavy rain of recent storms, swirling and bubbling and pushing debris downstream in tangled masses. Away from the upstream white water, it was deceptively quiet, a lurking, brooding, powerful monster. Andy watched as an entire small tree floated down, twisting and slowly turning in the churning water, and it struck him that today the river could not hide its true colors. It made him shiver as he watched the uprooted tree turn in its death roll.

He turned to walk to the local store.

The unpaved ground beneath his feet was soft and wet, and in places water was still spilling onto the road that separated the cemetery from the river. Muddy puddles lay all about, presenting a minefield of dangers to anyone brave enough to be out walking. Andy cast his eyes skyward, and sighed at the sight of more gathering clouds. More rain was on the way.

"I hate the rain," he said quietly to himself.

Still, Andy felt in no hurry. He had learned to live with his lot, and if getting wet was the worst thing that life could dish out to him, that would be okay. A chilly breeze made him put his hands in his coat pockets. *That was unseasonal*, he thought. For the most part it was warm in Springcliffe at this time of year, except when the storms came.

The storms that came in late spring always brought a chill to his bones.

After a few paces Andy heard a faint voice calling, and he ceased stepping between puddles as he turned to wait for the caller to catch up. While he was deep in contemplation, he recognized the voice immediately, and being that of an old friend it was not a voice he felt any need to avoid. Sarah Emerson was Andy's age, thirty-six, of medium height with short, light brown hair and a girl-next-door look about her.

Friends from school days, Andy had known Sarah for three decades, and while he loved her

as a friend, his feelings had never moved beyond that. Sarah continued to run toward him, even though he had stopped quite still as he waited for her, more of an indication of how much she longed to be at his side rather than any need for haste.

Running after him, Andy thought – in person, just as she did in life.

Sarah continued to trot, a knee-length, feminine skirt dancing about her legs, and a tasteful matching blouse and cardigan hugging her pleasant figure. *She had always dressed beautifully*, it struck him as he watched her run. A waterproof camera that hung from a strap about her neck bounced off her breasts as she hurried along. Sarah was always pleasant, always his friend, and always the perfect lady. As he watched her approach, he wondered why he had never found her attractive beyond the natural.

Sarah's blue eyes flashed as she dashed to Andy's side, happy to see him.

"Hey," she said with a grin. They fell in step as he returned her greeting, then she asked, "What'd you think of that storm?"

"Yeah it was... *big*," he replied. But that was all he would say about it, and she knew it. Sarah knew full well what he thought of storms, especially spring storms. Andy changed the subject.

"So how's our big-time news reporter today?"

Sarah's job was only local, and reporting for a small-town newspaper was not the most exciting job – but there was no denying that she was good. Everyone knew Sarah was talented; even those in the city had noticed.

"Didn't you hear the news?" Sarah shot back. "I'm after a story."

"No. Power's been out all night," Andy replied. "What news?"

Her blue eyes flashed again, not with mischief, but with the small-town thrill of being caught up in something larger than the town, regardless of how tragic the matter might be.

"A small plane went down last night. They don't know where it is, but they reckon it's somewhere up on Cash Mountain."

Andy stopped walking and faced her.

"You serious?" he checked.

She nodded. "Absolutely. It's been all over the radio. I'm on my way to find out if there's any chance of my getting some pictures."

"Ah, so that's it," he joked. He knew she would be concerned for those on the plane, but it didn't hurt to keep her humble. "So it's just the story your after? A gold-digger, is that it?"

Sarah gave a knowing glance, then looked about them, studying the sky.

"You know me better than that, Andy Harrison," she defended herself. Then she smiled

again. Yes, Andy *did* know better. “Still, my career is actually going somewhere – or at least I think it is – and I’d have to admit that a few exclusive photos would be all it would take...”

“What do you mean?” asked Andy. “Your career has already taken off, Sarah, and you know it. I mean, you already have an offer from the big smoke. What more do you need?”

Sarah sighed.

“I know,” she replied wistfully, “but I’m just not sure, if you know what I mean... I’m not sure I even want to go. I don’t really want to leave Springcliffe.”

“Oh, come on, Sarah,” Andy shot back. “Our generation and just about every kid ever since has busted a gut to get out of this place. Why should you hesitate now? This is your big chance. You should take it and run.”

“You’re still here.”

Her reply caught him by surprise. He was busy trying to boost her confidence, and didn’t expect such a pointed truth. Indeed, it almost hurt to hear her say it so bluntly. After all, they both knew Andy was the sole reason Sarah had never left town, and she knew that he had his reasons for not wanting to leave.

“Well,” he argued, “that’s different. And besides, I *did* leave. I spent ten years away – *remember* – doing what I wanted to do, Sarah. You should do the same.” His comment was as pointed as hers, but only to each other, since only they understood the depth of what each was saying.

“I’ll stay here as long as you do.” She said the words with a smile, but she was daring him.

“No,” Andy flatly replied, and then he resorted to simple, straight honesty. “I ran away once, you know. But that wasn’t for me. I *like* it here. I really do. Memories and all. This is my home. And I make a few bucks in my timber shop. I got no plans for leaving.”

Then came the nitty-gritty.

“But *you* – *you* should go and follow your heart. You’re the hottest little journo this town has ever seen or ever will. Your talents are wasted here, Sarah. You know it and I know it. Come on, Sarah, you’ve been offered a position by a big-city newspaper. You should just take it. Forget about me and this town – just take it!”

Sarah looked away, no longer wanting to return his gaze. She thought for a moment, and then changed the subject.

“The chief’s been on the radio and all,” she said. Her face suddenly took on a more sedate look, like that of an anchorwoman reading a somber story. “They’re not very hopeful about survivors, but they’re gonna send out a search party. The chief’s organizing it right now.”

“Heaven help ’em then,” Andy said, his crow’s-feet deepening. “And stop saying ‘gonna’.

You're a reporter now. The proper term is '*going to*'." Having given his view of the chief, which he found impossible to resist, he would have been glad for a change of subject. However, a tilt of Sarah's head silently chastised him, so he defended his position. "It's the truth, and you know it."

"Course," she agreed, and returned a little humor of her own. "The proper term is '*going to*'. Everyone knows that."

"Not *that*," he shot back. "Don't avoid the issue. Reporters are supposed to deal in *facts* and not *dodge issues*. And the fact is that Stedman is too old and cranky to do his job properly."

"He's not a bad cop," she countered. "It's just..." She stopped, unwilling to state the obvious. Andy did it for her.

"It's just he's a bigoted old fool who wouldn't know he was on fire unless you told him – and that's the clean version, Sarah." He stared into her blue eyes, enjoying her sprightly face as a few strands of light brown hair danced across. He was challenging her and she knew it. "And besides that, he hates me."

Now they were getting to the real truth of Andy's feelings, she knew.

"Okay," she conceded. "That much is true." The urge to argue remained, however, etched lightly into her smooth face. "But he's still not a bad cop."

"Yeah, but he hates me," Andy repeated. He always enjoyed their game. Sarah could not argue with the simple truth he had stated, but realizing that he was baiting her as he so often did, she let it go, turning to walk with him again. She changed tack. "So, will you go and search too?"

"Nope," he said simply.

Then he snorted and shook his head as if she had asked something so bizarre as to be ludicrous. She glanced across at him as they walked, her eyes flicking between the watery path upon which they ambled, and Andy's face.

"But no one knows the mountain like you," she urged. "They'd be a lot more likely to find those people if *you* were there."

"They'd be a lot more likely to find those people if the chief wasn't organizing the search party," he countered, refusing to concede.

"Oh come on, Andy. I'm being serious here."

"So am I."

Her voice took on a more conciliatory tone, mixed with a hint of pleading. "You might be able to make a big difference, Andy. You know you're good at it."

"Oh, give me a break," he snorted, his crow's feet deepening again. "They have

professionals to do this stuff, Sarah. Helicopters and dogs, and probably satellites for all we know. They don't need some country hick like me going along for the ride."

"*Yes they do*," she insisted. "Besides, you and I both know they'll start out with the locals. The townsfolk will be the first to head up the mountain, because the cops will be looking for people with local knowledge." She paused to make her point. "Nobody has spent more time up there than you, Andy."

"Yeah, well, that was a long time ago, Sarah," he countered. "And in case you hadn't noticed, I've mostly stayed away from it for ten years now..."

"No you haven't," she challenged him. "You told me you'd been back up since you got back to Springcliffe."

He sighed.

"Sarah, yeah, I've been back up," he conceded. "But that's only to face my demons. I don't... *stay up there* anymore. I don't even *like it up there* anymore."

"Yes, but you *have* been back up since you got back."

"Dammit, Sarah," he argued. "*Only to face my demons!* Don't you get it? Besides, Stedman is a cranky old fart, and I don't really think he'd want me anywhere near him."

He snorted again, unimpressed with the idea. Staying away from Chief Stedman always seemed like a wise plan. Then, as though Sarah's question had heralded some kind of doom to fall upon him, they both looked up to see the chief's car approaching in the distance. It moved steadily along the sealed main street of Springcliffe, lurching into deep puddles as it went, and causing water to cascade out from both sides.

Andy stopped and pulled Sarah back from the curb a little further. It didn't take a lot of planning to realize that those spurting plumes of muddy water would douse them if they did not move away from the road. Besides, Andy had little doubt that the chief would take considerable pleasure in purposely trying to drench him. Or maybe Sarah's presence would curb the old man's urge. Andy decided not to find out.

But to Andy's surprise, instead of continuing to steadily spray the sidewalk with muddy water, the car slowed as it approached. For a bewildered few seconds Andy wondered if perhaps the aging chief might be taking care not to spray them, but then dismissed the idea as ludicrous. That would be grossly out of character for him, he decided, although the old man had always been particularly courteous to Sarah; presumably because she was the great granddaughter of one of the town's founders. The car, adorned with insignia and blue and red strobe lights washed clean by the rain continued to slow until its V-8 motor purred as it stopped close by them.

Chief Corbin Stedman was a large man approaching retirement age. He was overweight,

not due to anything genetic, but simply to a lazy lifestyle. What was left of his crown of brown hair was turning white, having apparently ignored the gray stage and moved right on to make the man look older than he really was. His face showed the strain of years, of both the pressures of a demanding job, and moreover, the wages of an occasional bitter spirit. He did not smile, nor even nod hello, but his face appeared heavy with brooding blackness.

Sarah approached the car while Andy continued to eye the chief from further back on the sidewalk. There seemed little point in trying to be sociable anymore, though Andy had tried often enough. He knew that the Bible taught that he should try to live in peace – even with those who were difficult to get along with. *People like the chief.*

Unable to miss the bleak look of the man, Sarah remained upbeat, and tried to sound pleasant. She hoped that her amicable demeanor might break down his stern exterior.

“Hey Chief.” Her voice was noticeably cheery.

Stedman eyed Andy for another second then softened, his worn face taking on a more charitable look as his gaze moved to Sarah.

“Well good mornin’ to ya, young Sarah,” he drawled. Then straight to business. “I suppose you heard about the missing plane.”

She nodded.

“I have.”

“Well then,” continued the chief. “You live up on the hill a bit. I don’t suppose you heard anythin’ last night?”

“Sorry, Chief. All I could hear was thunder and rain. Wouldn’t have heard a thing over it.”

“Yeah, that seems to be about all anyone can tell me,” the aging chief replied. His face still showed some strain, though he was definitely making an effort to be pleasant with Sarah. He looked past her to view Andy once more, and his face immediately hardened again. “What about you, Harrison?”

“Not a thing, Chief. Sorry,” Andy answered matter-of-fact.

His tone was honest, and he made no attempt to be inflammatory, but still the chief’s gaze was hard. An uncomfortable silence might have ensued if not for the chief’s immediate response, which was to put the car into gear. Andy suddenly spoke again, and it was enough to make the chief brake.

“You gonna go up the mountain lookin’ for them?” asked Andy.

“I’m organizin’ a team, yes. Sendin’ a search party just as soon as they’re ready to go. Just waitin’ on some gear.” The chief did not even look at Andy as he responded, and he sounded markedly terse, as if warning the younger man off asking anything further.

“Need any help?” asked Andy. It felt like stepping off the edge of a chasm, but a sense of ‘right’ would not allow him to neglect his responsibility.

Finally the chief turned again to gaze upon him, and his eyes smoldered with resentment.

“Nope.” It wasn’t true, but it felt good. Then to twist the knife. “Besides,” the older man drawled. “I’d like to bring ’em back *alive*, if you know what I mean.”

Andy’s face hardened for a moment, but then relaxed as the two tried to stare each other down.

No, he decided. It wasn’t worth it. It never had been. And it certainly wasn’t ever going to break down the barrier between them. Moreover, it wasn’t what he knew Jesus would want of him. If Jesus could meet Judas with grace, Andy should at least try to meet this angry old man with a measure of the same.

Even is he was a cranky old fart... Oh that’s right, he wasn’t supposed to think like that anymore, but then, it was better than some of the other names he might once have referred to the police chief as...

The truth was that all the years of bitterness seemed very futile to Andy, and all he wanted was for it to end. It had been a long night for Andy, with just the storm and his memories to keep him company. He’d thought about it a lot over the years, and it seemed that he would simply have to endure the old man’s ire. And since the chief seemed no longer in a hurry to leave, he gave it his best shot.

“After twenty years, don’t you think you could just let it go, Chief,” Andy ventured bravely. He was tired of running from this man. And besides, he felt certain that Jesus didn’t want him to run anymore either. “If you can just... *try* to let me help...”

“Not on your life, son!” spat the chief, and suddenly the roaring lion that was the old man’s deep resentment of this particular young man, roared into life. It was all Corbin Stedman could do to suppress the worst of it in front of Sarah. “People *die around you!* *No!* I don’t want you *anywhere* near me or those good people goin’ up that mountain. Understand that?”

Firmly convinced that he was being subtly led to make peace with the old policeman, Andy didn’t even flinch. If building bridges was the only way to end the enmity between them, Andy had reached the stage where he was prepared to endure, and at least try to mend fences. Besides, such a terse, hurtful reaction was nothing new to him.

So, in the end it was not Andy who reacted to the chief’s hardness. Instead it was Sarah.

“It wasn’t Andy’s *fault*, *Chief!*” she blurted, catching both men off guard. Her voice was instantly tense, and full of emotion. “It *wasn’t* his fault! Come on. I can’t believe this. Andy knows the mountain better than anyone around here. And there’s people up there who might die

if no one finds them! How can you argue like this? You *know* Andy can help!”

Stedman was visibly surprised by Sarah’s sudden outburst, but he remained immovable. Instead of being swayed by her, he shot back a warning of his own.

“I’ve known you for over thirty years, Sarah Emerson, and your folks a whole lot longer, and I’ve never heard you backchat me like that. Hangin’ around this fella is becomin’ a bad influence on you. In any case, the search party’s already assembled and it’s all fixed to go. And most important of all, I don’t want *that man* anywhere near my team.” He turned to stare at Andy again, but the younger man showed little emotion.

“You ain’t goin’ up that mountain with my team, Harrison. Do I make myself clear?”

Andy did not answer, but the message was received well enough. He shook his head to show his disapproval, and even Sarah backed a step away from the chief’s car, her sudden outburst fizzing out. Without another word Chief Corbin Stedman accelerated down Main Street, his car tossing volumes of water from puddles as he went. Sarah stared after him, shaking her head too now, in disappointment and disbelief.

“That went well,” offered Andy lightly. He appeared only slightly rattled by the tense encounter, but deep down he was deeply troubled. *No point in taking it to heart*, he tried to convince himself. After all, he’d seen it often enough. Still, those fiery blasts always left their mark.

“What a fool!” blurted Sarah. “He *knows* he could use your help.”

“Well, you got to remember – *he’s not a bad cop*, Sarah.” He mimicked the words she had spoken a few minutes earlier, mocking her. Then for good measure he added with a hint of cynicism, “I especially liked the part where you told him *I could do it better than anyone else*. I’m pretty sure you almost had him with that.”

“Oh, that’s not what I said,” Sarah defended herself. “Oh, come on Andy. What I meant was – you’ve spent more time up that mountain than anyone around here – and it doesn’t matter if it was twenty years ago or – or – just last week! You know Cash Mountain better than anyone! He’s a fool if he doesn’t want you along.”

“Let it go, Sarah.”

Andy gave a weak smile, and Sarah realized that he wasn’t blaming her, but merely making as light of a bad situation as possible. That was how he survived. And yet she would not desist. Something was driving her.

“No *you* listen, Andy,” she insisted. “Have a look up there.” She pointed to a mass of white cloud that obscured all but the lowest portion of Cash Mountain. “The choppers won’t be able to go up there.” Then she pointed with a finger to where Andy knew people would be assembling at

the town hall. “And these guys will be lucky if they don’t all end up lost in the fog. *And* once the rain clears, the temperature’s going to drop to zero – or worse! How long do you think those people will last up there, Andy? They need you!”

She was panting, excited, her face turning red.

Andy pursed his lips and his head began to nod negatively.

“I sympathize,” he explained. “I really do, Sarah. But you heard the chief. He’s in charge of the show, and he just simply ain’t gonna let me tag along. Even if he did, there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell that he’d listen to anything I’ve got to say.”

Sarah faced him square on, blocking his progress. Her face was flushed, and she was vehement. Andy made another joke.

“I haven’t seen you this intense since you asked me to marry you,” he said.

“I did *not* ask you to marry me,” she corrected, somewhat indignant. “I told you I loved you – it’s not the same. And you weren’t listening *then* either.” She stared at a puddle she had just stepped into, shook her sodden shoe, and then ignored it. “Listen, Andy. I know it’s hard, but I really think those people need you. *Do it for me. Please.*”

Andy screwed up his face, showing his distaste.

“What’s the score, Sarah? What’s *really* goin’ on here? You related to someone on board, or what? Or do you just want me to go get your story for you. Is that it?”

It was humor again, and this time she realized it. There was, however, an unmistakable hint of seriousness to his question. He wanted the truth. Sarah gave a somber and serious reply.

“Neither.”

“What then?”

“Well, okay, I’ll admit I wouldn’t mind some photographs, but...”

“*What’s* the deal, Sarah?” he prodded firmly.

“I have my reasons. Look, Andy, I can’t go. I’d fall in the river and drown before I got half way to the top.” Her face reddened a little and she immediately regretted her choice of words. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” But then she was back, on a mission again. “But it’s true – you know I would. And yeah, I’d like the story – *that’s* what I do. I admit that. But that’s not it. You know me better than that.”

She took a long breath, avoiding the ultimate truth, but doing her best to convince him, just the same. Who knew? Perhaps a part of the truth would suffice.

“Look, you have the things that haunt you from the past, and I have mine. *That’s the truth*, okay. I can’t tell you what, but lets just say that I’m... *terrified* of anyone being left up there on the mountain.”

“Why?”

Andy still didn’t have the truth he wanted. *Close, but not quite.* He knew Sarah was a decent person who would naturally care for those who were lost, but this was quite obviously more. *Much more.* He’d never seen Sarah so disturbed about anything. This went beyond anything he had ever witnessed with her.

“*Please, Andy,*” she pleaded. “Don’t press me. I just can’t say. All I can tell you is that I have a great fear for those people. I’m sorry, Andy – but I’ve gotta say it – I don’t want anyone else falling in the river and drowning. Please just believe me, Andy, and don’t ask me why. It’s just one of my greatest fears – the thought of anyone dying alone up there on the hill. And as much as I don’t like to ask you to go get them, you’re the only one I believe can do it. Please just believe me on this. It’s not the story. Okay?”

“Okay, okay.” Andy cut her off as he shook his head again. “So neither of us wants anyone to die in the river – I get it.”

But Sarah wouldn’t quit.

“The Andy Harrison I grew up with wouldn’t stay at home while those people froze to death on the hill.”

“Oh. Now *that’s* cold,” he retorted. It was his turn to point, and he directed her attention just a little way up the road to where the Emerson Bridge crossed the churning Choppy River. He was still trying to feign humor, but the tears that gathered in his eyes were as real as the rain that soaked the mountain.

“And since you ask,” he said pointedly, “the Andy Harrison you knew *died under that bridge a long time ago.*”

No humor in his voice now. Sarah knew she had really struck a nerve. She slowly and partially retracted, though she did not yield.

“I’m sorry, Andy. You know that... you know I... don’t like even asking you. Ah hell, you know I think you’re the best thing that ever was or will be in this town. And you know I think you weren’t responsible for Rosalind’s death. I’m sorry if I hurt you. Okay? I’m sorry.”

He sighed long and loud as he looked down the road to the receding police car, now just a dot in the distance.

“Tell that to her father,” he said.

She waited, and then persisted, refusing to let the matter go.

“I know it’s hard for you, Andy.”

“You don’t know anything, Sarah,” he began, but then corrected himself. “Oh, damn it! *Yes you do. You do know!* And so you of all people should know better. Hell, you know I can’t

even *remember it all*. It eats me every single day, and... No, Sarah. Please. I just can't go back up there. Not like this! The only times I've been back up since I came back to Springcliffe was for just a few hours. *I didn't stay up there*. I... don't do that anymore. Not since... Look, you just don't know how bad it is for me..."

"Yeah, well that's because you always hold me at arms length."

It was out before she could stop it, and there was no denying how hurt she sounded.

"Woops, sorry," she apologized. "That's an entirely different conversation – I know that. And right now, it's not the most important thing."

She paused again, unable to tell what Andy was thinking, or what his decision would be.

So she played her ace.

"There's a kid on board, Andy. *A twelve year old girl*."

She saw his face drain of blood, then melt, and she could see tears come to his eyes again. He struggled to remain composed, already shaken by the mention of disturbing memories and a young woman's name. Try as Andy might to suppress his emotions, he could not.

"Damn it, Sarah," he said softly, and in absolute defeat. "*A kid?* That's not fair."

CHAPTER 3

Andy returned to the familiar park bench near the gate of the cemetery, newspaper in hand.

The tree overhead showered both him and his paper with generous water droplets from time to time as the breeze shook them loose, and he felt as though all nature was conspiring against him. Reading the Saturday morning paper was a ritual for Andy, a time to relax and forget about the week, and to view the world from relative safety. But today the world seemed to be pursuing him.

Another breeze, slightly stronger than the last brought a noisy spattering of plump, clear drops that exploded on impact on his newspaper, then turned it soggy and dark in places. Andy forced himself to read on, intent on not letting the events of the morning ruin his whole day. To his relief, the next face he saw was one who was always welcome.

Very welcome.

Natalie strolled up to Andy's side, casual as always, never hurried. Dressed in blue jeans and a floral blouse, she looked especially lovely in the clean freshness of the morning after the storm. The same age as Andy, thirty-six, Natalie was a tall, leggy brunette, with long flowing hair and flashing dark brown eyes. Her blouse reminded Andy of Sarah's, but that was as far as

the similarity went. Sarah would never have been seen in jeans, while Natalie sported them with flair.

Feminine, with a touch of adventure, Andy always thought. And he loved her so much.

Her face was pretty, and like her dress sense, perhaps might have betrayed a hint of adventure, or maybe playfulness. She was entirely captivating, full of life and with a spirited smile, and Andy's heart always raced when she appeared. Moreover, she was the friend he could always confide in, and trust. Even more than Sarah.

"Hey," Natalie whispered, as though someone might hear.

"Hey," he said softly.

"Reading the paper in the rain. Not like you." She knew him very well.

"Trying to decide what to do."

"What about?"

"Oh, a plane went down last night," he explained. "Up on the hill. Well, at least they *think* it's on the mountain. Sarah reckons I should go up and look for the survivors because, *everyone knows, no one else will be able to find them like I would.*"

He gave a weak smile.

"Sarah said that?" Natalie asked.

"You got it."

"She means well."

"Yeah. But I don't want to go."

"Do you think you could find them?"

"Maybe," he conceded. "No better than anyone else."

"You might save a life." This was a little more daring, and Andy knew exactly where it was heading. He sought to quash the idea.

"Yeah, but there's a certain chief in this town who thinks I might get people killed, and he doesn't want me anywhere near his search party. He came right out and said it." Andy sighed, dazzled by Natalie's radiance. She was lovely. She always was.

"He actually said that?" she asked, though she did not seem surprised.

"Yeah. He still blames me after all these years."

She could see the pain in Andy's face.

"Do you?" she dared to ask. It was the obvious question.

"No... yeah..." he hesitated, lost. "No. I don't know. Yeah, I do. If I'm honest, I do. I try to let it go, but it's always there, you know."

"I know."

She placed a loving hand on his shoulder, and stared deeply into his eyes. He could not escape her. He didn't want to. But still his mind was troubled, even in Natalie's presence. So he changed the subject. *Anything for a moment of true peace*, he thought.

"I love you," he whispered. "You know I always have."

"I know," she grinned. "And I love you too, Andy Harrison. And I always have too. But I can't help thinking that maybe you need to go up the hill."

"Forget the hill," he smiled back. "Come and run away with me."

She simply nodded against the idea.

"No. We tried that. Besides, you know I can't," she said. "I think we both know it wouldn't work." Her angelic face took on a more serious shade. "What else did Sarah say?"

Andy sniffed as he recalled his friend's vehement defense in the face of the chief.

"Oh well, you know Sarah. Reckons I'm the best man for the job. Let me see, told the chief off for me, says nothing's my fault – the usual stuff."

"She's in love with you." It was almost a shock to hear Natalie say it, not because it was news to him – he'd known it for years, even since school days. But what surprised Andy was that Natalie would say it. Andy quickly sought to clarify the situation.

"As long as you know that it's *you* I love, not Sarah. Sarah is a friend, always has been, always will be, but that's all."

Natalie simply smiled. She felt no threat at all, and his defense was unnecessary. Instead, she brought the conversation back to the only matter that neither of them could be fully clear about – the fate of those who were lost.

"Go up the hill, Andy."

He was surprised again by her forthrightness.

"What is this – a conspiracy?" he demanded, though in good humor. "Sarah wants me to do it too. There is a search party, *you know!* They have all the proper gear, *you know!* They have a chopper coming, *you know!* And the chief hates me, *you know!*"

Natalie was unmoved, and simply waited for him to cease complaining. She stared into his face, then touched his cheek in a way that only she could. It shook him to the core.

"Go up the hill, Andy."

"Come with me," he said.

"You don't need me," she countered.

"You would have come once."

Natalie would not be moved. Instead, she went right to the core of Andy's dilemma.

"What you need to remember is that no one who truly knows you, blames you for what

happened twenty years ago.”

He stared wide-eyed at her. She had read his mind, as she so often did, cutting right to the heart of the matter. He was about to correct her, remembering vividly the chief’s angry response just a short while before, when Natalie cut him off.

“Do it, Andy. Maybe you’ll save a life, maybe not. Either way, forget about what people say, and just do it. Do it for me.”

That last part was impossible for him to deny. He could never deny Natalie. He never had.

“I gotta go,” Natalie suddenly said. There was a look of concern on her face, and Andy wasn’t sure whether she was concerned for him, or something else. “I gotta go, Andy. Go up the mountain. You’ll do well.”

“That’s it?” he demanded. He was still in good humor, but nevertheless it was a serious question. “*Go up the mountain!* What about staying awhile? What about, *I love you too, Andy.* What about *running away with me?*”

Natalie grinned again, and the bond between them was so strong that Andy felt pain because of her. He loved her that much. And like he, she used good humor to make her point, smiling all the while, but nonetheless serious as she began to leave.

“Go up the mountain, Andy. Save a life. Oh, and by the way, *I do love you.* You know I always have. No one knows my secret but you. See, *I do love you.*”

He watched her retreat back along the puddled sidewalk of Main Street, dodging holes as she went. Her lovely form never failed to lift him, and strangely hurried as her departure was, he still felt greatly lifted by their short conversation. *Natalie was on his side*, he thought. But then, Natalie always was. She always had been.

As his mind drifted, watching wistfully as the tall brunette dressed in blue jeans disappeared into the distance, Andy became aware of Sarah’s voice calling his name from the opposite direction for the second time that morning. He felt light-headed from those few precious moments with Natalie, and his mind was still swimming with thoughts of her as Sarah approached, still calling his name.

And Andy wondered just how long Sarah had been calling to him.



Sarah stood close by Andy as they joined the milling crowd inside the town hall.

Many of the locals were there, along with a few people Andy had never seen before. Doris Harman had already been entrusted with the task of setting up a coffee stand in one corner of the hall, and now most of those present toted a disposable paper cup of caffeine stimulant. Sarah

filled two cups and stirred in the sugar, never asking Andy if he wanted one. She knew him well enough to know he would.

Andy took the cup and sipped while Chief Corbin Stedman gave his appraisal of the situation with a raised, albeit drawling, husky voice. Those present listened while fiddling with cups of coffee, or with the gear they had brought along for the trek. Someone asked about those on board the missing plane, and the chief described all four who were lost. Other questions were raised, along with the views of an official from the nearest airport, who stood at the front of the crowd for a time, and then handed proceedings back to the chief.

Chief Stedman began to lay out his search plan, which involved starting on the southeast face of Mount Cash, then scouring to the north, a procedure that would in all likelihood take two days. His face was grim as he gave details, but he was adamant that it was sound. The southeastern side of the mountain was more accessible and easier going, and any search party would make faster progress there. The northern side was too rough for a team to search in such turbulent weather, and any path there was also cut by the dangerous Choppy River.

Someone asked if they had any idea where the plane had gone down, and it was quickly impressed upon all present that there had been no radar contact due to a malfunction brought on by the storm. Radio contact had become broken and garbled, and the last known position of the plane was unclear. In essence, the searchers had no starting point except that it seemed likely that the plane had been lost on Mount Cash, since other low-lying areas were already being searched with no results. Unfortunately, because of heavy cloud and fog cover, an aerial search was out of the question at that time.

"If they *had been* on course, they should have been easy enough to find," announced Stedman, his voice loud and rough. "But they are *still* lost this mornin', so we have to assume they strayed. I know it's a slim chance we'll find them anytime soon, but we've gotta try."

"But they could be anywhere up on the mountain," observed Marty Phillips, a local fireman. Marty was the obvious choice to lead any team that might search the mountain, so his interest in detail was keener than most.

The airport man stepped forward, taking the crowd's attention from the chief.

"As soon as the weather clears, we can start to use the helicopters to search. Until then, all we can do is try. It would be suicide for a pilot to take up a chopper or a plane in this weather, and besides, the forecast is for more of the same." He paused, then added, "The last thing the pilot was able to tell us is that his compass was acting crazy. I'm sorry folks, but the truth is that we don't have *any* idea where to look. All we can do is to start at one end and work towards the other – and hope we pick the right end."

Alarms went off in Andy's head. And while he was fearful of angering Chief Stedman, he could not resist stating what to him seemed very obvious. It was a risk, but he had to try it.

"Wait, Chief. Can I just say something?" he asked. The chief's face grew black, but he felt compelled in the presence of so many concerned faces to at least let Andy speak.

"I know that mountain a little, Chief," Andy began, trying not to sound arrogant, not wanting to inflame the situation. But it had to be said. "And I can tell you that a compass will go crazy on the northern face. I've done it. If the pilot was having compass trouble, I think..." *No, too pushy. Tact, Andy thought, tact.* "I just think that maybe some consideration should be given to taking a look at the northern face, that's all. I've had a compass go crazy up there."

Those who were old enough to remember drew a breath and watched on in awkward silence. And those who understood the depth of Chief Stedman's anger wondered how the old man would react. But Stedman, true to his training and years of experience, remained calm, at least on the surface. His response was cold and aloof, as he tried his best to impress that Andy should keep his opinions to himself.

"You'd like me to take a team up the northern face in weather like this?" he asked. It was an accusation rather than a question. "When there's still more storms comin'? Is that what you want?" In the absence of a clear response from Andy, he thundered on. "Not me, *Sonny*. If you want to risk your life and go up the north slope, I suppose I can't stop you. Go right ahead."

Stedman wanted to add "and good riddance", but he stopped short of it. Instead he made the sharpest comment he could think of on the spur of the moment. "But I won't be putting anyone's life in danger, Harrison. That's not what *I* do."

Andy felt a slight urge to argue, but Sarah tugged at his arm. The matter rose to a crescendo of potential explosion, then subsided again when the chief turned away and ignored him, treating his view as inept. Andy made a face as he listened to the old man's voice laying out plans to the locals, and Sarah continued to hold his arm.

"Let it go, Andy. Let it go," she whispered. "Okay, you win. The old man hates you. Please let it go."

"Old fart," Andy said, but at least he let it go.

He was concerned enough, though, to put his pride aside and listen to the rest of the meeting, hoping for any pertinent facts that might help. Sadly though, nothing else was known. Base camp was already being set up in the town hall, with radios and tents were brought in. From there, Chief Stedman would direct operations, but he would not be hiking up the mountain. The task of leading the first team up the southeastern face would be placed in the hands of the fireman, Marty Phillips.

As Andy and Sarah left the town hall, his face was as bleak as the gathering clouds above them. Large drops of rain began to fall, slowly at first, then with gathering intensity. Sarah popped up an umbrella and Andy pulled the hood of his jacket over his head as they began to leave the crowd behind.

“Will you go and look?” Sarah badgered as they paced quickly, trying to get to Sarah’s four-wheel drive before the downpour arrived in earnest.

“You heard Stedman,” Andy shot back. He was both hurt and angry now. “He doesn’t want me anywhere near his team – just like I told you he wouldn’t.”

“That’s not what I asked,” she noted. “Will you go and look for them?”

“I dunno,” he grunted.

Sarah paused, regretting what she had led Andy into back at the hall.

“I’m sorry, Andy,” she said. “You warned me he would do that to you, and you were right. I’m sorry you had to go through that. It was my fault.”

“No,” sighed Andy. “It was my fault. Not yours. I started it twenty years ago, Sarah.”

“No you didn’t.” She sounded very adamant, as vehement as she had been when she defended him against the chief earlier that morning. Her pretty face pouted as though she might chastise him, and then it was gone. They moved on, neither wanting to dwell on it.

“So, will you go, Andy?” she asked again.

Andy mumbled as his foot slipped on some mud, the large spots of rain turning the already soft earth into slippery grease in just seconds.

“I hate the mud,” he said.



Andy’s mind swum, churning as much as the muddy water in his daydream. He leaned back in his recliner, his sodden newspaper discarded and crumpled on the table beside him. His home was modest but cozy, with a wood-burning stove in the corner for warmth, timber floors and no carpet, and varnished timber walls.

He had left the electric lights switched off, and with the heavy cloud cover overhead, the house was quite dark inside. Only a flash of lightning in the distance lit up Andy and his home. Rain pelted down hard upon the metal roof, drowning out all other sounds except for the occasional crash of thunder, and the horrible echoes within his head.

He was back in the water now. Choppy water. He turned, losing both focus and orientation. *Where was he now?* The powerful waters spun him like a toy, tossing him, threatening to pull him under. He spat. *Curse that filthy water when it gets down your throat!* All the sounds were

there. *The crash of pounding water, the sucking, swirling noises.* Andy moved in his chair, perfectly dry now, and yet struggling against the current in his mind.

And there *she* was too!

His mind leapt. His heart leapt.

Hold on! He could remember calling those words to her. *Hold on! Hold on! Please, hold on!*

But she could not hold on. She never did. How could she? The girl and the events in his dream were as clear in his mind as if it had happened an hour ago. So was his pain. He saw her, clearer now, her head bobbing in and out of the water as she gripped the bowline of the small wooden boat that was being carried backwards, upside-down in the cold, powerful river. Then *bang! Crash!* Just as it always did in his nightmares, the boat was pulverized against a boulder.

Water and rock seemed to dismember the small craft, tear it asunder, and then spit it out as the menacing black monster passed beneath. Then the lurking menace struck out at her! Andy saw her pretty head smack sickeningly against the boulder, and imagined he could hear the fleshy thud. Of course he couldn't. Or rather, he *hadn't*. The river had been too loud. And yet his mind had always held him to ransom, and over the years he had heard that bony, fleshy execution a thousand times in his head.

He couldn't even remember anymore if he'd protested aloud when he saw her knocked so mercilessly unconscious. He certainly imagined he must have. It was too long ago now. *And soooo traumatic.* In fact, there was just *so much* that he had never remembered. What mattered was that he had seen the blow that had killed her. Or had it? They continued on, in the treacherous, boiling waters of the Choppy, in his mind.

Andy was swimming toward her now. Swim, he told himself. *Swim harder!*

But it was never hard enough. It never had been. His lovely princess was washed away before him, and no matter how hard he struggled, he had never been a match for the power of that water. Nor had she. She disappeared, only to reappear somewhere else an eternity of seconds later. But she was no longer struggling against the raging waters, only being carried along by them.

Andy could still feel the panic rising within him. He lunged, but it was no good. They continued on forever, carried along on a nightmare of swirling, cruel horror that seemed to last for hours, though he knew it was far less.

And then, by some miracle, he was close to her again, *catching her.* *He glanced up and saw a figure. Then two. People were rushing to help them. Where were they now? Carried so far downstream, and so fast... The bridge! Yes! He recognized the steel monster now.* Andy

reached out, and felt his heart race as he was finally able to grab on to the young girl's sleeve. *His precious angel – she was unconscious, sucking in water when she should have been struggling for air.*

And Andy was screaming for help.

Help arrived, and Andy could still see the girl's father, hanging from a rope ladder and reaching out from below the Emerson Bridge. A much younger Corbin Stedman, his face as twisted as Andy's with anguish, reaching out for his beloved daughter's hand. A moment later she was on her back on the cold, steel bridge, hovering over the cruel Choppy River, and they were struggling to revive her.

Another hand, invisible now, or simply indistinguishable, plucked Andy from the swirling water too. Its owner was of no consequence now; in truth Andy had wished a thousand times that the hand had simply let him slip by. Death might have been a less cruel blow than the one he was about to witness.

As Doc Benson leaned over the drenched, stricken girl, Andy could still hear Corbin Stedman, *Chief Stedman*, calling her name.

"No Rosalind! Rosalind, no! Don't die on me! Daddy loves you! Don't die on me now, Rosalind. Rosalind! Rosalind!"

Those words had echoed in the darkened cavern of Andy's mind for twenty years.

And then there was Doc Benson, raising his head, his chest heaving from effort. *How long did the doc work on her?* Andy couldn't remember. It didn't matter now anyway. Because now the doc's head was shaking. Shaking pitifully from side to side. Doc Benson closed his eyes. He was speaking. Just two words, and Andy could not hear them over the feverish voices about him.

Indeed, he was aware of very little now, except the plight of his one true love.

The doc's lips moved, but no sound came forth. It didn't matter. Andy could read those two words without hearing them.

"She's dead," mute lips pronounced.

Stedman screamed *"Nooooo!"* so loud that Andy could still hear the pitiful, piercing scream two decades on.

And Doc Benson's words had condemned Andy forever.

Andy woke, snapping out of his nightmare, though he was never actually asleep. When he looked up Natalie was there, having crept to his side, concerned by the pain etched into his face. She turned a seat back-to-front and sat facing him, resting her arms on its back. Andy was sweating and shivering, his face pallid. He swallowed when he saw her, and neither said a word for a long time. She simply watched him, waiting for him to be calm again. When finally she did

she speak, her words were gracious, full of understanding that only the closest of friends could give him.

“You in the river again?” she asked.

“I was dreaming, I think,” he explained. “Not a good dream...”

“I know,” she said, and she reached out and very gently touched his hand. “I know.” And so she did. She knew of his nightmare. There was no need for explanation. She got up off her chair, moved close and hugged him as the tears rolled from his eyes.

“I just couldn’t fight the river,” he sobbed. “I tried so hard, just *so hard*...but I couldn’t... I just wasn’t good enough. *You understand*, don’t you?”

“You know I do,” Natalie whispered. “It’s okay, Andy. I’ve never thought it was your fault. It’s okay.” Andy felt her arms about him, but he could not stop shivering. Just her presence should have been enough to ease his pain, he reasoned, and yet nothing had ever ended *this* pain. He shivered a while longer, then calmed slowly, and finally Natalie spoke again.

“It’s not your fault, Andy. Don’t hate yourself. Just let it go. You can do more good alive today, than dying every day in the river, living in the past.”

Eventually he looked up and stared with pleasure into her deep, brown eyes. And then he smiled, a wide, wild grin amid the tears as he shared a deep truth with her. He pretended for a moment that Natalie had no idea of who the girl was, as if describing a stranger.

“I loved her like no other, you know. She was *so beautiful*. She was my sweetheart.”

Natalie put on a pretend hurt-face, then smiled with him.

“She must have been *very special*.”

The pain slowly washed from Andy’s face as he thought for almost half a minute before responding, and Natalie waited patiently for his answer. When finally he did respond, he was smiling again, though just barely.

“She was,” he explained. “A lot like you.”

Natalie smiled back, then held him again.

CHAPTER 4

Marie Townsend woke from a deep slumber, only to find that her head throbbed with intense pain.

She wished fervently for sleep, but something would not let her rest. Someone was calling her. The voice was small, shrill and familiar. It was the voice of a child, or was it a young

woman? She listened, her mind dazed and her head spinning with a pain that grew in intensity as she became more conscious.

The agony of the pain in her head struck her with full force, compelling her to return to sleep, but her will would not surrender, and she swam to the surface of an oppressive slumber despite the pain. And then Marie recognized the frantic voice. It was her daughter, Stephanie.

“Wake up, Mum. Wake up. Wake up.”

Stephanie’s voice was persistent, and perhaps a little panicked. As Marie broke the surface of the oppressive, induced rest imposed by a heavy blow to the left side of her head, a chilling memory budded in her mind, and then blossomed into full-blown fear. Whether a natural reaction or the result of years of nurse training, she suddenly sat bolt upright, still strapped into her seat, then looked about her. The sudden movement jarred her strained neck, and her head felt as though someone had belted her hard with a bat of some kind. Pain struck with full force.

As though opening her eyes had opened a vial of cruel poison, Marie’s brain registered something which was far worse than any headache she had ever known, and as quickly as she opened her eyes, she closed them again, gripping her head with both hands.

“Wake up, Mum. Wake up,” the small voice persisted. Marie held up a restraining hand.

“Okay,” she uttered through a wall of discomfort. “I’m trying. Just wait. I’m...”

She fell silent as her mind focused. Memories came roaring into her brain, even louder than the pain that sought to suppress her. *The plane*, she thought. *The trees!* She remembered catching a glimpse of a forest rising up out of the blackness towards their plane like a horrifying monster, a feral beast that was surely going to take all their lives. *The seat! The seat! And the seatbelt! And what of Stephanie?* No... that’s right... Stephanie was the one waking her... Stephanie was okay. Marie’s mind swam.

She opened her eyes again.

Light blazed into her tormented brain, magnifying the pain in her head so that she automatically closed her eyes once more. But Marie persisted, refusing to ignore the incessant pleas of her daughter, or to remain a victim of the situation. Against a haze of pain and blurred vision, she forced herself to focus, and slowly her eyes grew accustomed to her surroundings.

All the while Stephanie continued to coax her mother quietly, her voice concerned but controlled as she roused her. To Marie’s dread, even when she did manage to open her eyes properly, and to keep them open, her vision remained markedly hazy, causing an array of daunting medical questions to launch inside her confused mind.

Despite the pain and a sudden fear of what was happening to her eyesight, Marie found that she was able to focus in time. She saw Stephanie’s young face, and automatically reached out to

hug her daughter to her. As the child pulled back, Marie saw that Stephanie's forehead sported a small, purple bump over her right eye, and that there were tear stains where the girl had been crying. The hands of the mother reached out instinctively and took the daughter's face. A quick inspection revealed that Stephanie's usual neat appearance had been blown away, her face dirty and her hair disheveled. After the initial caresses and tears, Stephanie quickly broke down, dissolving in tears as she tried to speak.

"Mum, I think the pilot's dead! I think he's dead, Mum! And that other man is bleeding! And there's no one around. We're lost, Mum.... and there's blood... and my leg hurts, Mum..."

Everything Stephanie said sent dire messages to Marie's struggling mind, but her last words brought the immediate reaction of a mother. Marie looked down to see that her daughter's right leg sported a long, thin gash that reached half the length of her calf muscle. The injury had obviously occurred on impact, she realized, since a considerable amount of blood had gathered in the girl's sock and jogger, having congealed into a dark and sticky mess.

The wound was no longer bleeding – a good sign, Marie decided, though it did still weep in places. While not oblivious to the injury, Stephanie was clearly in enough of a state of shock to be able to mostly ignore it. At any other time, Marie knew, her daughter would have been hysterical about such a wound.

The sight of Stephanie's weeping calf brought an instant reaction from Marie, who struggled to rise from her seat, only to have her seatbelt tug hard into her midriff. Bruised from her earlier encounter with the seatbelt upon crash-landing, Marie's belly quickly sent painful messages to her brain, urging her not to persist. She sat painfully back into her seat and unclasped the buckle.

She sat forward again, examining first herself, then Stephanie in more detail. Other than a grinding headache resulting from striking her head against the seat in front, or possibly the fuselage, and from bruised ribs and muscles, she could find no other injuries to herself. Stephanie too had survived relatively unscathed, except for the shallow gash in her calf.

To Marie's great surprise, the small Beechcraft had skidded onto what appeared to be the stump of a sizeable tree, the immovable timber slicing its way through the undercarriage of the aircraft as it slid to a halt. One of the resulting shards of torn metal, now jaggedly protruding from the floor had sliced into Stephanie's leg. Marie stared in disbelief at the destruction, marveling that they had not all been hurt much more seriously.

Then she glanced forward. The stump had obviously not torn through the entire length of the plane, disemboweling it as Marie expected, but appeared only to have punctured it near where the women were seated. In her dazed, pained mind Marie imagined the plane skidding along on

its underbelly, then biting in at the front, tipping up and then coming down hard on the stump. It seemed likely, since she vaguely remembering a sharp upward shunt as the plane seemed to stop instantly beneath her. That was when she had struck her head...

Oh, her head, she thought. *So much pain...* She forced herself to look around the cabin.

To Marie's enormous relief she suddenly realized that it was not in fact her eyesight that was hazy, but the air about them. Thick fog hung in the air, so heavy that even the short distance from the middle of the plane to the windshield was filled with white mist. She sighed, very glad for the mercy. At least her eyes were unharmed, though her head still pounded with a vengeance.

The cabin was a mess. While the landing had obviously been merciful to have allowed them to survive at all, it had still brought the plane to a thudding stop. Various doors within the cabin had yielded to the inertia of stowed luggage and gear, which now lay strewn about, and several windows were cracked, having taken a battering during the plane's careering path between the trees. The plane had taken a hammering.

Marie stood warily to her feet, her head spinning. She felt dizzy, but forced herself to continue. Stephanie said nothing further about her leg, and neither did she follow her mother as the nurse did what came naturally to her – surveying the situation. Marie moved forward to check the fate of the two men in the front of the plane. Ahead of her, she could see their backs, each man leaning forward against their seat's restraints.

At first that was all she noticed.

The old pilot was not moving at all, and Marie had little doubt that he was dead; she had been fairly sure even before the plane had crashed. The signs of a heart attack had not been difficult to recognize.

Making the initial task of identifying the state of the two men more difficult was the fact that the entire windshield was now destroyed, shattered and pushed in on them by bushes and jagged, twisted tree branches.

So, that was what had stopped them, Marie thought. The branches belonged to a rather large oak, and at first glance it looked as though the green and brown monster had held out its many gnarled arms to fend off the unwelcome, skidding Beechcraft.

Fortunately, the plane had not struck a major branch, but only the lower-hanging limbs, which had sheered off and shattered upon impact. Still, many had pushed in through the exploding windshield, their jagged, splintered fingers raking at the intruders. Others had punctured the tiny craft too. Instruments were dislodged from the dash of the plane, plastic and metal fittings shattered and torn from their proper places.

Upon nearing the two stricken men, Marie could see that Merve Hillman's face was being

supported by the splintered end of a shattered tree-limb, and while no blood was visible, she had little doubt that he would be a mess. Just the mere fact that the old man remained motionless and quiet told her to expect the worst.

Beside the old man, Ashley Collard sat motionless too. At a glance, and from behind, Marie held slightly more hope for him, since his face and body did not appear to remain in contact with any branches. A cursory glance downward, however, quickly changed Marie's initial summation, and she pursed her lips as she noticed a trail of dark blood snaking its way from beneath the man's seat.

"Oh, not good," Marie uttered, stumbling forward. Her eyes widened a little more as she regained her balance and looked up from the blood-trail.

Another gnarled limb, smaller than the others – about the thickness of a billiard cue, protruded directly out from the back of Collard's seat. It too had been broken off by the impact of the plane, and had then impaled the intruder. The splintery tip, just barely protruding from the back of the seat, was coated in dried, almost black sludge, a mix of sap and blood. Marie had little doubt that it was very bad news for Ashley Collard.

She stumbled forward, still reeling from pain and a rather dazed mind. Leaning over the two men amid a tangle of twisted metal, shattered plastic and hanging instruments, Marie fended off the intruding tree branches to check for a pulse in both men. She tried the pilot first, and was not surprised to find that Merve felt cold to touch. No sign of life there. Then she touched Collard's neck. Despite being rather wet from the deluge of rain that had washed the men clean after their bodies had been so vigorously traumatized, the bald man still exuded a hint of warmth. Moreover, his pulse was steady, albeit weak. Marie leaned over his shoulder and began to look for injuries.

Collard's worst injury was not difficult to find, and Marie expected the worst even before she looked. Disappointing, though not surprising, the slender branch had skewered the large man neatly through his mid-section, just below the ribcage on the right side. Marie pondered what internal damage might likely have been done; *liver, spleen, blood loss* – and immediately and silently weighed up Collard's chances of survival.

Not good, she thought, though she didn't say it in the presence of her daughter. *One shock at a time for the girl*, she thought.

To Marie's further surprise, Ashley Collard began to stir, moaning at first as he too battled to wake through a wall of pain. The large man's eyes opened slowly, wandering at first, and then finally focusing upon the woman who leaned over from behind. Marie spoke in hushed tones, trying to comfort and calm him, not wanting to exacerbate his condition. Collard barely moved.

To Marie's further surprise, he simply took hold of the branch protruding from the right side of his upper belly, and then gave a weak smile. He could barely speak.

"Found it... found it earlier..." he whispered. He was very weak. "Didn't want to wake you..." He gave another weak smile. "Couldn't... wake you..." Brave, as some are when facing true horror or even death, Collard then added his own diagnosis. "I'm a bit stuck... excuse the pun... Think... Think I might be done for."

"Nonsense," rebuked Marie. "Nothing like it."

Her face never faltered. But in her heart she feared he was sadly rather accurate in his summation. Without immediate help he wouldn't stand a chance. Marie pushed away some twigs and leaves that threatened to annoy her patient. Blood trickled down Collard's forehead, not having dried because of the rain that had spilled in on him.

No other serious injuries, Marie noted, but plenty of scratches and gashes to make the man uncomfortable. She hoped his weakened state might have numbed the worst of his pain.

"I'm going to look for anything I can help you with. Okay?" Marie asked. She was secretly hoping for a lucid response from the stricken man, a sign that he was making an effort to stay alive. She was pleased with what he said.

"Tell you what," snorted Collard, his battered face struggling to smile again. "I'll stay here... while you look... Won't go nowhere, I promise. How's that?" They smiled at each other, each hoping for the best. Sadly though, Marie feared that Ashley Collard's good humor might be the only comfort he would receive.

She turned away to search the plane, then suddenly winced, her body reacting to a sound in the distance. Her reaction was one of fear, not of hope. For the sound in the distance was not that of anything man-made, but of more thunder.



It was almost midday before Andy finished cramming gear into his backpack, a task he then completed by folding a plastic tarpaulin and a waterproof swag together inside a plastic bag. He then strapped the bag beneath his pack. As a final touch he tossed a small packet of colored jellybeans into the top of the pack. He always found that something sweet was always a welcome relief when walking any distance.

Outside the rain still pelted, accompanied by the occasional rumble of thunder in the distance. It was bucketing, the worst of the electrical activity having moved on. At least, Andy decided, the electrical portion of this latest storm was over. Now there was only the deluge to contend with.

He looked thoughtfully at his kit, then wandered back to his seat at the head of the table and flopped down. Natalie watched without a word, waiting instead for him to speak. She could see there was a lot on his mind. Andy studied the front page of his paper, almost dry again now in the warmth of the cabin, but its pages puffy and ruined by rain.

“I hate storms,” Andy finally ventured. “I hate going out in them.”

She didn’t reply. It wasn’t news to either of them, and didn’t warrant a response. Still, she did offer a small smile to buoy him. And it did.

“You never know,” Natalie finally ventured. “They might be alive. You might save some lives, Andy. Besides, I know you. You won’t be able to sleep until they’re all found, one way or another. You never could – least of all with a kid lost up there. You know that.”

It was true.

He nodded in silent and reluctant agreement. She was right. He wouldn’t rest until he knew they were either safe or dead. He’d never been able to leave anyone or anything lost ever since the river that day... so long ago. Just the thought of it haunted him. He shook his head as if to shake off the nightmare.

“You’ll be okay, Andy,” Natalie said quietly.

There was so much depth to her comment. He could hear the caring in her voice, yet as much as she cared, she wanted him to go. That was because she knew he would be in pain until he knew the fate of those who were lost. And she knew him so intimately; she knew every thought that passed into his mind. She understood his pain and she knew his love. She even knew the emotional giant raging just below Andy’s quiet, controlled exterior. Inside he was always close to an emotional response. Twenty years of regret had made him tough in some ways, and yet as sensitive as any man could be in others ways.

Andy looked up as though he was about to reveal some deep secret, but it was simply a truth that he knew he couldn’t hide, at least in the face of the dangers he knew he would face going up the mountain.

“You know I love you, Natalie. Don’t you?”

“I know,” she said simply. “I love you too, Andy. Since the very first day.”

They stared at each other; he the somewhat disheveled, silent and troubled searcher, and she the almost angelic vision of maturity and loveliness, with a depth of beauty Andy had never been able to fathom.

“I know you’ve been hurt, Andy, and I know you hate the river. But you’re still the best man for the job. Sarah was right about that. Deep down, you know it too.”

Her comment surprised him, as it was not what he expected at all. Andy didn’t like to brag,

and to rate his skills or experience on the mountain above others didn't sit well with him, and yet there was truth to what Natalie said. After all, they had spent their youth on that mountain, Andy and his friends. Most of the young men had left Springcliffe now, in search of work or a more exciting existence. With the exception of Natalie and perhaps Sarah, he could not think offhand of anyone who would be more likely to know the mountain better.

"I hate the mountain," he said quietly.

He stood again, fidgeted, and then paced the floor before checking his gear one more time. When finally he turned to face Natalie again, he was completely mesmerized by her. The love he felt was so deep that it caused him pain, and yet he knew that what separated them could not be bridged.

Sure, he told himself – *she knew*. There was no doubt about that. And yet words never did him justice. He would have died for her, any day, any place. She knew it. And yet they had never been able to close the deal. She was all he ever wanted. She always had been.

"You want me to come?" she asked. "You know I will."

The thought made a cold shiver pass through Andy, and he realized that there were some things he feared much more than dying.

"Not a chance," he answered flatly. His voice was full of concern for her. *The flood. Remember the raging water, Andy.* The thought made him feel ice-cold. "Absolutely not. No way in this world would I let you go up that mountain with me – least of all while it's in flood."

Don't let anyone you love go near the water, Andy.

"I'll be waiting for you then," she said, her brown eyes sparkling and her face almost glowing. She loved him too.

A silence filled the warm cabin, not awkward, but pleasant. So close were they that there was no need to hide from each other or from the truth. When Natalie spoke again she changed the subject completely, but it was not an escape she was seeking, rather a genuine care for Andy's welfare.

"I know I've encouraged you to go as much as anyone, Andy, and for that I'm sorry. It's just that we both know you won't rest until you know what's happened to those people in that plane."

Andy looked away from the warmth and loveliness of her eyes to glance at his watch. "Yeah. I suppose you're right." Then, "Sarah will be here soon." He rubbed his hair back against its natural tendency. "This is crazy."

"She's in love with you – you know that, Andy. She's loved you since high school."

It was a statement, not a question, and moreover, it was said without malice or jealousy.

Natalie merely stated the truth, and then looked to Andy to gauge his response. Andy locked eyes with her, almost caught by surprise by what she had said, but when he saw that she was not afraid, he felt no reason to explain. So he simply kept the conversation going in the direction he would rather have taken it.

“That may be,” he answered slowly and deliberately, “but I’m not in love with her. Sarah’s my friend, nothing more. I’m in love with you, Natalie. You know that. No one but you.”

Natalie looked sad, but did not look away. Rather, it was Andy who blinked, turning away to adjust the wood stove so that the comforting fire within would slowly die. A long period of silence reigned, then Andy looked again at Natalie. He went back to staring into her angelic face, unable to escape the pain in his heart at leaving her, or the magnetism of those loving eyes. He felt as though he could shelter beneath the gaze of those eyes forever. He always had.

“You’ll never be happy until you go, Andy.”

“Yeah, I’m just plain ecstatic at the thought of it,” he retorted. He gave a hint of a smile. Then suddenly his face metamorphosed, becoming very serious as he so often did. He swallowed, and she knew he was aching inside.

“I wish you would marry me when I come back,” he said simply. There was no challenge in it, no fear. It was the obvious culmination in what was the perfect relationship, and as natural as anything could ever be. And yet Natalie’s pretty face showed just the smallest trace of sadness.

“You know I can’t,” she whispered. Andy thought he saw a tear. She spoke, her voice melancholic and so precious to him – more precious than any other sound in the world. “I was hurt once too, you know,” she said.



Marie Townsend looked at the threatening, black sky and clambered back into the crumpled plane after inspecting both it and their surroundings. In one hand she toted a folded plastic sheet she had found in the rear of the plane, and in the other hand was a small mirror.

It was futile, she knew, to even hope for an opportunity to signal a plane with the mirror, and yet she had felt it best to be prepared. In the absence of any other plan, it had seemed better than nothing. It wasn’t. Not only was the entire crash site blanketed in heavy fog that limited visibility to no more than thirty or forty meters, but she could not even hear an aircraft. She felt desperate and hopeless.

A Christian for over a decade, Marie tried to see her predicament as an opportunity to see God help her and Stephanie, and yet she found that very difficult to do. Indeed, with the pilot already dead and the only other male passenger not far from it, she even wondered whether she

and her daughter would survive at all. Try as she might to remain steadfast in her belief that God would somehow miraculously save them, it was a difficult thing to do.

When she leaned over Ashley Collard's seat, his face was pale, and he was moaning in pain. Still, he was alert enough to sense her presence, and broke from his semi-conscious state, his eyes taking time to focus properly on her.

"Help me," he moaned. "Please take it out." He gripped the bloody shaft protruding from his belly.

"I can't, Ashley," whispered Marie. Her voice was soft and full of compassion, but resolute. "Right now it's stopping you from bleeding to death. We can't take it out. You'd die."

It was the harsh truth, but what Marie hoped to avoid having to tell him that he was doomed anyway unless help arrived soon. Even then, she knew, his chances of survival were slim.

"Just try to remain still and calm," she encouraged. "Help won't be far away. After all, they know where we went down."

Ashley Collard glanced over at the gaunt, pale battered figure of Merve Hillman, their doomed pilot.

"Heaven help me," he moaned. Marie covered the expired pilot with the white plastic sheet, and they were both glad for the small mercy of not having to stare at his cold, beaten form any longer.

"Rest," Marie urged calmly. "Just rest. We'll get you out of this. You'll see."

Marie ventured to the rear of the plane, past the door where she had left her limping daughter. Stephanie was looking rather sorry for herself, but having seen Ashley Collard's injuries, she was trying not to wallow in self-pity. A bloodstained bandage bound up her calf, giving her some comfort, and keeping the wound clean. Now she was wandering about the site as best her injured leg would support her, looking for anything that might help them. That was the task her mother had set her, and one she was glad to carry out, because it got her out of the battered plane and out of the presence of the dead Merve Hillman.

For her part, Marie's head was clearing, though it still throbbed with enough force to make her sit when she could. Fortunately, she had found a good supply of basic painkillers and a waterbottle, and she had dosed up all three of them as much as she dared.

She searched through the wreckage of the plane, hoping for anything that might be of use, but she found little. Some plastic sheeting, two waterbottles, painkillers and a very small first-aid kit, and several blankets were all that seemed to be of any real use. She found herself saying a prayer of thanks, since the blankets and first-aid kit were all dry, packed away safely in the rear of the plane and untouched by the deluge that had poured in through rent metal and shattered

windows. They also rescued their own belongings, which included clean and warm clothes, something Marie knew they would need once evening came.

While rummaging through their belongings, it suddenly occurred to Marie that Stephanie's bag had received a heavy blow, the side of the aircraft quite dented where the girl's bag was situated. Her mind raced again as she began to pull out her daughter's things. And then her heart sank. Buried within the bag was a pair of jeans, and as she pulled them forth, she found one leg to be wet. Knowing that the bag had not been wet by rain, Marie knew the dreadful truth even before she found the evidence she feared so much.

From within the folded jeans she pulled a plastic case. The case had been smashed, and several shards of jagged plastic fell away as she retrieved it. Opening what remained of the shattered lid, Marie viewed the contents within, and despite her resolve to remain calm for the sake of her daughter, she began to weep. She dissolved, sobbing aloud as she surrendered to an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness.

"No, God. No," she whispered, writhing in deep distress.

Her tormented mind began to scream silently within her aching head as she stared in disbelief for almost a minute of dejected, desperate dread. Inside the smashed case, Stephanie's glucometer lay smashed in pieces, a serious enough problem in itself. But far worse, an insulin pen used to administer long-acting insulin, along with all of the girl's spare insulin vials also lay flattened, the precious, life-saving medicine now fully absorbed by the surrounding fabric in the bag. In Stephanie's favor, a second insulin pen remained intact, a blessing in itself, with a recently inserted vial containing almost sixty units of short-acting insulin. Even with rationing, Marie knew, it was barely enough for two days, considering the girl's requirements.

Marie broke down and cried aloud.

CHAPTER 5

Sarah Emerson shook her umbrella as she stood on Andy Harrison's front porch, turning away from him to gaze at the downpour that was now limiting visibility to less than forty meters.

Even in the rain, Andy noticed, Sarah still wore a floral skirt. Granted, only the hem was visible beneath the drenched, heavy coat she sported, but still, Sarah's dress sense never changed. It made him smile. *Oh well*, he thought, if all else failed, at least there were two certainties in life: Sarah would always wear floral, and Natalie would always wear jeans. The whole world could fall apart, but those two facts would remain unchangeable forever.

Andy nudged his backpack upright as it threatened to topple, and then sat on a bench to pull on his tall, waterproof hiking-boots. He was wearing full wet-weather gear now, waterproof trousers and a heavy parka, complete with hood pulled up over the top of his head. His kit too was waterproof, his swag and tarpaulin also wrapped in a heavy plastic bag for added protection.

"Sure you still want to go?" Sarah called, speaking loudly so as to be heard over the roar of rain on the corrugated metal roof of the cabin. Andy gave her a friendly look of disdain.

"*I never wanted to go in the first place,*" he grated loudly. "As I remember it, this was all *your idea*. Anyway, don't talk about it now – you might just talk me out of it." He pulled down his trouser leg over the high lip of the first boot. "Do you know if the search party got away?"

"I think so," she called back. "Chief was saying they were going last time I was there. I think his mind was pretty made up – it was them or no one. Mind you, I can't imagine anyone wanting to go out in this rain."

Andy frowned sarcastically. "Imagine that."

"Sorry," she admitted. "I am sorry, Andy. I know I pushed you into this. I'd understand if you didn't go, you know."

Another frown caused her to desist.

"I'm committed now," he explained. "So don't depress me." To lighten the mood he changed topics. "Good to see the chief still hates me. He was in fine form this morning, wouldn't you say?"

"He doesn't hate you," Sarah offered, sitting close by him so that she didn't have to shout. But upon having Andy give yet another sarcastic frown, she twisted up her face in admission.

"Oh, alright then – he hates you. But that doesn't mean you still aren't the best man for the job, Andy Harrison. And I just happen to know you are." She gave a weak smile, sorry that she had badgered him now.

An easing of the rain gave them the chance to speak rather than shout, and Sarah did not waste the opportunity. Her face showed considerable concern.

"I want you to be careful up there, Andy. I want you to come back, you hear?"

He gave her a salute. "Yes Ma'am."

"I'm serious, Andy. You forget – *I know you.*"

He returned her gaze, realizing that she was genuinely afraid.

"I'm sorry I ever asked you to go, but I just didn't know who else to ask. Ah hell, there *isn't* anyone else to ask. But I know the risks you run, Andy. Sometimes it's like you just don't care about your own safety. Please don't be like that up there. *Please.*"

"Oh come on, Sarah," Andy smirked. "Steady up. It's not like I'm gonna go up there

looking to jump in the Choppy River again. I'm never going in *that* water again. You know I won't."

He was laughing it off, but she was far from convinced.

"No, Andy. I mean it." She touched his cheek with the tips of her fingers, as close as she had ever gotten to him. And then, like she had done so many times, confessed her feelings. "I know you don't love me, Andy, but I think the world of you. I always have. You know that."

He nodded. She had – ever since school. He tilted his head, hoping she would not persist, but a slight upturn in the volume of the rain drove Sarah on in fear. She could not be quiet. It was as if she believed this would be their last encounter ever, and she refused to be silent.

"I know friends is all we can ever be," she admitted reluctantly. "I think I know that by now. But that doesn't mean I can't still love you, and I want you to come back down from the mountain, Andy – with or without those people. You hear me?"

Andy began to salute again, but didn't complete the gesture. He lowered his hand, and his tone, sorry for how he knew she felt.

"I will," he said. "I promise."

"You remember it," she shot back. Then again her tone changed, and without invitation, she continued her previous train of thought, acknowledging what Andy had always known. "It's ironic, I think," she said. "You've always been in love with *her*. You still are, aren't you?" She didn't wait for a response. She knew the answer. "And I've always been in love with you. You can't have her, and I can't have you. This really sucks, you know."

"I know." It was the very painful truth.

"You still seeing her?"

He nodded.

"Yeah, most days."

"I can't compete with that." Sarah shook her head, pursing her lips. Then she shrugged and made some humor of her own. "But at least *I* would have had sex with you if you'd asked me. You only had to ask, you know."

He smiled and shook his head slowly, and it was clear that, whether either of them was joking or not, she had touched a nerve. He knew that like no other time, he had to be honest now.

"Hmm," he admitted wryly, and it was clear that she had told him something he really would have preferred not to be tempted in – even though it was no surprise. "Thanks for that thought, Sarah. I really needed that mental image when I'm trying to do what's right. But you know I just can't, hey? Like I told you, I'm... a Christian now, and I'm trying not to do that stuff. And as much as I'm sure that would be *real* nice, people get hurt that way – least that's

what I think God has been trying to tell me. Don't get me wrong – you're really nice..."

He took an exaggerated look at her floral blouse through the gap in her open jacket.

"*Really nice*," he clarified. "But I'm already a mess from the hurts I've caused people in this life. You're... really cute... but I just don't need anymore... pain."

His use of such a sensitive word – *pain* – proved to her that he was most certainly telling the truth, and she nodded her understanding.

"Yeah, I get it," she conceded, but sounding heartily disappointed, as indeed she was. "Oh well, even if I can't have you, at least you're still my friend, Andy, no matter what. So you come back. Okay?"

"I'll bring you a story for your paper," he offered, smiling again.

"I'll hold you to that," she replied, smiling bravely, but dying inside.

They looked awkwardly at one another. She was sorry now that she had begged him to go. A sense of guilt rained down on her, almost as oppressive as the deluge of water falling around them. Still, there was no turning back now. Andy had made up his mind, and Sarah knew him well enough to know that he would not rest until he knew the fate of those lost people. Besides, in a very real way *she did* want him to go.

It was Andy who broke the silence that ensued.

"So," he said. "You ready to take me to the base?"

Sarah nodded, and then faced him again, knowing he would never be hers to have.

"I know there's never going to be anything – *that I want* – between us," she admitted, glad for another temporary ease in the rain so that she did not have to shout her feelings. "But if you don't come back, I'll find you and I'll haunt you. I mean it."

Andy smiled again in reply, somewhat wistful.

"No," he said. "Don't do that. I have enough of that already."



Marie Townsend adjusted the plastic sheeting as best she could over Ashley Collard as the rain roared upon it, threatening to press it down upon the occupants in the front of the shattered plane.

She fiddled with it for a long time, doing her best to prop it up with sticks, to prevent water from gushing in on the stricken man, who remained pinned in the front seat. As long as the plastic sheet was, Marie had also managed to fold it, thus covering the body of Merve Hillman, a small, though considerable mercy for both Collard and Marie's daughter, Stephanie.

Rain pelted down, hammering noisily upon the dented fuselage, and while several windows

were cracked, most of them remained intact. Hence, mercifully, with the help of strategically placed plastic sheeting, the three managed to remain dry. It was cold, and Marie devoted much of the cold-weather gear she had found, blankets and a couple of coats, to her two patients.

Stephanie remained seated, adhering to her mother's wishes and resting her gashed calf muscle. The temptation to view the severity of the downpour outside was too great though, and eventually the girl found herself wandering to a window to stare out at the gray-white world beyond the battered aircraft. She wiped the foggy window with a sleeve of her parka, and then a handkerchief when the former proved inadequate for the task.

Marie struggled back to join her, stepping cautiously over a pile of gear they had assembled. The nurse gripped her forehead, leaning on her daughter for a few seconds as her head throbbed from the sudden movement. Once steady, and with the burst of pain easing, she joined Stephanie in staring out at the torrent.

Rain fell so hard that they could only see ten or twenty meters, and the heavy fog that still hung in the chilly air was being stirred up by the watery invasion, but not dissipated. The temperature dropped, not oppressively so, but enough to make them all uncomfortable. Most of the spare clothes had been draped over Ashley Collard in a feeble effort to preserve his life, though Marie knew it was not likely to prove anything more than a kind gesture. At least she was able to keep him dry and warm, she told herself.

"Will that man die, Mum?" Stephanie asked.

It sounded in Marie's mind like a voice of doom, daring to ask the very question she had hoped might be avoided. Still, Marie decided, Stephanie was mature for her age and she could handle the truth as long as it was presented properly. She didn't lie.

"He's badly injured, Steph," Marie acknowledged in a voice just loud enough for her daughter to hear over the deluge. "No, I'm sorry. We must be brave. It... doesn't look good. Without help..."

Marie made a sad face, and her silence told the girl all she had to know. Stephanie nodded bravely in return. She had heard enough stories of death over the years to know that this was her mother's business, and that Marie would be accurate in her prediction. Stephanie decided that she would accept the sad truth as bravely as she could, for her mother's sake if nothing else.

"I hope he isn't suffering too much," she said hopefully.

"He's not," assured Marie. "Mister Collard is barely conscious. And when he does wake up, he doesn't know very much. The body has a way of numbing the pain, you know. If he does die, it will be peaceful enough for him."

Stephanie swallowed hard, but did not cry. *Must be brave*, she told herself. She glanced at

the noisy, rattling plastic as rain bombarded it into smooth shapes that filled with water. At least the old pilot could not be seen anymore. Oh well, she decided; she'd already seen one dead man this trip, so she could be brave for her mother's sake, and not cry if the other poor man died too. She rejoined her mother staring out the window.

"How long before you think they'll come find us?" Stephanie asked.

Already convinced that she should not try to hide life's realities from her daughter, least of all since the girl had already witnessed one man's death and would likely see another quite soon, Marie did not lie about this matter either.

"I don't think we can expect help any time soon. This rain and fog will be stopping anyone from looking for us, I should think. I'm sorry, Steph. We'll just have to be brave."

"It's okay," Stephanie replied. She was actually appreciating the fact that her mother was placing a degree of trust in her by not trying to water down the truth. "We'll be okay. At least we have each other."

Marie nodded, and then hugged her daughter. "Yes," she said, holding the girl tightly.

But in reality Marie was not telling Stephanie the entire truth. The mental picture of her daughter's broken insulin kit would not leave her mind. And deep down, she harbored a deep and horrible fear that they might not finish this ordeal together.

The two held each other tight, then finally flopped down into their seats, both exhausted and in pain.



Sarah Emerson's Toyota slipped sideways just a little, and then gripped as all four wheels cut deep furrows in the mud.

Plowing down into the thick sludge until they made contact with buried gravel, the wide tires made soft, sucking, groaning sounds until they finally bit, then the drab green vehicle moved slowly backwards in the midst of a three-point turn. Once happy that she could safely continue back along the track she had just made, Sarah pulled on the park brake, but never switched off the engine.

Andy and Sarah stared down the path they had just traversed to reach their destination. Two deep, snaking furrows marked their progress, then a mess of churned slop and grass showed where Sarah had rocked and reversed until she had been able to aim the vehicle back toward the main road. In such inhospitable conditions her four-wheel-drive had not been able to take them nearly as far as she had hoped, but Andy was happy to have her turn back. He did not want her to venture any further from civilization.

“No point in anyone else getting stuck out in this,” he said. “You think you can get back safely from here?”

She nodded. He knew she would, but it seemed pertinent to ask. Even this close to the relative safety of the sealed main road he still had some fears, but he would have to trust her. He turned to stare out his window at the daunting sight of Cash Mountain, rising up from the earth until it disappeared into a thick veil of secretive fog. The mountain looked particularly uninviting, wet and gloomy. Rain still fell, though it was lighter now, just enough to cause some of the mud which had splattered on to Sarah’s Toyota to melt and run away in snaking trails on the paintwork.

“Damn, I hate the mountain,” Andy grumbled, but as always, with a slight grin.

“No you don’t,” Sarah corrected. “You just hate getting wet.”

He took a last long look at her, pursing his lips. “You sure you want me to do this?”

“No. Not any more, I’m not. What do you think?”

“I think the whole idea sucks,” he taunted. “But at least it was *your* idea. Remember to report that when you’re doing your big article.”

“You’re a good man, Andy,” she said. “The best man I know.”

There was no hint of a smile now. She was being quite serious. Tears were welling up.

“Don’t do that,” he urged. He reached back and retrieved a very large parka, then struggled to pull it on within the confines of the Toyota. “You really want to do something for me? Do two things, will you? First is, if anything happens to me, just know that I’m doing what I like and I’m doing it at home – and that’s pretty good. Second is, tell me why you were so keen for me to go up the mountain this morning.”

Sarah swallowed her tears.

“Yeah,” she admitted reluctantly. “I suppose I owe you that.”

“Yeah, you do.” He gave her no hope of retreat.

“I’m haunted by the same things as you, Andy. You blame yourself for Rosalind’s death, and I... well I... I have trouble with it too, okay? Me and Rosalind, we didn’t get on that well at school, you know. I was always jealous of her. She had you, and I didn’t.”

She paused, feeling particularly vulnerable, and yet strangely liberated by the honesty of it. She shook her head, never sure of how to say the words.

“Well the point is that... I was always sorry she drowned too. I should have been nicer to her. A *lot* nicer. I should have let her have you and not been so hung up on it.” She laughed, several large tears slipping down her blushed cheeks. “Oh hell, I’ve even offered myself to you and you still don’t want me.”

“That’s not true,” he corrected unnecessarily. “I think you’re really hot. It’s just that...”

“I know. I know,” she interrupted, well familiar with his explanation. “New man, turned a new page and all that.” She sighed dejectedly. “Oh, what’s it matter anyway?” She looked away, the regret etched into her face.

“Twenty years later I still don’t have you, do I? No, that’s not right – I *can’t have you*. That’s what it is. And what really steams me is that you’re too damn... *honorable* even to... *use me*.”

Now it was he who sighed. But he did not reply. Indeed, no response was needed.

“Anyway,” Sarah continued, “no matter what I thought of her, I know *you* loved her, and I’ve always been sorry for what it did *to you*. I’ve always been sorry for *that*. It wasn’t your fault, Andy. *You have to know that*.”

He said nothing. His face showed nothing – a trick he had learned many years earlier, but inside he disagreed with her intensely. It was *all his fault*. No words could ever change that. In Andy’s mind, Sarah had nothing to be sorry for.

The rain, his mind flashed back. *It was raining, just like this*.

“I undid the rope,” he said, his mind wandering back in bitter agony. “It was only a joke, Sarah, but I did it. I have to own that. Admitting guilt is good for the soul, they tell me.”

His words cut into her like a knife, and all she wanted was to take away his pain. But she could not find the words. She never had. Indeed, she too had learned to hide things, just as he had, and so her pain went largely undiagnosed.

Until that moment.

Andy stared in silence, realizing that he had never before noticed just how much she shared his grief.

“It’s okay,” he coaxed, wanting to help her. “It’s okay. These days I just live with it. That’s the price I pay for a moment’s stupidity. But you have to believe I didn’t do it to hurt her. I never would have done that.”

Don’t untie the knot, Andy!

“Oh God, Andy, I know that,” Sarah said softly. “*I know that!* I believe you. Don’t you ever think you’ve got to try to get me to believe you. *You know I do!*”

She let it go, and again he saw how upset she was. He stared at her a while longer, imagining her pain to be a blend of sadness for the loss of a classmate, and genuine sorrow for how she knew he must have suffered over the lonely years. Above that, he felt sure he knew what *really* weighed more for Sarah – her feelings for him were no secret.

Sarah sighed again. She felt her stomach cramp with fear, and had to change the subject to

escape from where she knew *that* conversation would lead.

“Anyway,” She continued, her voice shaking. “I told you a hundred times how I feel about you, Andy, but I never told you that I’m really sorry for what happened. I’m just *so sorry*.”

She drew a long breath, unable to continue down that path. At least, she told herself, he could see that she was genuinely sorry for Rosalind’s death. That was *something*. And it was real. *Very real*.

“You’re a good man, Andy Harrison,” Sarah finally repeated. She raised her head again, struggling valiantly to overcome her emotions. “You’re the best. Better than me. Better than *all* the rest of us.”

“Oh, can I have some of what you’re smoking?” he joked. “No, I doubt that, Sarah.” He pulled the hood of his parka over his head. “But flattery will get you everywhere.”

“I wish,” she replied, but they both knew it wasn’t true. That door had never been open for her. Sarah felt almost physically sick.

She watched as Andy stepped out into the light rain, closing the door after him. A moment later he opened the rear door and retrieved his pack, then struggled to lift its straps over his shoulders. Then he took a heavy stick which he had laid on the floor, and closed the door. He squelched his way in deep boot-prints through the mud to Sarah’s window. Instead of rolling down the window, Sarah opened the door, ignoring the soft rain that patted in on her, mixing with her tears until her entire face was wet.

“You take care, Andy,” she pleaded. “Thank you for doing it, but *please* take care.”

“I’ll be back,” he said. “It’s Saturday. If you don’t hear from me by Monday night, tell Chief Stedman he’s got two lost parties on the mountain. He should enjoy that.”

“Yes, he would.” She grinned, and it temporarily broke the spell of doom she had fallen under.

“But if you do have to tell him,” Andy continued, “it may be best not to tell him it’s *me who’s missing*. He might not bother coming to find me.”

Sarah continued to smile, but she knew there might just have been a hint of truth to that statement.

“Love you, Andy,” she said softly.

“Love you too, Sarah,” he answered. It was true, but they both knew his would never be any more than the love of a friend. It was such a sensitive comment, Sarah thought, but he drove home the reality of their relationship by adding simply, “See you Monday.”

Andy turned and trudged away from the vehicle. It was just before one o’clock, and the clouds were easing their drenching of the earth. The mountain ahead rose steadily from a thick

canopy of trees, capped in a foreboding veil of fog. A chilly breeze had now risen, and far above, the clouds were rushing into each other, buffeting and jostling, preparing for their next onslaught.

Andy stepped heavily in the soft mud, his tall boots sinking almost to the ankles with each step. He wrestled with his kit, nudging it with one elbow into a more comfortable position. He knew he was in for a long trek, so he figured he may as well be as comfortable as possible. Cold rain patted upon the hood of his parka, spraying his face gently with watery mist. He turned back toward Sarah's Toyota, and was surprised to see her still sitting there, watching with the door ajar.

He waved one last time and headed towards the northeastern face of Mount Cash, mud squelching noisily with each heavy imprint of his boots.

And, "*Damn, I hate the mud,*" he said.

CHAPTER 6

A particularly heavy fog gathered and hung lazily just meters above the mangled remains of the Beechcraft, and then slowly, swirling in the light breeze that followed the rain, it began to fall upon the entire scene.

It made mid afternoon seem like evening, and the day became old before its time. The swirling fog was thick and impenetrable, shutting out both light and hope, inducing an oppressive gloom that reached as far as the marrow in Marie and Stephanie Townsend's bones.

Ashley Collard had lost consciousness, though his vital signs refused to surrender. His battered, impaled body fought against death, his breath rasping softly in his throat as his body shivered with the cold. Marie wrapped him tightly in what blankets and spare clothes there were, but she knew the battle was hopeless. It was a question of time now, she knew. But still, she could not entertain the notion of leaving the stricken man. *Besides*, she pondered silently, *which way would they go?* And moreover, the heavy fog made even the task of deciding a direction in which to hike impossible. Both she and her daughter struggled against a feeling of hopelessness.

And then there was fear.

Stephanie rubbed her belly where her mother had injected a small dose of insulin.

"I know it's not as much as you should have," Marie explained, "but for now we have to conserve everything." Stephanie nodded, her face bleak with a sense of dread. She tried to smile, suddenly remembering how she had decided to try to help her mother by putting on a brave face in the midst of danger and trial. Marie appreciated the gesture.

Together they directed water from puddles that had formed in the plastic sheeting over the two men, pouring it into a plastic bottle. While cold and damp now, they each realized that if the storms cleared, water would quickly become a precious commodity. Stephanie winced as they were forced to approach the plastic sheeting that covered the dead pilot, and fortunately they had sufficient water to prevent them being forced to use water that had gathered over his body. Clean, they knew it would be, kept pure by the plastic sheeting, somehow the very thought of drinking water that had been so close to a dead body was something neither wanted to do.

Later they both knelt close by the pile of supplies they had managed to gather, which included their own warm clothing, the small medical kit and waterbottle. The only food on board consisted of an unopened packet of potato chips and a bag of apples they had purchased before the flight. Marie remembered when she'd bought them, and smiled at God's providence.

Since Stephanie was a diabetic, Marie understood the importance of a healthy diet for her daughter. When Stephanie had wanted a snack, Marie had offered to buy fruit for the two-hour plane trip. *An apple*, she had said. Marie had been annoyed at the time because the store had not sold apples singly, and she'd been forced to buy a whole bag. Now she looked back on the incident with enormous gratitude.

It made a change from how she usually approached God. Ever since her husband, a policeman, had been shot and killed on the job, she had become more and more distant from him. A Christian for a dozen years, she had gone along happily growing in her understanding of who God is and what he *really* wanted of and for her – right up to the day her husband was shot. From then on she had been unable to trust Him, even though she still prayed daily to Him.

To Marie it felt something akin to an almost schizophrenic relationship. She loved God, and still prayed to him, and yet she could no longer honestly trust him. He had let her down, and nothing could change that. All the preachers' sermons about 'having faith' seemed so hollow and pointless now... *No, not pointless...but powerless.*

Surely God had let her down...

"How long do you think Mister Collard will live?"

Stephanie's question snapped her mother's mind back to reality, both by breaking her train of thought, and because of the measured, mature tone in the girl's voice. Suddenly Marie realized, staring into the surprisingly calm, albeit young looking face of her daughter, that Stephanie was about to learn some very important life lessons. And the girl was handling the ordeal with considerable maturity.

"I don't know," Marie admitted.

She glanced in Collard's direction, gritting her teeth at the bump protruding from the back

of the man's seat – a bump now because of the fact that Marie had earlier hung a spare rag over the bloody end of the impaling branch. She looked back to meet her daughter's gaze. May as well just be honest, she decided; Stephanie was going to find out anyway.

"Only an hour or so, I suspect, though it can be deceptive. I'm sorry, love. There's just nothing I can do."

Stephanie nodded and looked sad, but she resisted the urge to cry. *Must remain strong for Mum*, she thought. Marie touched her daughter's face. She was cold to touch, despite the heavy coat and extra shirt she now wore.

"You're very cold," Marie said.

"I'm okay, Mum." But the girl's discomfort was not well disguised. In her effort to remain strong, Stephanie had been denying the truth about how weak she felt.

"They'll find us, Steph," Marie encouraged, putting on a brave face. "In the meantime we can count our blessings. We have plenty of warm clothes, and lots of water. And I think we can make your insulin last another day or maybe even more." She put on an extra broad smile. "And most important, we've got food." She held up an apple to her daughter, gesturing for her to eat. "To think I was annoyed when I had to buy a whole bag of these."

Was that God's providence? Yes... No! God had let her down even after she had prayed for her husband's safety. God knew he had a dangerous job. How could he not care like that? A bag of apples was certainly appreciated now, but it hardly made up for losing Frank. No, God had let her down so painfully...

Marie let out a small, nervous sigh and smiled at Stephanie. They hugged, both feeling the strain of their situation, both wondering how long it would take before help arrived. Stephanie took the piece of fruit, but didn't eat, instead offering it to her mother.

"What about you?" the young girl asked.

Marie made a face.

"I'm okay. I know you want to look after me, but you need to trust me on this, Steph. Remember, I'm the nurse here." She caressed her daughter's face again. "If I don't eat, I get uncomfortable. If you don't eat, you die. I don't want that. So please, just eat the apple – I'll be okay."

Stephanie reluctantly took a bite, but made no effort to return her mother's brave, continuing smile. The apple tasted especially good, though she wished intensely that there was more to eat. She went back to wondering how long it would take to be rescued.



Marty Phillips struggled along the meandering path, careful not to slip on the wet, rocky trail.

His pack seemed heavier since the last downpour, and Marty was already missing home. Angela had promised him a cherry pie for the weekend, and his favorite motor race would be screening as they walked. He pictured himself laying back in his recliner, snacking and watching the race. It seemed like a much better pastime than trudging out in the rain and mud to look for people who were more than likely dead.

Dead. Hmm. It was a daunting prospect.

He took a quick glance behind at his three fellow searchers, each one staring at the slippery path beneath their feet, and each one laboring beneath their packs. The fog was thickening with each passing minute, it seemed, and Marty wondered whether trekking up the hill in such conditions was wise. But then, Marty knew the answer to his own question. If the going was tough for them, fresh and recently fed, the mountain would doubtless be merciless to anyone still alive on that plane.

He trudged dutifully on.

Ben McGraw walked just behind Marty, barely watching where he was going, puffing and moving like a robot. *One foot after the other, and follow Marty's footprints*, Ben told himself. Like Marty, all he wanted from life at that moment was to see the race. *Dumb tourists, what were they doing traveling in a storm anyway?* Ben knew Merve Hillman quite well. The old man had been flying these parts for many years, and should have known better.

"Old fool. Probably thought he was *so familiar* with the run, that he figured he could do it in any weather," Ben mumbled.

Marty heard Ben mumble, but couldn't make out what he had said. But he was already tired, puffing beneath the weight of his pack, and struggling to keep a steady footing on the rocky path with a layer of greasy mud caked beneath his boots. Marty was too tired to ask Ben what he had said. If it was important, Ben would repeat it, he decided.

Ben didn't. He fell silent, too tired even to grumble anymore. Instead, he held the imaginary conversation between himself and the errant pilot in his mind, chastising Merve Hillman for being such an old fool.



Chief Corbin Stedman spoke with his state colleague by phone, his tired body pulsing with a mix of relief and a feeling of oppression. Having the state police intervene in anything under Stedman's jurisdiction was never something he enjoyed, naturally enough, and while Captain Ed

Worth of the state police was simply “making a call at this stage” to see if any help might be needed in the search, the chief felt uneasy.

A brusque, domineering man, Stedman found it a simple enough task to fob off his colleague, but the conversation sat uneasily with him. Stedman had the situation ‘in hand’, he assured, his local volunteers capable of handling the search effectively, calling on local knowledge of the mountain. Moreover, no amount of resources offered by Worth could be utilized until the weather cleared. Stedman would call if he needed help. He put down the phone feeling rather drained.

“That’s all I need – some state cop coming in here telling us how to do our job,” he grumbled.

Officer Mario Abbot gave a barely perceptible smirk, more than a little aware of the chief’s distaste of interference. In fact, the chief hated almost *anything* that didn’t go his way. No doubt about it, Stedman liked to be in control. It was not an entirely bad attitude, Abbot knew, since the old chief had handled many and varied situations with considerable wisdom and expertise in the past.

Still, the old man’s growling attitude always made Abbot shake his head, and while he made light of Stedman’s permanently gnarled disposition, he also knew that the old man’s resentment was a real problem. Underneath all that age and experience lurked a hidden mass of resentment and potential destructive bitterness; Abbot hoped that he himself did not end up quite as hard as his boss could be.

The real advantage Mario had was that, being in his early forties he was old enough to remember the source of the chief’s bitter inner being. Mario could remember the day with poignant clarity, twenty years earlier when two young people had been pulled from the flooded Choppy River. He could still see them, both being carried along like flotsam, two pieces of discarded debris purged by the river further up.

And the river would have claimed them both forever had it not been for the fact that the steel frame of the Emerson Bridge had afforded police the opportunity to pluck the drowning teens from the swirling, muddy waters that fateful day. Abbot’s memory was vivid, his own life touched forever by the events of that day, both by the tragedy of it, and by the occasional rage he had endured from his boss ever since.

Abbot’s mind swum for a moment as he remembered the fear he had felt scurrying under the steel railing of the old bridge, and then hanging down close to the raging water from a rope. It had been like nearing a monster, death just a slip away. Stedman had grasped the girl, who was not moving, but remained afloat only by the efforts of the young man spitting water at her side.

Abbot felt a chill pass through him; he could still feel the frantic terror of knowing that if he failed to make a successful grab for the boy, then the lad would have been lost forever in the lethal current. Once past the bridge, a person would be smashed again on more severe rapids another kilometer downstream.

But Abbot had reached, and he had grabbed. And he *had been able to hold on*, as was the chief at his side. The next minute was a haze in Abbot's mind, but he remembered clearly enough dropping the boy in a puddle of water on the bridge that day. The lad was coughing and spitting water, probably saved just in time, and Abbot remembered how frantic the boy was too.

But most of all, the policeman remembered looking from his own "drowning rat" over to view Corbin Stedman working like a madman on the girl, administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, shaking and crying all the while.

He remembered the arrival of the old doc, and how he had taken over the task of trying to revive the Rosalind Stedman. All of Chief Stedman's calm disposition had dissolved that day, and the frantic chief had beaten his chest as the doc struggled before him.

In the end, of course, they had failed. It was all history now. But Abbot had never forgotten the rage Stedman had displayed that day, the crippling grief and loss a father had endured.

Stedman had never recovered, even after twenty years.



Andy Harrison trudged in the pouring rain, wondering if it would ever cease. Keeping balance by leaning regularly on his stick as he slipped along the muddy path, he pulled at the drawstrings of his parka hood as another icy drop of water managed to infiltrate his polyester armor.

The droplet snaked a meandering path down Andy's chest, chilling his skin uncomfortably, and causing him to hunch his shoulders in an effort to adjust how his coat and pack clung to his back. His mind grappled with the question of how far he had come, his computations keeping pace with his feet.

Chinese grave, two kilometers, palm plantation, another two kilometers, Johnson's well, half a kilometer... that was... that was... four and a half. Just four and a half clicks... Pack clinging, very uncomfortable... forget the distance, just put one foot in front of the other. He was tired already. Still, the old railway crossing would be just a half a kilometer ahead.

It had been six months since Andy had ventured to the mountain; *the hill*, as he and his friends had known it in their youth. Each turn of the path, each large tree, every boulder seemed to haunt Andy as he climbed, more than ever as the rain pelted him.

After the death of his childhood sweetheart, Andy had stayed away from the hill for over ten years. It had been *their* place, and it was full of secret, pleasant places. But once *she* had died, Andy had not been able to face it – not for a long time, anyway. He had left Springcliffe for most of those ten years, finally returning to take up life where he had left off.

He had stayed away from the hill for almost another year after returning to the town of his birth, but in the end he had refused to let his nightmares defeat him. Despite an avalanche of haunting memories, Andy had managed to master the mountain again – as an adult. Today, though, it felt like it had in the days when he had first returned – haunting, bleak and even hostile. Andy's mind was filled with voices and mental pictures.

The mountain was pretty green everywhere he looked. Earlier rains had brought new vegetation springing from the earth, and the current downpour washed the hill so that it looked clean, despite the constant fog and occasional blinding spray. A strange contradiction, Andy had often thought, how beautiful the hill could look, and yet how treacherous it always remained. He determined never to trust it.

His feet plodded on, sinking slightly in the soft path, and making deep imprints where there was no grass to buoy him. But he refused to quit or slow, turning his mind away from the urging of his body to rest, and moreover, his mind to play haunting games.

Upon nearing a particularly large oak close to the path, Andy stopped. He stared long and hard at its gnarled trunk, searching the pitted bark. He remembered the tree from his childhood. It had stood sentinel for generations; had probably stood silently by as Andy's father had roamed the very same path.

Andy swallowed.

The tree stood just a few meters off the track, sprawling overhead as it had always done, silent and imposing. Its wet leaves dropped enormous, noisy drops of water on Andy's parka from time to time as he stood in silence, staring. Some things he had conquered, like the mountain upon his return to Springcliffe. Some things, he had purposely avoided, never to gaze upon again.

The bark of that tree was one such thing.

Andy's mind wandered, both in his memories, and into his own identity. Could he bear to go near it? He stood silent and still for some time, momentarily forgetting his pressing quest. It had been twenty years since he had touched *that* tree.

Twenty years, he thought. *Not long enough.*

And yet, perhaps it was. An internal battle ensued, and then died away as Andy forced himself to conquer his fear. *Should he go? Should he look?* He wrestled, without moving. His

crow's feet grew deeper as his mind and will did battle, and finally he swallowed hard, resolute. He left the track, his gaze locked upon the old tree trunk.

He circled slowly, his boots cracking softly on a bed of fallen leaves and twigs, mixed with sodden grass. It had been twenty years since he had felt that same grass beneath his feet. A barrage of memories came flooding back, and yet none could deter him. He was committed now. He could not turn back.

He would not.

Rounding the trunk, his fingers ran softly over its rough, wet bark, as though he was reading Braille. All the while, Andy stood quite still, not even breathing for a time. He had passed by this tree several times since his return to Springcliffe, but he had never dared to look upon it. Never dared to open the old wounds.

Until now.

He could hear a loud ringing in his ears, despite the constant, noisy dripping of water droplets from the tree, and the constant patter of rain from the sky. A shivering hand stroked back over his forehead as he swept several strands of damp hair from his face and eyes. A blinding image flashed through Andy's mind, as clear as if it had been just yesterday.

But it wasn't yesterday. It was a lifetime ago...

Andy drew an uneasy breath. His first reaction was surprise, not the deep pain that he had feared.

He continued to search, and yet could not find what it was he expected to see. He suddenly realized that fear had turned to consternation at the absence of what he sought. The long seconds of anticlimax gave him time to think, his mind letting go of his fear as his eyes continued to search.

But there was nothing.

And then, when the reality sank in to Andy's charged mind, he realized that with the passing of twenty years, the carvings he had once etched into the bark of that tree – *their favorite tree* – were now grown over with new, albeit scarred bark. Only the faintest trace of irregularity remained in the place where he knew a large, heart-shaped etching had once been. Andy's heart sank, disappointment welling up where fear had been just seconds earlier.

Just for a moment, tears mixed with rain as he felt his heart sink, his deepest pain threatening to return. And then it was gone. Andy stared, mesmerized for a time, unable to believe what he was seeing. His mind played a game with him, and just for a moment he could see *her* again. She was sixteen, as was he, young and happy and so lovely. And she was his, just as she had promised she always would be.

They had made their vows and kissed, there beneath the oak on the hill – *their* favorite tree.

And as an eternal testament to their promised love, Andy had taken his pocketknife and begun to cut. He cut and carved for what seemed like an hour as she watched on, never taking her eyes off him or his work. Then it was done. She kissed him again to show her agreement. They had carved their vow into the sentinel oak, and sealed it forever. *RS L AH – Forever*, all contained within a large, deep heart in the bark. It would be there for all to see, and for eternity, and the sentinel was their witness.

And yet it was gone.

Emptiness filled a dark pit where fear had recently dwelt. Those eternal strokes, once so valid and so full of meaning, speaking of a love that would last forever, and mean more than life itself, were now no more than a smear and a stain within the regrowth of bark. The ever-watchful sentinel, the tree beneath which they had kissed and vowed their love for one another, had forgotten them.

Andy shook his head. *How could the world forget her and move on?*

He stepped back as if wounded. He felt hurt and betrayed, and yet the emptiness was strangely better than the pain he had endured for so long. He swallowed again, closing his eyes in disbelief. Their initials, their carved heart, and the eternal love were all gone.

And then, as if the whole world had turned a page and was ushering Andy onward, the rain eased and became little more than light drizzle. Andy stood still and lost track of time. The incessant patter of rain on his parka hood ceased, as did the voices whispering in his head, and it seemed as though fate was bidding him to move on. He was unwilling to move at first, not happy to release precious memories of a beautiful girl he had once vowed to love forever, and who had left him alone so tragically. And yet something else was nagging at him all the while.

“There’s a kid on board, Andy. A twelve year old girl.”

Sarah’s voice crackled to life in Andy’s mind, and was then echoed a moment later by something Natalie had said just before they parted.

“It’s not your fault, Andy. Don’t hate yourself. Just let it go. You can do more good alive today, than dying every day, living in the past.” He could still see her saying the words.

“The kid,” Andy said aloud, and the words snapped him from his torment. “Gotta go find the kid.”

His boots squelched again as he moved back to the soft path, slipping in the mud. Andy took another long look at the sentinel, and then peered up the gloomy track before him. The rain had eased so much in the past minute that now he could hear the Choppy River in the distance, and haunting memories were replaced in an instant by the daunting prospect of crossing *that*

river.

And, “*Damn, I hate the mountain,*” he said.

CHAPTER 7

Andy stood still, staring down at the raging water of the Choppy as it churned, wild and muddy some meters below him.

Surging all the while, sucking and belching, tearing at the steep, slippery bank for anything it might be able to draw in, the brown, swirling mass pushed and jostled, plowing into submerged boulders and spraying skyward. The deadly, churning current carried uprooted grass and small bushes in an occasional flurry of rolling green and brown tangles as it raced down the mountain, destined for an ocean not even visible through the fog and distant rain.

Andy let out a long, slow sigh. He remembered this all too clearly.

If the lethal currents didn’t pose enough risk, with the mess of tangled trees and grass they carried along, and the submerged boulders upon which the river sought to pulverize all, things became decidedly more dangerous.

In his childhood there had been a railway line running along the edge of the mountain, connecting Springcliffe to the next town, some fifty kilometers away. But with better road transport the line had been closed, and while disused, the tracks had remained complete for the most part. Most importantly, a railway bridge had crossed the Choppy, affording just enough clearance to cross even when the river was in flood.

To Andy’s dismay though, the steel rails had been removed during his time away from Springcliffe, leaving the bridge weakened as a structure. With the rails missing, the river had remained traversable, but the bridge had become prone to damage during floods.

With its backbone effectively removed, and with no maintenance for over twenty years, the old bridge was left vulnerable, and this latest flood had washed away the timbers that had once connected the pylons. Now all that remained were a series of denuded, split timber uprights, valiantly standing in pairs against the torrent that smashed against them.

Masses of weed bonded together by tangled fence-wire now clung to the pylons, with no less than four meters of impassable, roaring water cascading between each. The bridge, which had stood for years as a safe method of crossing the wild river in almost any weather, was effectively gone.

Andy’s heart sank.

He stared in disbelief for a time, wondering if he could safely cross by connecting a rope from one pylon to the next. But as he watched the fuming water pounding the pylons, and saw the rubbish that the river carried down, large logs and bushes buffeting the uprights without mercy, he could see that trying to cross that way was not a safe option. His memories of being swept away in the river were still vivid, despite the passing of years.

With his mind still dazed from the surprise of seeing his sacred carving gone from the sentinel oak, Andy's thoughts wandered again, and he found himself wondering what else would be missing after so many years. He stared up the river a little way, his view obstructed by familiar boulders that jutted out of the earth at the river's edge.

He remembered those too. When the river was not in flood there was a deep pool at the base of those rocks, part of the river itself. Moreover, it was one of the few places along the river where a person might safely escape its steep, slippery banks, though only when the river was not in flood.

In his youth Andy and his friends would climb those massive boulders, then jump in. Foolish perhaps, he reflected, and yet safe enough since no one had ever touched the bottom of the pool. So as long as they checked for submerged logs, it had always been a calculated risk. A shiver ran through Andy's body as he recalled the several-second plummet each time he would launch off the edge of the tallest boulder. A running jump and a few seconds of screaming glory, hollering to his fellow jumpers, and friends below.

"Crazy," he mumbled to himself as he stood silently, remembering. Then he smiled. Crazy, but daring too. And how the girls had admired any boy who would jump. Hence, Andy had jumped many times.

"Hey, Rozzi! Yahoo!" he could hear himself yelling.

A few quick, brave paces and his heart would come up into his mouth, then he'd be bellowing all the way to the water. He could still remember the hard smack and the chill of the water, and the eternity he seemed to be under water, waiting for natural buoyancy to raise him to the living world again. All eyes would be on the diver, waiting for their safe return, and then a few more shrieks would testify to their bravery.

Rosalind had been suitably impressed.

Rosalind. Oh, yes. Rosalind.

Andy's eyes ventured a little further upstream, but the boulders obscured his view. He knew they would. And he'd always been glad that they did. A natural blind spot created by the boulders had made the next section of the river a haven for young lovers, and teens who simply wanted to hide or 'make out'. Before that tragic day Andy had visited the secret place with *her*,

just to kiss and cuddle, but since that day, those same boulders had afforded a welcome barrier, allowing Andy to cross the Choppy without ever having to look upon the last place he had been with *her*.

His crow's feet deepened again.

Something within Andy told him that time was of the essence, and that people may be dying up the hill, and yet a voice spoke out from deep within demanding that he face his past. He looked longingly across the remains of the shattered bridge, knowing that he would not be able to safely cross it. That left only one other place to cross, higher up the mountain, and the dangers there were great too.

Ludicrous as the thought seemed, Andy wondered if he would die trying to cross the river this time. It was a possibility, he knew. One slip and he would be back where he was twenty years before, only this time the flood was worse. Death did not terrify him. But still, despite all the pain he had known since that terrible day, he felt no need to hasten its arrival.

But there was another force at work, inside Andy, and he knew it all too well. There was no denying it. At first he had tried to deny it, to quash it, and like the prophet Jonah, to stay right away from it. Deep down, though, he knew that was never going to be an option.

Over a period of time he had felt a growing need to venture to the mountain one more time, and this time, for the purpose of closure. Everything he had read, small things people had said, none of which meant much on their own, but when put together, gave voice to something he felt certain was from God. There was no denying it anymore. Andy believed with all his heart that it was God who had led him to the mountain this time, and while he couldn't imagine why, he felt sure Jesus was walking right along with him.

Every step.

"You sure about this?" he prayed, and gave a smile and a shrug when he heard no audible answer. He didn't need one. He knew God had been in this from the beginning. *Those who didn't walk with God, wouldn't understand*, he knew. But to him, there was no denying that he had been led to this very place.

Andy shivered, wondering why. A fearful voice inside him insisted that this might be his last visit to the mountain, and while he knew that might be true, his fear did not ring with the same promise of God's accompanying presence. And so Andy would not quit.

He could not quit.

He glanced at his watch, and then at the boulders again. Twenty minutes is all it would take.

Just twenty minutes.

He could face his nightmares, once for all time, and then go on to face his fate, if that was what was required. Or maybe twenty minutes in the dreaded Choppy River *was his fate*. Morbid as the thought was, he could not shake the possibility that he would die. It had happened before in that very same river – to the one he loved.

Just twenty minutes.

How much difference could it make?

Andy turned and continued to walk upstream to where he knew the only other possibility of crossing the river was, but first he resolved that he would use what may well prove to be his last trek to the mountain to visit the place he had been most afraid to go for two decades. Just seventy meters, he knew, and he'd be there.

It was only a short detour, he told himself. Just twenty minutes... That's all it would take.

That's all it took twenty years ago...

And he was so afraid of *this place*. This was one place he had gladly *not visited* in his few trips up Cash Mountain since his return from ten years of self-imposed banishment from Springcliffe. His heart felt suddenly so heavy.

Such a short distance, and yet it loomed on his horizon like a venture into death itself. He felt his stomach tighten and his body chill at the thought, and while his mind insisted that he go and face his greatest fear, his body rebelled with nervous dread.

What if it still looks the same? What if it doesn't?

The sentinel oak hadn't remembered them. What if the sacred place where he had lost his precious Rosalind was... *unrecognizable*? How was there any good in *that*? Shouldn't the place remember *her*? What if all the missing memories came rushing back? He hadn't visited that place of death a single time since that terrible day.

Rosalind...

This was as close as he had ever dared to venture.

And the day was *just like this one...* light rain, gloomy after a flood – peaceful and quiet, just like this... and deceptive. *So deceptive! What were we doing there, anyway? We should never have been up the hill after a flood! What were we thinking? Can't face it... can't go... what if she's there?*

Andy thumped his chest with a fist. He didn't believe in ghosts. He believed in God, and God's presence with him. All he had left of his precious love was memories – and incomplete memories at that. He knew there was nothing more to fear than what was in his own mind. And yet those memories were so painful – and so powerful.

Twenty years of dread and pain loomed large before him, dark and cruel. That same

monster had wakened him from sleep on almost half the nights since that horrible day, and had tormented him to the depths of his soul. How could he face that terrible place again?

Andy swallowed, facing life as best he could, and as he always had done – with whatever small degree of bravery he could muster. If he was going to die on the hill, trying to save others from dying, then he would need to face his past before he went.

He knew he didn't want to leave this life without having resolved the most painful chapter he had known, to the best of his ability. Indeed, he felt certain that God had led him to this very place. And if God wanted the matter resolved, then why should he fear? Andy knew he would have to visit the scene just one more time.

Life's greatest horror might very well pursue him into eternity, he decided, but not until he had at least tried to stare it down.

"It's not your fault, Andy. Don't hate yourself. Just let it go. You can do more good alive today, than dying every day, living in the past." There was Natalie's lovely face, a wonderful thought.

"Thanks, Nat," he said. And then he spoke out loud to the other presence with him. "Jesus, this is all your fault. *You* sent me here. So, please, help me now."

Determined to face his fear with the help of God, he started to walk.



"Can't we at least light a fire?"

Stephanie Townsend's voice droned, a pitiful whine, and not helpful to Marie's state of mind. The nurse's head still hurt, several courses of painkillers having helped to ease, but not quash the pain. Her body was sore now too, especially her mid section, feeling the effects of the seatbelt which had saved her life.

"No, Love," answered Marie patiently. "I know. I'd like that too, but we can't. The plane must still have fuel on board. I couldn't see if it had leaked out in the rain or not – but we're likely to blow ourselves up if we light a fire anywhere near it."

Stephanie looked annoyed, but bit her lip, seeing that her mother was in pain. Marie tried to console her daughter, knowing that things were wearing on both of them. "Let's just be thankful that we're out of the rain. I want to get off this mountain too, Steph."

Mountain? Were they even on a mountain?

Marie didn't know for sure. She had heard old Merve talking about a mountain, but – had the old man even known where they were? *Surely, yes.* Marie had seen it with her own eyes. When the lightning had flashed, lighting up the horrifying sight of the trees rising up to swat their

plane, surely she had imagined them being on a rising hill.

The land about them seemed hilly enough, what little she had seen of it through the fog. And while the rain had prevented them from venturing very far from the plane and the doomed Ashley Collard, Marie felt sure they were on, or near, the top of a mountain.

Her heart sank. It was ridiculous. They were waiting for rescue by people who probably had no idea where they were – no more than she and Stephanie did. And in this rain and fog – how could *anyone* be expected to find them? Marie began to fidget, fretting as she considered Stephanie's insulin dependency, and the sight of so many shattered vials. She rubbed her forehead, and then looked at her watch.

2:46 PM.

It was too late to set out down the mountain – if this even was a mountain. And it was probably too rash a move anyway. But she could not stand by and do *nothing*! Her mind wrestled with the situation. Had Merve Hillman not admitted that they had strayed off course, Marie might have been able to feel more confident, but the old pilot had clearly been afraid.

And lost.

Help from the authorities might never come, or simply come too late, because the authorities likely had no idea where they were. They had flown blind for over half an hour before the crash, hence they could be a long way from where anyone might be looking. If Marie and Stephanie simply waited, they might die. Surely, they would have to do *something* to save themselves. But what?

She prayed for a time, unsure, and very frightened. So unsure was she that in the end she simply voiced the thought out loud to see what her daughter's response would be.

"We might need to just start walking," she said aloud, looking bleak and unsure.

"You already said we can't leave Mister Collard, Mum." Stephanie's voice, while young, snapped Marie back to reason, and she found herself wondering if maybe she had taken too many painkillers. She rubbed her head again.

"My head hurts," she pointed out needlessly. Then a spark of hope rose in her eyes and face. "I'm going to take a walk, Steph. Gotta try and walk this off. You wait here."

The girl's face blossomed into full fear, and her mother read it without a word.

"Don't fret so much," Marie promised. "I won't leave you. I just need to get out and get a better look at where we are, that's all."

Stephanie looked less than pleased with the idea, but she could also see that her mother would not be dissuaded.

Marie, already wearing her parka, zipped it up tightly beneath her chin, and slipped the hood

over her head. She gave Stephanie a reassuring peck on the cheek, and then stepped out into the heavy rain, desperate for anything that might give her hope, or help to clear her head.

Besides, she needed to be alone for a few minutes to pray. This was life-and-death decision time, and she needed to pray.



Andy paced slowly upstream.

After twenty years the track had changed a little, wandering in slightly different ways to how he remembered it. Most importantly though, he found that with each step he took, the dread which had oppressed him so heavily, became weaker. It felt very strange, wandering back after so long, having been afraid of this place for twenty years. It was the scene of the ultimate tragedy of his life, the most defining moment.

Even worse than the Emerson Bridge.

For while Rosalind had been dragged unconscious from the water below that old steel structure, the bridge had not killed her. The river had... and more precisely, the real tragedy had begun just ahead. And it had been all his fault.

All your fault.

Andy paced steadily, his mind troubled, and yet lucid and steady, his eyes taking in every detail. *So strange*, he thought; *it almost felt a relief to be finally returning*. His eyes flashed about, his mind recalling long-forgotten details, now that he was back at the scene. Vivid memories buffeted him.

Rain fell softly on the hull of the upturned dinghy, keeping them dry. The soft shower made romantic music in the minds of those who knew they were enjoying the pleasure of true love. Not sex. He loved her too much just for that. She was all the world to him. He wouldn't touch her until she wanted him to – maybe their wedding day – if that's what she wanted. He could wait for that.

For her.

Rosalind smiled, crouching beside him beneath the boat as they sheltered from the gentle rain. She kissed him, first just a peck, and then more. Don't venture too far, she thought – but then, no need to worry. She trusted him.

She would have trusted him with her life.

Andy pulled back, totally eclipsed by her. They were sixteen, kissing, making out beneath old Jonesy's boat. Old farmer Jones would have been annoyed if he'd known. So would Rosalind's dad. Still, no matter. No one knew where they were. Several railway sleepers formed

a makeshift slipway, keeping the upturned boat just far enough off the grass to allow them to slip beneath. Then, as long as they stayed away from the edges, they could avoid the wet grass, and no one could see them. It was the perfect hide-away.

Andy kissed her again. No one could find them anyway, he thought. They were in heaven.

But even heaven-on-Earth could be interrupted. The call of nature wrenched Andy's lips from hers, and he apologized for the unwanted break in proceedings. He'd be right back, he promised – it was an easy promise to make. Andy could still see her youthful, wonderful face, her short brown hair and her soft, brown eyes beckoning for him to return. He loved her so much that it hurt.

Life was sooo perfect, he thought. Because she loved him too.

"Don't forget my name in future," she whispered. "I'm gonna ask you what it is when you come back."

"I'll remember," he promised. "I won't forget. Not ever. I won't even call you by your old name any more, if that's what you want."

"But only you," she whispered. "No one else can know. You can only use my middle name when it's just us. It's only for you to use – our secret." It was important to her, and strangely sacred to him.

Another promise which he would find easy to fulfill.

Andy struggled out from beneath the upturned dinghy, into the cold – in every sense. Must get back to her, he thought. So lovely beside her. So cold away from her. He remembered the soggy, sticky grass, seed stalks raking at his jeans as he trudged up the slippery slope to the path. Looking down from the path, pausing in the light rain, he waved back to her as her slender arm reached out from beneath the boat. He could see her pretty face smiling warmly.

So young, he remembered. We were so young!

Young and foolish!

He stopped now. The rope that kept the upturned boat from sliding on its timber slipway into the Choppy River was tied to a tree stump just beside the path, several knots holding it tight and ensuring it wouldn't be slipping away unintentionally. Andy began to untie the first knot.

It was just a joke. A silly joke because he knew she was watching!

Don't do it! Don't untie it, Andy! But he was only remembering. He could do no more harm now. All the damage was done now. Remember, Andy – don't untie the boat!

But I didn't! I only untied the first knot! There were at least three more knots to go!

I wouldn't hurt her for anything!

The young girl peered out from beneath the upturned boat, waving a chastising finger.

“Don’t you dare!” she called. Her voice was music to him.

Just joking, he thought, and he tied the rope up again. Tied it up again! Yes! He had pictured doing it ten thousand times.

But had he really done it?

Yes! He had tied it up again! He knew he had! He wouldn’t have done that to her! He wouldn’t have risked it! Of course he tied it up again!

The boat never moved – it was never likely to move. The rope was never untied. It wasn’t! I told them it wasn’t! I know I tied it up again! I know I did!

But did you, Andy? Did you really?

Andy slipped away some distance to answer nature’s call. All the while his heart was skipping. She was so lovely. And he loved her so much. Not many childhood sweethearts went on to marry, their young love lasting, but THEIR love was real. He would marry her, and there was nothing more certain. All his dreams had come true. And today they had sealed it, first with an everlasting inscription in the sentinel oak tree for all the world to see, and then when she gave him a new name that only he would ever call her by.

And best of all, she loved him too.

Then came the scream.

It had pierced his soul forever.

Andy was running now.

It took a moment to realize. Jonesy’s boat was in the water – the raging water, with a snaking rope tail following mutely after it. The boat had slipped quickly and silently down the timber slipway into the torrent. And Andy’s one true love had been drawn in with it. Andy could feel his heart pumping, not with love now, but with awful, dreadful fear.

She slipped out from beneath the capsized vessel. Then she was turning, splashing and twisting in the flooding water, grasping the trailing rope with all her strength, carried along toward destruction.

“Noooooooo!”

That scream had echoed in Andy’s mind for twenty years.

He ran. Slipped. Skinned a shin. No matter. Rather die than lose her!

“Rosalind! Hang on! Hang on!” Running. Must run. Must save her!

Fell again. More lost skin, no matter. Must run.

Follow the track, intercept her further down! Run!

Can see her again now, still twisting in the water, but she’s okay. She’s hanging on to the boat now, her arms wrapped about its timber bow – that should save her. If she can only stay

afloat! As long as she can hold on! Still running. Grazed the leg a third time. Must keep running. Water coming. How deep? Can't wait. Just dive and pray for the best!

Water so cold, and so fast. So hard to fight it. No! Missed her! She's ahead. Coming Rosalind.

"Hold on, Rosalind! I'll save you!"

Then came the submerged boulder...

Andy closed his eyes. He could still see Jonesy's boat exploding as though it had been torpedoed from below. Worse still, much worse, he could see the moment when his beloved struck the rock too.

He sobbed, still in great pain after twenty years.

"Didn't even remember to call her by the name she wanted," he sobbed, as though someone might hear his apology.

He staggered and cried, gripped by an agony that had never left him. Memories came flooding back to him, fine details he had not been able to recall since that cruel, horrible day. Eventually he moved again, something deep within driving him, insisting that he face all his demons.

A few more paces brought him in silence to stand beside what remained of an old tree stump. He gasped, staring down at it. In his nightmares it had been a stocky monster, cruel and pitiless, *their betrayer*. But now, standing beside it after avoiding it for two full decades, the silent stump had lost all its power.

"Still there," Andy whispered, barely able to believe it was the same stump to which Jonesy's boat had been tied. *Jonesy's boat – the one Andy had untied as a joke... the one that had carried his beloved to her death in the river...*

"Oh God," Andy whispered. "Help me. Please help me."

Tears were drying upon his cheeks as he viewed the scene of all his nightmares, and he wiped them away to clear his vision. If he was to die on this trip up the mountain, then he would see his demons clearly before he went. Andy drew a long and painful breath as he arrived at the top of what once had been old Jonesy's slipway. For the first time in twenty years he saw the most painful of all places on the Earth.

Five meters below, down a low grade of grass and tangled tree roots, the river swirled, once again in flood, the water slightly higher than he remembered it being twenty years earlier. But the grade was still the same, soft and damp, with slippery with grass laid down by the rain. Even the remains of a few timber sleepers, rotten now and mostly hidden in the grass remained.

Only Jonesy's boat was no longer there to complete the picture.

And neither was she...

Andy dropped to his knees, overcome with emotion. He sobbed into his hands, jerking about for some minutes before he was able to take in the scene once more.

“Twenty years,” he whispered. “I miss you *so much*.”

The words were soaked in pain. Seeking balance as the weight of his pack bore down, Andy reached out and touched the top of the denuded stump, older and possibly shorter than he remembered, and largely rotten now.

“I thought I had tied it back on,” he said aloud, still crying. “I’m *so sorry*. I was *so sure* I had tied it back on. I wouldn’t have hurt you for anything. *Not for anything!*”

From somewhere deep in Andy’s mind a voice quietly whispered. It was the voice of an angel, he thought, a most wonderful being. It was soft and merciful, and forgiving – just as it always had been. It was a voice he knew very well, having heard it so many times.

“I know, Andy. I know. It’s okay. I know you loved me.” It was a voice he loved. *She* had always been his friend, and *she* had always understood. Moreover, it was the voice of God, promising him forgiveness; God – taking on his torment and pain.

God – restoring him at last.

Andy struggled, wrestling silently for a while as he knelt in the gentle rain. The day was exactly as it had been twenty years earlier. *Exactly!* Heavy clouds hung in the sky, softly pampering the green landscape, just as they had done on that fateful day. The grass was soggy beneath him, the bank slippery, with the river swirling by as it hurried down the mountain. Perhaps the only difference was that the river was slightly higher than it had been twenty years prior. Other than that, it was all the same.

And the voice – *it was the same too*.

How he had come to love that voice. It was all he had left of her now. She was no ghost, he knew that – she was just in his mind, but what a comfort she had been to him. Andy never even owned a photograph of the one he had loved so much, but he had never forgotten the sound of her voice.

And yet now there was nothing left to show that she had ever lived. Their names had been erased from the sentinel oak. The stump to which Jonesy’s boat had been tied was rotting, and would someday soon be completely gone. It seemed that even the mountain was forgetting her.

But he never would. He couldn’t.

Andy listened for the voice again, but it was gone. Having reassured him, she was silent again now. And as much as he hated to admit the truth, Andy knew she was only in his mind. There were no ghosts. She was gone. Gone forever.

“I didn’t even call you what you wanted me to call you,” he whispered, wiping tears away. And again he heard the voice of God reassuring him that all would be well.

Andy wanted to call her back into his mind, but he knew the effort was futile. She had only ever been there when he needed comfort, when he needed support. And he somehow had passed the crescendo of his agony now. It was a strange sensation, a mix of pain and freedom at returning after so long.

He looked about.

There was nothing else to mark the great tragedy of his life, that single defining moment that had burdened and scarred him forever. Just an old denuded stump and a few rotting timbers hiding in the grass. If he hadn’t known the place so well, even he might have passed it by without recognizing it.

It didn’t seem fair. She deserved to be remembered. He loved her so much. How could the world forget *her*?

Andy struggled to his feet, battling against emotion and the weight of his pack.

“I’d have given anything to save you,” he whispered. “Even my life.”

A mental picture of himself diving into the Choppy River blossomed in his mind. He *had* risked his life that day! He stared down at the rotting stump again, rubbing his fingers where he had played a tragic joke twenty years before.

“It was only a joke,” he said. “I was only joking. I thought I had tied it up again. *I’m so sorry.*”

Tears began to flow again as Andy remembered the knots in the rope. *Why had he left her under the boat? Why had he left her?* The pain was so great as he reflected, and yet as he caressed the top of the stump, Andy could not deny the very strange feeling of liberty struggling for recognition within him. He was finally facing his demons – *she* would have been pleased with that.

He hugged the stump and cried aloud.

And as he did, Andy’s monsters lost yet another portion of their grip on him.

“I’m so sorry,” he said again. “I thought I had tied it up again. *I’m so sorry...*”

(Continued...)

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