



THE ACCIDENT

AND THE AFTERMATH

Esther Minskoff

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By

Esther Minskoff

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To live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering.

Viktor Frankl

Summary

This is a book about death, the unexpected cruel death of good people. A crash takes the lives of two elderly people, Joe and Martha Silver, and a mother, Beth McNair, and her 11 month old daughter Sabrina. Joe accidentally kills Martha, Beth, Sabrina, and himself when he has a heart attack while driving. Their deaths cause upheavals in the lives of three people who loved them dearly: Ken, Beth's husband and Sabrina's father; Matt, Beth's brother; and Lilly, the Silvers' granddaughter.

In searching to find meaning in their deaths and how to live their lives despite suffering, these people react differently. At first, Ken is filled with rage and hatred, and isolates himself from the world. But eventually with psychiatric help, he resumes his role as father to his surviving child and his work as a fireman. Although Matt is overwhelmed by his beloved sister's death, he has an innate resilience which enables him to continue devoting his life to legally helping the poor. Lilly fights depression, but finds meaning through teaching disabled children. Eventually, Lilly and Matt meet and they fall in love. Together the three find peace by dedicating their lives to honoring the memories of their loved ones by bettering the world.

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PART I

Chapter 1

Although the torrential rain had stopped, visibility was still limited by the blowing diaphanous mist engulfing the bridge. Fog bleached everything, including flame red cars, fluorescent yellow cars, and even pearly white cars, turning them all shades of gray. The car lights cast an eerie glow, reminiscent of the days of Jack the Ripper in London in the 1800's.

Joe hated driving over the rickety Cooper River Bridge that connected Mount Pleasant to Charleston. He wished there was an overland route he could take that wouldn't add an hour to his travel time. His hands moistened on the steering wheel as he crept along in the lane farthest from the edge of the bridge. He wondered why there was so much traffic on the bridge on an early Sunday morning. It was probably due to the rainy, foggy weather that had plagued the area all weekend.

When Joe had no choice but to drive in the lane next to the edge, he feared that a mysterious force might sweep the car over the side rail into the Cooper River where he would be devoured by sharks, even though sharks had never been sighted in the river. When traffic tie-ups forced him to wait in this lane, he imagined a huge slimy octopus rising up over the bridge railing and wrapping its tentacles around cars and tossing them into the river. It was a sight straight out of a Japanese horror film even though Joe had never seen such a movie.

Oddly even after he was off the bridge, Joe still felt uncomfortable on his usual Sunday drive to services at Charleston Methodist Church. He hadn't felt right since he got up that morning, but he hadn't said anything to Martha because she would have fussed over him and insisted that he get checked by a doctor instead of going to church. They both loved going to church, rarely missing a Sunday. The comforting rituals and prayers, the shared companionship of good people of faith, and the history emanating from the walls of the 200 year old building infused them with strength and peace. When they were at services, they felt that they were actually in God's presence. They especially liked Don Smith, the pastor, whose sermons filled them with spirituality. They made it a point to attend christenings even if they didn't know the families because they liked the idea of starting babies out on a holy life. They felt that someday these babies would make the world a better place because of their faith.

Joe was having difficulty ignoring a feeling of queasiness and pain in his upper left arm and back which he attributed to playing 18 rounds of golf the previous day. He was certain that these symptoms would disappear once he entered the church. He never considered the possibility that he was having a heart attack, even though he had received some troubling results from recent medical tests.

When Joe exited the bridge, he saw the usual group of idle black men loitering in front of run-down buildings on garbage-strewn streets in this undesirable section of Charleston. Most were drinking booze concealed in paper bags. Joe wondered how anyone, even alcoholics, could drink alcohol so early in the morning. Maybe they were just continuing last night's drinking. He also wondered where they got the money for booze. He was sure they weren't working so they were either using illegal means or using government money, his tax money, to support their addiction.

He really felt that these people should be relocated so they weren't the first thing people saw when they entered Charleston. These people didn't represent the real Charleston, the Charleston Joe loved. He was leery that one of the men might attack his precious Mercedes. Although he knew this was unlikely, he kept his car doors locked just in case. He avoided eye contact with the men, keeping his eyes glued straight ahead, hoping that they would ignore him too. He hoped that by not looking at them, he could deny their existence.

He felt more comfortable as he drove into the historic district of Charleston. Now Joe's eyes strayed from the road to embrace the clean streets, the grand houses, the lush vegetation, and the friendly people. He felt that this was the real Charleston, the true Charleston.

Although the streets in the city were almost empty, Joe drove carefully. With age, he'd become more cautious, ever vigilant for potential sources of accidents, especially because he didn't want to mar his silver Mercedes-Benz sedan. He doted on his car as if it were his pampered child, always having it washed and serviced even when it wasn't necessary. His granddaughter, Lilly, teased him that he loved his car as much as he loved his grandkids, maybe even more.

Joe was proud of the picture he presented to the world as he drove his Mercedes. With his silver hair, tanned face, and fit body, he didn't think he looked like he was 75. He wore a blue sports jacket and gray trousers with razor-sharp creases that seemed to have been freshly ironed. And he didn't think that Martha looked her age – 74. She colored her hair brown, had had several face lifts, and maintained the same weight as when she was 21. Martha wore stylish dresses and pants outfits with stiletto heels that most women, except gymnasts, would find challenging to balance on. On that day, Martha was wearing a new white pant suit to show off her tan. Joe and Martha personified affluent, successful retirees living the good life.

Martha said, "Joe, I think we're going to be late. You can drive faster now that the rain has stopped. What're we going -10 miles an hour?"

"Don't worry. We won't be late. We're never late."

As Joe entered the parking lot behind the church, he spotted his favorite handicapped spot at the far end. He wanted to make sure that no one took the spot so he sped up. Suddenly

his foot slammed down hard on the accelerator. Martha screamed, but Joe didn't hear her. Every cell in Joe's body lost consciousness, except for those in his right foot which seemed to have an existence of their own. Since he was coming down a clear stretch from the parking lot entrance, there was time for the car to accelerate. The speeding car appeared as if it were being played in the fast forward mode on a video.

The car didn't stop at the curb. It ran up over the sidewalk where it was abruptly halted by the church wall. The force of the car caused bricks to crumble and exposed the inside hallway of the church. Bricks that had survived the Civil War, earthquakes, and hurricanes succumbed to the powerful Mercedes engine. It looked like a bomb crater. But before the car was stopped, it ran over a woman who was pushing her baby in a stroller on the sidewalk. The car rammed the woman and child against the church wall. The woman, 32 year old Beth McNair, looked like a crumpled doll. Her 11 month old baby, Sabrina, was crushed inside the stroller which had folded like an accordion.

For the first ten seconds after the crash, there was truly deadly silence because Joe and Martha were dying, and Beth and Sabrina were dead. The realization of what had happened hadn't yet penetrated the consciousness of the people in the parking lot. Then the screaming began. It grew exponentially as it spread to all corners of the parking lot and into the church. If you listened carefully, you could hear organ music wafting through the hole in the church wall as if to accompany the chorus of screams.

Ken McNair, Beth's husband, had been walking a few feet behind her. He was pulling Randy, their three year old son, who was having a tantrum, not wanting to go into the church. Because of Randy's pulling back, Ken and Randy were several feet behind Beth and Sabrina when the car crashed. Seconds earlier, they had been walking beside them. Randy's tantrum saved their lives.

Ken ran to the church wall to get Beth out of the rubble. He frantically pulled at the bushes entangling Beth with their claw-like branches. He wildly flung aside the bricks which had partially buried her as he loudly screamed Beth's name as if expecting her to answer. Other church goers came running to help.

When Ken freed Beth's body, he held her close, sobbing as he repeated, "Don't be dead my Beth. Don't be dead." He looked at her face for any sign of life. Strangely, her face hadn't been injured. Her clear blue eyes were opened with a look of surprise. In that split second after she was hit, had she realized that she was dying? Had the accident run in slow motion for her? Was every nanosecond as long as an hour? Instead of Beth's past life flashing before her, did she see the future? Did she foresee how this tragedy would mutilate Ken and Randy's lives?

Someone tried to take Beth from Ken's arms to administer CPR, but Ken said, "She's dead. Nothing will help."

He sat amid the rubble, rocking her back and forth as he repeated over and over, “I love you my Beth. Don’t leave me. You know I can’t live without you. What will I do? How will I live? Oh my Beth. Oh my Beth.”

Kathy Moran, one of the church Sunday school teachers, had parked her car nearby and had seen the accident as she walked a few yards behind Ken and Randy. She rushed to pick up Randy who was one of her students. He looked like a stunned orphan standing in rubble in a bombed-out area in the Middle East. She took him to her car and pressed him close, futilely trying to help him as well as herself erase the indelible scene they had just witnessed. She gently stroked him as she sang children’s songs to try to calm him and herself.

Jesus loves me! This I know,

For the Bible tells me so,

Little ones to Him belong,

They are weak, but He is strong.

Yes! Jesus loves me!

Yes! Jesus loves me!

Yes! Jesus loves me!

The Bible tells me so

In the brief seconds that Randy had witnessed the accident, he realized that he was seeing all the monsters and ogres of his nightmares come to life. His persistent fear of his mother deserting him had come true. Then Randy became oblivious to his surroundings. He receded into the safety of his cordoned-off mind. His brain was producing antibodies against acknowledging what had just happened. But these antibodies would lose their effectiveness over time, and visions of the accident scene would unexpectedly pop into his consciousness, but more frequently they would insidiously creep into his dreams. Even though he was just three, his memory of the accident would become sharper with time. The newspaper photos of the accident that his father collected and hung on the walls of his den enhanced Randy’s memory of what his eyes had seen.

Pastor Don Smith heard the crash, which from the inside of the church sounded like a bomb. He wondered if there had been a terrorist attack on the church. After 9/11, such thoughts were not out of the realm of possibility. He was in his office reviewing his sermon which he would never deliver. He ran to the hole in the wall and climbed over the rubble. There he saw Ken rocking Beth back and forth. He tried to help him by pulling aside the shrubbery tangles and the bricks, but Ken pushed him away. Don righted the overturned stroller and looked inside where he saw the cruelest sight imaginable...a totally destroyed

baby. He turned aside and vomited as he sobbed. Don's clearest memory of the accident would always be the sight of Sabrina. Like everyone who was a witness to the accident, he would be haunted for the rest of his life. But the memory of Sabrina would always be accompanied by the question, "God, why? Why a baby? Why such destruction to her tiny body?"

The fire and emergency personnel came within eight minutes. One group checked Joe and Martha who were both critically injured. Joe's seat belt had protected him from the crash, but not from his heart attack. He was unconscious, and fortunately unaware of the damage he had done. Martha had removed her seat belt when Joe drove into the parking lot so she had crashed violently into the airbag. She, too, was unconscious, bleeding profusely from her face and head. Her new white pant suit was splattered with blood, making it look like an abstract painting. They were rushed to Charleston Hospital.

Another group attended to Sabrina even though there was no doubt that she was dead. Like Don Smith, they were visibly overcome with emotion at the sight of Sabrina's body. Despite being experienced first responders who had witnessed people maimed and killed by fires, auto wrecks, hurricanes, and violent murders, they weren't prepared for seeing Sabrina. Nothing can prepare a person for the sight of the mangled body of a healthy, thriving baby.

One of the fireman recognized Ken because he, too, was a Charleston fireman. He tried to take Beth from him to examine her, but Ken fought him off as he wailed. "Damn you God. Why did you take the best person who ever lived? Why didn't you take me? Why here at the church? You're supposed to protect your people, not destroy them. FUCK YOU GOD. FUCK YOU."

Don had never heard anyone curse God, especially with such profanity. Yet he was not outraged. He understood the depths of Ken's fury. He knew that Ken's damaged soul was crying out in anguish.

When Don put his hand on Ken's shoulder, Ken violently shrugged it off. "Don't touch me. I don't want to be comforted. I want to die. I deserve to die, not Beth. She was the best person who ever lived. She was pure goodness and love. What kind of God would kill her? And my beautiful angel Sabrina? Why an innocent baby? Why like this? Why such carnage? What was God doing – waging war on goodness and innocence?"

Finally, the fireman was able to take Beth from Ken's arms. Ken took Sabrina from another fireman's arms. She felt like a limp rag doll. He looked at her smashed face, not recognizing the cute baby who minutes ago was giggling, something she did all the time because she loved life, and now she no longer had life. He stroked her blood-soaked red hair turning his hand sticky and dark red. The fireman gently took Sabrina from Ken's arms and placed her in an ambulance next to Beth. Ken squeezed in. He couldn't be separated from

them. He needed to be with them for as long as possible. No one tried to stop him as they were transported to Charleston Hospital. It wasn't really an ambulance; it was a hearse.

Chapter 2

Forty minutes after Joe had a heart attack and killed Beth and Sabrina, the parking lot was emptied of people other than police and fire personnel. The parishioners went into the church, not to pray, but to seek solace, to find some explanation for the vicious slaughter they witnessed at God's house. Many were in a state of disbelief, rejecting the images their eyes had transmitted to their brains, hoping that the accident was a figment of their imagination, a nightmare from which they would awaken.

Don wasn't sure what to do. Although he wanted to go to the hospital to comfort the McNair and Silver families, he felt that he had to stay with his parishioners. He knew he had to be strong for them; he couldn't let them down in this moment of crisis. This was the greatest challenge of his life, both professionally and personally. He implored God to give him strength and guidance so he could comfort others as well as himself. For the first time in his life, he found it difficult to reach into his reservoir of love of God for the strength he needed. He had no doubt that there was a God, but he found that he couldn't converse with Him as usual. He kept asking WHY, but he wasn't receiving any answers. Why were good, innocent people killed while evil people, like terrorists and dictators, spared? Why was an innocent, good man the instrument of the killing? Why did this murder happen at God's home which should have provided them with shelter?

He knew it would take many years of questioning to find answers, but he was certain that someday with God's guidance he would find them. From Christ's example, he knew that suffering led to meaning in life. He would suffer like all the others who were impacted by the accident. It was not only the congregants who were affected; it was the McNair and Silver families, friends, and co-workers.

He looked around the church which had been his home, his sanctuary, his refuge, but now was an alien place to him. This was to be a safe haven for his parishioners, but there had been no safety for Beth and Sabrina McNair. His church had been transformed into a slaughterhouse.

Don wanted to be at the hospital with Ken because he had officiated at Ken and Beth's wedding five years earlier. He had also christened Randy and Sabrina. In the congregation on the days of the christenings were Joe and Martha Silver. They marveled at the holiness of the McNair family welcoming their babies into God's world. Not in their wildest nightmares could they have foreseen their roles in obliterating this family.

Ken and Beth were an integral part of the church community. They were more than parishioners to Don, they were more like his extended family. He was especially close to Beth. Her kindness had helped so many church members. She was always available to console anyone needing support due to death or illness or life's challenges. He would always remember the comfort she gave to the Harmon family whose daughter inexplicably

committed suicide, or to Pat Singer whose baby died at birth, or to the Martino family whose son died of a drug overdose. Beth told them that we couldn't always understand God's plan, but we had to trust in Him and live our lives to the fullest and eventually we would find peace. When she consoled people, she always held their hands as if she were transfusing them with hope. Sometimes she just hugged someone for a few minutes as they sobbed uncontrollably. They physically lessened their grief by sharing it with her. Where was the Beth who would comfort Ken and Randy? Who would console them? Who would hold them?

And Beth also consoled with food. Her tuna casseroles were the first to be dropped off at someone's house when a family was in need of support. In the days after the accident, congregants brought food to the McNairs, but no one brought a tuna casserole.

Don told Rich West, the assistant pastor, to go to the hospital to be with the McNair and Silver families. Part of him was glad that he didn't have to face the families. He didn't know if he had the strength to comfort them at that moment. He had to prepare himself for the challenge of Ken asking him why, and wishing that he had died instead of Beth. He couldn't offer glib responses, like "It is God's will." What was God's will? What was God's intention? Would he ever know?

Although he had been a pastor for 22 years, at that moment he felt ill-equipped for what he had to do. No training or experience was helping him now. His only hope was that his faith in God would prove unshakeable, and it would guide him to help others. He had always felt that he had a calling to be a pastor, to lead people to God. Now he doubted whether he had the strength to do what he had to do. He felt like he was in a battle with himself to resuscitate that calling.

Don stood before the congregation for a few minutes just staring into the tear-filled eyes of his parishioners who yearned for support and guidance. The church he knew so intimately had changed since he'd been inside earlier. It was darker even though light was filtering through the stained glass windows along the walls. It felt colder even though the thermostat was at the usual setting. And the air felt heavy as if laden with humidity from the parishioners' tears.

He didn't know what to say because there were no words that could explain what had happened. He told everyone to hug the person next to them. It was time to reach out to others to gather the strength needed to cope with this tragedy. No one could do this alone. His wife, Rose, who was the church organist, hugged him as they both wept. Rose had favored Beth over almost everyone else in the congregation. She felt that Beth should have been a pastor. She had an unshakeable belief in God and the nurturing personality needed to guide parishioners. She thought that God had given Beth a special blessing, and maybe that was why He wanted her in heaven with Him.

Don decided to lead the congregation in singing consoling hymns and reading comforting verses usually associated with death. But there really were no songs or words that could comfort anyone after what they had experienced. After 30 minutes of leading the congregants in reading and singing, he announced that there would be a telephone hot line established to report on the status of the families and tell people what they could do to help. He told parishioners to call him or Rich West for support at any time of the day or night.

Don knew that some people would need more than pastoral counseling; they would need help from mental health professionals. For the first time in his life, Don thought that he might need counseling too. He announced that grief counseling would be provided to anyone in need by the three congregants who were mental health professionals. He didn't have to ask their permission. He knew them well, and knew that they wouldn't hesitate to volunteer their professional services. He also announced that there would be group support sessions open to all. Rich West had a master's degree in pastoral counseling and could use this training to facilitate such a group.

As the congregants were preparing to leave, Don realized he had to give them something to take away. They couldn't leave in the shell shock condition they were in. They were lost. He had to give them direction.

Suddenly Don felt a rush of passion and love pulsate through him. His body stiffened and his face flushed. He felt God's grace shine upon him. He thrust his arms upward, and this usually soft-spoken man spoke with a booming voice. Before the congregations' eyes, Don was transformed from a thin, quiet, mild-mannered man into an emotional, forceful man. He seemed to have grown six inches. His presence became commanding.

"God, God, God. Heavenly Father, hear us. Talk to us. Make us feel Your presence. Heavenly Father, tell us why this tragedy happened. Why? We know that You will guide us to find answers if we keep faith in You. We know the answers will not appear suddenly. Instead we will spend many years searching. But through our search, Your love will sustain us. You are our rock and our redeemer. We will hold fast to you. We will cling to you. It is times like this that test our love for You. It is easy to love You when you bless us with good, but our faith in You is challenged when inexplicable cruelty enters our lives. And what we saw here today is the worst cruelty imaginable. But we will not let our love for You be diminished. We will overcome our doubts and fears. You will be our pillar of strength, imbuing us with courage to face life's tragedies. Jesus will be our shepherd as He guides us through these times of suffering, sadness, pain, and loss.

We will hold Beth and Sabrina's memories in our hearts forever, and we will spread goodness to honor their souls. In the name of Jesus, we vow to make the world a better place because of Beth and Sabrina. And we vow always to be there for Ken and Randy. We must use Christ's suffering to help them through their suffering.

And we will help Joe and Martha face the fact that they were innocent. They were instruments for evil, but they were not evil. We will do all we can to help these good people cope with feelings of guilt which will engulf them.

We must be more than a congregation. We must view ourselves as soldiers who have survived a horrible battle in war. We will be like blood brothers. We must love and nurture each other. This tragedy will bring us closer to God and link us to each other. And GOD WILL HELP US SURVIVE. GOD WILL HELP US SURVIVE.”

The congregants repeated the mantra - GOD WILL HELP US SURVIVE.

“And we will be blessed in our love of Jesus and our fellow man. In the name of Jesus, we pray for courage. May God bless us with peace. Amen.”

And with these words, Don felt himself infused with the strength that he desperately needed. As he looked out at his parishioners, he saw that they, too, had been strengthened by his words. They were energized. God had rescued them in their time of need. They were taking their first steps in the process of coping with this horrendous tragedy.

Years later, Don was involved in another tragedy at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church when a white supremacist killed nine people at a prayer service in a historically black church. As President of the Association of Christian Ministers of the Charleston area, Don attended the memorial service at the church where he witnessed Obama’s historic speech and emotional singing of *Amazing Grace*. He also attended the funerals of the nine victims, both as a representative of the Association and because he felt the need to personally honor these innocent victims.

The parishioners at his church and the black church reacted very differently to the tragedies on their grounds. There were identifiable reasons behind the deaths at the black church. The age-old explanations of evil and hatred were undeniable. There were no explanations for the accident at his church. Many in the black church forgave the racist killer even though he never expressed remorse for his actions. There was no one to blame or forgive for the accident at his church so there was no real conclusion as there was in the massacre. Don often pondered whether he could have forgiven the racist killer at the black church. After seeing the victims of the massacre, he didn’t think he could.

After Don gave his parting words to his congregation, the parishioners filed outside where a heavy rain had resumed. Along with all involved in the tragedy, God was crying.

Chapter 3

In the ambulance, Ken wanted to hold Beth's and Sabrina's hands, but they were tucked into sheets so he just rested his hands on their bodies hoping somehow to send them a message that he was still there, that he would always be connected to them even after death. He was wishing that their souls took longer to die than their bodies. Oh how he loved Beth and Sabrina. He thought no man had ever loved his wife and daughter more. And no man could hurt as much as he did, and would for the rest of his life. The pain was physical, psychological, and spiritual. It resided in every aspect of Ken's being. Many people feel numb after a catastrophic tragedy. Not Ken. His body felt as if it were covered with festering sores being eaten by maggots. Many people have difficulty recalling specific aspects of a horrific experience. Not Ken. He remembered every minute detail since he first witnessed the accident. Many people want to die after their loved ones die. At first Ken did. But now that he knew they were gone forever, he wanted to live until old age so he would suffer more with each passing day. His death would be a release from the crippling pain he felt; he didn't want release. He wanted a sentence of life-long suffering with no possibility of parole.

Before Ken met Beth, he'd experienced periodic depression and feelings of rage, which he'd been able to control through medication and a strong support group of fellow workers. The firemen he worked with were his brothers, more than even actual brothers because they would unhesitatingly sacrifice their lives for each other. As soon as they saw signs of Ken feeling blue or angry, they talked to him until he was able to bring his feelings under control. Not only were they good at saving people from fires, they were good at saving one man from his internal fires. For Ken, they were the best psychotherapists in the world.

Until Beth entered his life, Ken's best friend, Al, and his co-workers were his only means of emotional support. Although he had parents, they never gave him love. Their only love was booze. They were alcoholics, albeit controlled alcoholics. They both had good jobs: Craig, his dad, as a manager of a hardware store and Lucy, his mother, as a bank teller. They never drank in public. In fact, they hid their drinking so effectively that the world didn't know about it. Not their co-workers, the people from their church, or the extended family they rarely saw. Only Ken knew. To the outside world, they were upstanding, hard-working citizens who had done a good job of raising a respectful son. They were regular church goers who hypocritically extolled the virtues of a good Christian family. Ken dutifully went to church with them although he hated everything associated with it. When he started working at McDonalds, he scheduled Sundays for work so he didn't have to attend church.

Ken never understood how they were able to limit their drinking to their house and only to times when they were alone. As soon as they got home from work, Lucy made dinner which they wolfed down quickly. Then his parents watched TV as they downed one glass of whiskey after another. With each glassful, their bodies relaxed and their eyes glazed over. Strangely, they interacted with the characters on the TV programs. They talked to them to

warn them about impending dangers or they laughed with them about silly things that had happened. They were more animated when they watched TV than when they lived their lives. In fact, living through the TV characters was their life.

Promptly at 10:30, they went to bed. In the morning, they showered, dressed, and miraculously showed no signs of a hang-over.

Ken never watched TV with them. He did his homework, read, or played games. When he was older, he arranged to be out of the house as much as possible with after-school activities or working at McDonald's. Up until the time he had children, Ken avoided TV. He associated TV watching with memories of his drunk parents hypnotized by inane shows. However, after he became a father, he let Randy watch educational TV, but never cartoons or children's programs he considered silly.

It was not only the alcoholic environment that damaged Ken, it was also the emotional coldness and silence. His parents showed no physical or verbal affection toward him or each other. Even as a young child, they did not comfort him when he got hurt or was afraid. When he cut his finger and cried, his mother bandaged it and told him to stop crying and be a big boy. When he cried out with a nightmare, no one came to comfort him. His father would yell from his bedroom and tell him to shut up. He had to face his childhood demons alone. Maybe that is why he never fully conquered them.

His parents' verbal interchanges were limited to "Pass the butter," and "Is there garbage pick-up today?" They never asked him about school, his performance on sports teams, work, or discussed what was happening in the world. It was like being raised in a home of deaf mutes. Interestingly, they talked to Ken in public, especially when they went to his basketball and baseball games. They boasted of his accomplishments to others, but never to him. In the outside world, they even laughed with him, something they never did in their house, other than when they were watching a funny TV program. No one saw through their charade of being a loving family.

Ken vividly recalled the first time he kissed a girl when he was in high school. Although he responded to the sexual aspect of the kiss, he responded more to the emotional aspect. He felt electrified by the girl's lips. He felt she was sending a message that Ken was a good person, a worthwhile person. While in high school, Ken never had sex. He was content to kiss and hug, sometimes to the girl's disappointment. He was more focused on affection than sexual gratification.

Ken secretly read romance novels designed for girls. Someday he hoped to be like the romantic heroes he read about. He bought these books in a store far from his house, and told the owner that they were for his sick sister who couldn't get out and buy them on her own. After he read a romance novel, he threw it in a trash can far from his house. Most teen-

aged boys secretly read porno, not Ken. He read books with titles like “First Love,” “My Sixteenth Summer,” and “Romance at Summer Camp.” He thirsted for true love, not sex.

Since Ken had no one to share his secrets with, he bottled them up where they simmered until periodically boiling over into violent outbursts. He tried to channel his anger into working out at a gym or running until he was totally exhausted, but there were times when he couldn’t contain the anger erupting in him like lava spewing from a volcano. His rage would lead him to intentionally destroy things at home, focusing on things his parents valued. He smashed old records his father collected for years; he broke Christmas dishes his mother displayed in a glass case in the dining room; he pulled out rose bushes his mother carefully nurtured. They never talked to him about his outbursts. They knew what caused them. They just silently cleaned up. He wanted to shout, “Say something. Do something. Scream. Hit me. Punish me. Show that you have feelings, that you’re human.”

Once he caught his mother crying as she picked up pieces of porcelain dogs she collected. Ken had not only thrown them on the floor, he’d stomped on them so she couldn’t put the small pieces together. Ken felt good when he saw her tears. He felt good knowing that he hurt her. When he saw those tears, he realized the depth of his hatred for his parents. He knew he couldn’t hurt them physically, but he could hurt them emotionally, even though he knew their emotions were for things, not people. They only loved inanimate objects – records, plates, porcelain dogs, roses. He wondered if they had always been like that, and what caused this coldness. He also wondered if one of them caused it in the other. But his hatred for them prevented him from delving into the causes underlying their behavior, not that he could have found them. He also worried that he was like them, incapable of human emotion. He hoped it wasn’t genetic. He vowed not to be like them. He vowed to find and show love someday.

Ken also wondered if he was adopted, but when he looked at his father he knew their resemblance had to be genetic. He also thought that he might have been an accident. He wondered if they thought of an abortion, but knew their supposed religious views prohibited this.

Although Ken had friends at school, he kept them at a distance. He never invited boys to his house, and he didn’t like going to other boys’ houses because it hurt to see happy families. Seeing parents talking to their kids and touching them was too painful for Ken to witness. He kept himself busy with sports and working at McDonald’s. He liked the façade of happiness at McDonald’s where everyone smiled and was polite. In reality, many of the workers were desperately poor, unhappy, on drugs, or hated their jobs. He felt his life was like that façade. He smiled a lot and appeared happy on the outside, while on the inside, he was lonely, sad, and angry.

As soon as Ken graduated from high school, he joined the Air Force. He had good grades and was encouraged to go to college by his teachers. In fact, he was offered baseball

scholarships by several small, local colleges. But he wanted to get as far away from his parents and Nashville as possible. He knew that his parents didn't want him to go to college. They wanted to get rid of him as much as he wanted to be rid of them. They wanted to live their secret life of TV and booze with no interference.

After he left for basic training, he had no further contact with his parents, and he never returned to Nashville. He didn't know if they were dead or alive, and he didn't care. And not surprisingly, they made no effort to find him. He felt like an orphan. He kept no traces of his life before he left home... no photos, no yearbooks, no sweaters with athletic letters, no newspaper articles extolling his winning pitching in one of his high school baseball tournaments, nothing.

When he was asked about his parents, he said that he'd rather not talk about them. Most people thought that he had been abused, and they were right. He had been emotionally abused which resulted in scars permanently etched into his being, just like scars from physical abuse are etched onto a person's skin. He was so filled with hatred for them that he thought he might spew profanity if he talked about his feelings about them. So he kept them pent up. And with time, they became muted, but they were always there simmering on a back burner.

During his four years in the Air Force, Ken proverbially found himself. He loved knowing that he could and would defend his country with his life. Not only did he feel an allegiance to his country, he felt a commitment to his fellow servicemen. He would die for them, and he knew they would die for him. For the first time in his life, he felt affection, even love, toward others. And also for the first time in his life, he began to like himself. He felt that he had survived his parents, and unlike them, was "normal". When he looked in the mirror, he saw a handsome, confident young man who overcame his past.

After basic training, Ken was stationed in Germany where he was an airplane mechanic. And there, he made his first and only true friend – Al Damico. They enjoyed drinking German beer in bierstubes, and laughing more and more as they got drunker and drunker. Ken never felt that his drinking was like his parents' drinking. He drank for camaraderie.

Three months into their friendship, Ken told Al about his parents. With each secret he revealed, he felt as if another pound had been lifted from a heavy weight around his neck. After talking non-stop for two hours, Ken experienced emotional relief – catharsis. Al hugged him tightly.

Ken said, "Now you know all about me. I've bared my soul to you. What d'ya think?"

“You have so much inner strength to have survived such an abusive home and come out on top. I don’t know if most people could have survived like you. I don’t know if I could have. It’s made you stronger and you’ll have a great future because of it.”

After that, Al became more caring and even protective of Ken, knowing that his friendship had to provide Ken with a family, his first. They became like brothers, with Al being the older brother who looked out for his kid brother.

When Ken and Al were given leave, they flew to Al’s home in Charleston. For the first time, Ken personally witnessed a loving family. Al came from a close Italian family where everyone showed physical affection for everyone else. Ken loved being kissed by Al’s mother, grandmothers, and even his father and grandfathers, although that took some getting used to. He never thought he would like physical affection from a man, but this was not sexual, this was familial love. He was filled with bittersweet feelings ... happy to experience affection and sad realizing what he had missed out on the first 18 years of his life. He vowed that someday he would have a family like Al’s.

Ken also found sex in the Air Force. His pals knew he was a virgin, and for his 19th birthday they treated him to a night with a prostitute who serviced many of the airmen on the base. It was all that Ken hoped for and more. When he got back from his night out, Al and his pals had a party where he had to describe everything that happened. They gave him a tee shirt on which someone had written, “Ex virgin.”

After that, Ken dated several women from his Air Force base. He had good relationships with them, but there never was any question of anything permanent. During his remaining years in Germany, he learned more about sex and acceptable dating behavior. He learned what a lot of men learn in high school and college.

While he was in the Air Force, Ken didn’t show any signs of being affected by his parents – no rage and no anger. Maybe because he wasn’t placed in any stressful situations. He really enjoyed his stint in the military, but he knew he didn’t want to make it a career. He wanted to settle down someplace. He needed to find love, just like in the romantic novels he’d read in high school.

When Al got out of the Air Force, he went home to Charleston. Ken had no home to return to so he, too, moved to Charleston. Some of Al’s cousins were fireman so Al planned on following in their footsteps. At first, Ken thought he might go to college, but he had no career plans and was anxious to start living life so he decided to become a fireman too. He and Al enrolled in a fire fighter training program at a community college, and after two years had completed all the requirements and passed all the necessary tests. Pictures of Ken at his induction ceremony into the Charleston Fire Department show him bursting with pride. Ken had never smiled wider and felt more optimistic about his future.

In his first year back in Charleston, Al met Christie O'Connor at a restaurant where she was waitressing part-time while working on a teaching degree. It was love at first sight, and also proof of the adage – opposites attract. Al was short, brawny, and swarthy. Christie was tall, in fact 2 inches taller than Al, skinny, and blonde. They had a huge Catholic wedding with Al's big Italian family and Christie's even bigger Irish family. Ken was best man. Once they married, Ken visited them often. He frequently ate meals at their home and went to the movies with them. Despite being newlyweds, Al and Christie never minded his company because they knew how much he needed them. They genuinely felt like he was family, and for them family came first.

When they had their first child, just eleven months after the wedding, Ken was baby Mario's godfather. He also was his frequent baby sitter. He delighted in making Mario laugh and playing children's games with him. Ken found that he really liked babies, which surprised him. He had never really thought about children, especially the possibility of having his own one day. But now he hoped to have lots of babies. He knew he would love them dearly to prove to himself that his parents hadn't damaged his ability to love a child. In fact, memories of them made his urge for a family even stronger.

Although Al and their friends fixed Ken up with different women, he never found the right one. He joked that he wouldn't marry until he found a girl as great as Christie. Although he craved emotional closeness, he secretly feared that he didn't have it in him, and that his parents had squashed any ability he had to love.

Ken found the work of a firefighter satisfying. He embraced the idea of saving others because he wished that someone would have saved him from his parents. He saw himself as a hero, and he liked the role. He eagerly awaited the appearance of Miss Right. He was sure that in the future he would be like the hero in a romance novel – one who saves a damsel in distress. And he and the damsel would fall in love and live happily ever after. Little could he have predicted that Miss Right would be the heroine who would save him when he was in distress, and they would indeed marry and live happily ever after, but for too short a time.

Chapter 4

Over the four years Ken had been a fireman, he had witnessed some horrible fires, but none like the one he experienced the day before he met Beth. A six year old boy had been playing with a lighter and had burned down the house where he, his four year old sister, and two year old brother had been left alone.

The house was a mere shack, and of course, had no smoke alarm. It was surrounded by heavy vegetation which stoked the fire. By the time neighbors spotted the flames and called the fire department, it was too late to save the structure or the children.

The fire trucks drove through dark, thick vegetation to the billowing gray pillars of smoke. The lights of the trucks eerily lit the scene creating the look of an inferno. Although the shack was no longer standing, Ken knew what it must have looked like just hours earlier – one room with garbage strewn everywhere, cupboards empty of food, a few broken toys on the floor, and children playing with whatever was around, including a cigarette lighter, which sadly was one of the few things in the house that worked.

Ken and the other firemen slogged through the glowing embers. His foot hit something. He looked down at the body of the four year old girl spotlighted by his helmet lamp. He gently picked her up. She was so light. Her eyes were open wide; the jet black pupils embedded in stark whiteness. She was staring at Ken as if asking, “Why? Why did I die so young? Why did I have to live like this? Wasn’t I entitled to a decent life? Wasn’t I entitled to a life?”

Ken had been at fires where people had been severely burned and killed, but not one where people had died needlessly like these children. He wanted to breathe the gift of life into the child, but he knew she had been dead for a while. He couldn’t use his training to save her. He failed abysmally at what he thought he was – a hero. He was unprepared for the depths of his rage.

As he carried the child toward the fire truck, he found the mother standing near the smoldering remains of the shack. Sobbing and slobbering, she loudly wailed over her lost children. “Oh my babies. Oh my babies.”

When Ken carried the charred remains of the child to her, he smelled the alcohol emanating from her like pungent perfume. The acrid smell of the fire couldn’t camouflage the smell of booze seeping from every pore in her body. He knew that odor intimately having smelled it almost every night of his childhood. Suddenly the deeply embedded loathing he felt for his parents became intertwined with hatred for this woman. She was the cause of this tragedy. It was as if she had actually lit the fire that had caused the conflagration.

He looked into her eyes and saw more than grief. He saw evidence of booze and drugs. She was a heavy black woman bursting out of a tight tee shirt and even tighter shorts.

He knew that she had gone out to drink, get high, and probably have sex, while her children were left alone to burn to death. He wanted to strangle her, and he might have if he hadn't been holding the child. It wasn't possible to see his face because it was blackened by the fire, but it was red as were his eyes. Every cell in his body was inflamed with fury, grief, revulsion, and hatred for this woman.

He screamed at her. "You killed your babies. You left them alone. You're a murderer. You should have burned in this hell hole, not them." The woman tried to take the child from him, but he wouldn't release her. She was fighting him, clawing at him for her child.

"You want her now. Where were you when she was screaming Momma as she burned? May you burn in hell for eternity."

He was inches from her face as he repeatedly screamed, "You fucking murderer." He was seeing more than this woman. He was seeing his drunken parents standing behind her. He wanted to kill her for what she had done to her children, and he wanted to kill the apparitions of his parents for what they had done to him. He thought he was free from his parents, but he wasn't. The ugliness of his life growing up in the McNair prison vividly returned to him. His parents' cruelty in emotionally neglecting him became compounded with this woman's cruelty in leaving her children alone.

One of the other firemen took the child from Ken's arms. He was shaking as if he were having a seizure. The other firemen were afraid that he might attack the mother so they rushed him back to the firehouse.

Ken was inconsolable. Every aspect of the fire permeated his sensory memories. From his visual memory, he couldn't erase the look of the child's eyes begging him to be saved. From his tactile memory, he couldn't erase the feel of holding the burnt child as light and fragile as a china doll. From his olfactory memory, he couldn't erase the acrid fire smell or the pungent alcohol smell clogging his nasal passages. From his auditory memory, he couldn't erase the mother's screams, the sounds of the water hoses, or the sizzling of the embers.

Back at the firehouse, he took a boiling hot shower hoping to wash away the memories, but it wasn't possible. He dressed quickly, wanting to get away from people, even his closest friends. Since it was 4 AM, his co-workers forced him to stay at the firehouse and lie down for a while. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't get the visions of what he had just witnessed out of his head. As he lay in bed, he became increasingly agitated. He got out of bed and looked at the paperwork on the fire. The mother was Myra Jackson; the six year old was Elijah, the two year old was Isaiah, and the girl he held in his arms was Angel. What a fitting name. He knew she was an angel in heaven now. He etched those names into his memory. He would never forget them: Myra Jackson, Elijah Jackson, Isaiah Jackson, and Angel Jackson.

Months later, Ken followed up on what had happened to Myra Jackson. He learned that no charges had been brought against her even though he was certain she was guilty of neglect and child endangerment, and maybe even involuntary manslaughter. The district attorney probably thought she had been adequately punished with her children's deaths. Ken thought that she should have been charged and sent to jail for a long time. He felt that the justice system was lax in its pursuit of people who commit crimes, especially blacks.

Ken also learned that Myra Jackson had another child, 11-year old Monique, who had been taken away from her because the child was selling herself to buy drugs. She did this in the shack with her mother's knowledge. The other three children had been present when she had sex. What must those poor children have been thinking? Maybe death was the only way for them to escape the hell they were in.

To Ken, there was no one worse in the universe than Myra Jackson. He wished there was a way that he could mete out the punishment she deserved. He felt that she deserved the death penalty, but he knew that he couldn't kill her without being caught. He didn't wonder if he could kill her. He knew he could. He would have no qualms about shooting her in the heart.

Some of the firemen tried to talk to Ken, but he refused. They wanted to contact the psychologist or the clergyman on call for help in such situations. Again, Ken refused to talk to anyone. Despite their pleas to stay at the firehouse for a while, he left at 11:00. He didn't trust himself to drive so he planned to walk to a nearby bar where he hoped to find liquid solace, forgetting that it was too early for the bar to be opened. He rarely drank because of his parents, but booze seemed to be the only solution to escape from this living nightmare.

As he walked to the bar, he became aware of a throbbing on his arm. He pulled up his sleeve and found a small, but deep burn on his forearm. There must have been an ember caught in his jacket. He hadn't noticed it in the shower or when he was dressing. He had been oblivious to his physical pain, only focused on his emotional pain.

He didn't want to go back to the firehouse to treat it. He didn't want to face more attempts to comfort him. Instead, he went to a nearby pharmacy to get salve and bandages. He wasn't sure exactly what to buy so he decided to ask the pharmacist. And that's when he met Beth.

He walked to the pharmacy station at the back of the store where he saw her talking to a customer. He stared at this petite, plump, blue-eyed redhead wearing a white jacket with a name tag reading, "Beth Hayes." He thought she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Her skin was white and smooth, like ivory; her eyes were light blue, like the water in the Caribbean; and her short, straight hair was a beautiful shade of red. He'd never seen anyone with that color hair. He knew it was natural, and he knew women would do anything to replicate that shade. She was slightly plump and he felt the urge to reach out and touch her

softness. She looked like an angel. Whenever he thought back to the time he first saw her, he was sure there must have been a halo shimmering above her red hair.

Once she finished with the customer, she turned her blue eyes to him, and asked, “What can I do for you sir?” Her voice was soft with a lilting Southern accent.

For the first time in his life, Ken was speechless. He wanted to say, “Help me. Save me. Make me want to live again. Make me whole again.” But of course, he didn’t. He couldn’t. She would think he was crazy, and maybe he was at that point in his life.

He pulled up his sleeve and pointed to the burn. Words wouldn’t come out of his mouth. He felt like a person with aphasia, knowing what he wanted to say, but unable to do so.

“That’s not a normal burn. How’d you get that?”

Finally, his tongue was freed up, and he could speak. He had to talk to this woman. He had to capture her with words. He couldn’t let her go.

“I’m a fireman. I got it putting out a fire.”

“Well, why didn’t you use something at the station? You’ve got the best stuff there.”

“It’s a long story. Let me tell you about it. When are you off work?”

Beth didn’t show any surprise at Ken’s behavior. Later, she would say that she was struck by this man in obvious psychological pain, and she felt compelled to ease his pain. She thought he looked like a drowning man reaching for a life raft, and she knew that she had to be that life raft. That was Beth – a person with a bottomless wellspring of empathy. She was always there to help a person in distress, even if the person was a total stranger.

The fact that she sensed Ken’s helplessness showed her ability to see inside people. Ken certainly didn’t look helpless to the outside world. He was tall and muscular from daily workouts at the firehouse gym. And he was handsome with thick brown hair and a tightly pulled face with regular features. He had a crew cut which made him look like he might be in the military. In fact, he looked like he did when he was in the Air Force. He had a swagger that conveyed confidence. When he spoke, he had a deep voice that demanded attention. The word formidable fit him, but only on the outside. At the time he met Beth, he was filled with fear, doubt, anger, and hatred of himself and the world. She saw past the outward façade of strength to his inner core of pain and suffering.

“Not until 4. First let me put some salve and a band aid on that.”

He felt as if her touch healed him instantly, not only medically, but spiritually. It was as if she performed a miracle, healing his soul with each dab of ointment. She created a Ken

who was no longer filled with rage. Ken felt as if Beth had kindled the spark of life in him just as God had done when he touched Adam's fingertip in Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel. It was as if the heat from the burn on his arm kindled the spark of life.

"I'll wait for you outside."

"What's your name?"

"Ken. Ken McNair."

He read her name tag. "And you're Beth Hayes." He thought to himself, "And someday you'll be Beth McNair." He hadn't looked at her hand to see if she wore a wedding ring. He just knew that she was single, and that she was destined to be his wife.

He walked back to the fire station to retrieve his car and drove to a lot adjoining the pharmacy. As he waited, he replayed every second he'd been with Beth which gradually muted the memories of the burned child. When Beth came out of the store, his anger had dissipated. The only emotion he felt was hope, hope that Beth would save him.

"Let's go someplace to talk. I don't want anything sexual from you. I'm not a pervert. I just need to be with you. I need to feel goodness, and I know you're goodness personified. I see it in your eyes and I felt it in your touch."

"My car's in the back lot."

"I'll drive you home. We'll come back for it later."

They went to her apartment where she made tomato soup and grilled cheese, which became Ken's favorite meal. Over tea, he described the fire and the deaths of the children. He raged at their mother for leaving them alone. As he talked, he cried. He had never cried in front of a stranger before. He felt no shame; he felt catharsis.

"That mother is a murderer. She's a monster. She should be sent to prison for the rest of her miserable life. I'd kill her if I could. I want her to burn like her kids burned. Booze was more important than her kids. She's just like the other niggers who live on welfare and keep having babies. We've got to stop these people. They're just like animals. Like rabbits producing babies they don't care about. They're not human. No human could live like that. No human could leave her kids to die."

Beth ignored his racist tirade. She talked to him as if she were lecturing a young child.

"Ken. I think you have to see another side to this. You have to look at why the mother went out and left her kids alone. If she had money, she would have gotten a baby sitter. I can't imagine any woman wanting her kids to die, especially like that. Think of how she was living in that shack. She's a poor woman who had to get away from her pathetic life. And

now her life is hundreds of times worse. Her punishment is worse than any prison. She has the memory of seeing her burnt children which will haunt her for the rest of her life. She got drunk to escape her life of poverty. Now she also has to find a way to escape the memory of her children burning to death. And she'll never find it. Booze and drugs and sex can't erase her memory of the last time she saw her kids. I know it's hard, but try to understand her. I'm sure she's not an evil person. She's just a poor, overwhelmed woman with no resources for help.

Hatred and revenge aren't the solutions. They just eat away at you. Revenge isn't the answer because you can't punish her more than she is being punished for the death of her kids. And you can never be satisfied no matter how much you retaliate. There is no end to revenge. Understanding and forgiveness are the solutions."

"Beth. I can never forgive that woman. Maybe God can, but I can't. I don't know if you'd be able to do it either if you'd seen the charred bodies of those kids. I'll never forget them. I will hate Myra Jackson every minute of my life. And I will get revenge. Somehow. Someday. I can't wait for her to go to Hell for her punishment. I've got to punish her."

"You're not God. You have no right to punish her."

"I was the eye witness to the murder of her children. I have the knowledge that no one else has. I have to take responsibility. I have to be the children's spokesman, their guardian, their father. I have to be the judge and jury that get justice for them."

Beth didn't continue the conversation. She knew she couldn't change Ken's thinking, not then. His views were set in concrete. But she hoped that in the future she could shatter the concrete to get Ken to see the right thing to do. She needed to find the right sledge hammer to make the first crack.

"Do you think you'll be able to go back to being a fireman?"

"Yes. I have no choice. It's who I am. You don't understand what it is to be a fireman. It's a calling. It's something you have to give your life for if you have to.

I'll just have to learn to live with this memory. There may be more fires like this, but I'll be able to face them if you're with me."

As he spoke these words, he looked at her, imploring her to say that she would. Beth didn't say anything. She didn't have to. Ken knew that she would be with him forever.

Beth held his hand as they talked. Then they sat on the couch as she stroked his head. He fell into a sound sleep. He had never before experienced such a peaceful sleep. That was their first night together. Since then, they had never been separated, not until the accident.

When Beth remembered their first day together, she was amazed that she had gone off with a complete stranger, even taking him to her apartment. She said that from the second their eyes met in the pharmacy, she felt she knew him. And she knew he would never hurt her. She knew he was in desperate need of help, and she wanted to be the source of that help. Just as she had healed his burn with ointment, she wanted to heal his soul with the balm of caring. She also knew that he was the man she was destined to be with for all time. She saw only the goodness in Ken.

After their first night together, Ken often thought about the two extremes of life – good and evil. He believed there must be a God who created both. He believed that God created the evil in Myra Jackson, and He had also created the goodness in Beth. If he hadn't met Beth, he would have been destroyed by the evil he had witnessed, and he wouldn't have become the man he became, at least until Beth's death – a loving man dedicated to helping others. He felt that God sent Beth to save him. With Beth gone, the man consumed with the flames of hatred returned.

Over the first two years after the accident, Ken visualized simultaneously holding the charred body of Angel in one arm and the broken body of Sabrina in the other. The memories of the two children became enmeshed in an irrational collage in his mind. No matter what Beth had said about forgiving Myra's behavior, he became increasingly convinced that not only was she at fault for the fire that caused Angel's death, she somehow was also at fault for Beth and Sabrina's death. Joe Silver was no longer the cause. Instead, Myra drove the car that was the murder weapon. He fantasized that she stole the car, intentionally killed Beth and Sabrina, and then ran away leaving Joe and Martha dead at the scene. He altered his memory of seeing Joe behind the steering wheel to seeing Myra there. He felt that she was retaliating for his bearing witness to her killing her children.

The accident caused brain damage in Ken, not an actual lesion that a neurologist could identify with an MRI or a CAT scan. No, this was destruction to the part of his brain having to do with rationality, and not over-all rationality, but only rationality having to do with his thinking about the fire and the accident. When he pondered the events of April 17, 2003, the rules of logic were irrelevant. There was only his distorted view of why. Gradually, his blaming of Myra for the deaths of Beth and Sabrina spread to all blacks who were led by Myra Jackson, a drug-addicted, alcoholic, uneducated woman. He would day dream about hordes of angry dark-skinned, sweating blacks marching in the woods, holding torch lights and guns, and being led by Myra who was holding up a whiskey bottle and a gun. She always wore the tee shirt and shorts she wore the night of the fire. No rationality, no reason, no logic— only blind, misplaced hatred fueled by a desire for revenge.

Ken had a faint scar from the burn on his arm. Whenever he touched it or looked at it, the memory of that first night with Beth returned. He still marveled at how goodness in the guise of Beth arose from evil that fateful day. He vacillated from bitterness and hatred of the

world for what had happened to Beth and Sabrina to gratitude and love for having had Beth and Sabrina in his life, if only for a too short time. Without the tragedy of the burned child he would never have met Beth.

Chapter 5

When the ambulance reached the hospital, Ken, Beth, and Sabrina were taken to a private room in the ER section where a doctor examined Beth and Sabrina. A nurse officially pronounced them dead at 10:47 A.M. on April 17, 2003. Although they actually died at 8:48, just as they were rushing to make it to the 9:00 church service. The exact time of death was recorded by the stopped clock in Joe's car.

The doctor asked Ken to leave, but he insisted on staying. He wanted to be with Beth and Sabrina as long as possible. He wanted to be with them until they were lowered into the ground. No. He really wanted to throw himself into their grave and be with them for eternity.

The doctor asked Ken: "Do you really want to see them like this?"

"Yes. I want to see them for as long as possible. I won't remember them like this. I'll remember them the way they looked this morning before we left for church. I'll remember Beth wearing a new dress to show off her new figure. It doesn't look new now. Does it? It looks like a bloody rag. Beth had lost the final 15 pounds she'd put on with Sabrina. She was so proud of how she looked. She pretended to be a model strutting down a runway as she walked around the kitchen. I whistled as I admired my glamorous wife. God, she was so beautiful.

And I'll remember Sabrina in her high chair picking up one Cheerio at a time, and inspecting each one to see if it was perfect before plopping it into her mouth. She chomped down with her two bottom teeth, her only teeth. Could there be anything sweeter than watching a baby delight in the joy of eating Cheerios? That morning will be my last memory of them."

But that wasn't true. Although he tried, he could never forget the sight of their mangled bodies. Visions of them periodically popped into his head. He was like a soldier with PTSD having recurring flashbacks to his gruesome wartime experiences.

Beth's body looked like it had been flattened by a huge iron; her bones protruded and dried blood and tissue were all over. Her face was unharmed, but now she looked dead. It was obvious that her soul had left her body which soon would decompose and become one with nature. The real Beth was in Heaven. Although sometimes Ken wasn't sure if there was a God, he was confident there was a Heaven, and Beth was there now. He was certain that he would meet her there someday, and they would spend eternity together. He couldn't accept the possibility that there was no Heaven and that he would never see Beth again.

Sabrina's body was even worse than Beth's. It was totally mutilated. Her facial features couldn't be distinguished. Only her red hair signaled that this was Sabrina. Her soul, too, had vacated her body. Ken pictured her crawling around Heaven as she giggled with

delight and amused God. Her giggle was so infectious. Ken was sure that everyone in heaven was laughing along with her.

As they were about to be taken to the morgue, Ken asked if he could kiss them good-bye. He gently kissed Beth's lips, and said, "I'll love you forever and I'll see you in Heaven someday when we'll be together for eternity."

Then he kissed Sabrina's hand, and said, "I love you my little angel and I know you'll be an angel in God's Heaven for eternity. I'll kiss you again when I see you there."

He put his finger to his lips which felt numb from the cold of Beth's lips and Sabrina's hand. He had to touch them to see if they were still attached to his face, or if they had been frozen off.

The nurses and even the doctor in the room had to fight back tears. The hospital personnel who were used to death were not immune to the overpowering emotion engendered by the sight of Ken saying farewell to his beloved wife and child who had been so violently and unexpectedly wrenched from his life.

When Ken came out of the room, a hospital social worker named Rita Carnes was waiting for him. After she introduced herself, she led him to a private meeting room.

"Would you like some coffee or tea?"

"No. I'd like poison."

She ignored this, and went on.

"Is there anyone who can take care of Randy?"

"Beth's mother's died seven years ago and her father left when she was a kid. Her brother Matt's at USC Law in Columbia. I have no contact with my parents. My best friend is another fireman, Al Damico. He and his wife, Christie, have sat with the kids a lot. They have two boys who Randy loves. I'm sure they could take him for a while."

"Good. Give me their number and I'll make arrangements.

Do you want to call Matt now?"

"No. You call him and tell him there was an accident, but don't tell him they're dead. I can't talk to him now. He'll be in worse shape than me, and I can't comfort him. We're more than brothers-in-law, we're really brothers. He was very close to Beth. She was his big sister and always doted on him. I don't think either of us could be strong for the other right now."

While Ken waited for the Damicos, Ed Brent, a Charleston policeman, entered the room. Ed was a small, thin black man with salt and pepper close-cropped hair. He had a quiet and gentle persona.

“Hi Ken. I’m Ed Brent, a detective with the Charleston police force. I hate to ask you questions so soon after the tragedy, but I want to interview you while the memory of the accident is fresh in your mind. I’m afraid it’s also the most painful time. Although I don’t think there’ll ever be a time when you won’t feel pain.”

Ken liked Ed immediately. He seemed to be kind and sympathetic, more like a counselor or clergyman than a policeman. He felt Ed wasn’t like a typical black. He was one of the few law-abiding good ones.

“I didn’t actually see the moment of impact. Beth was pushing Sabrina in the stroller trying to get into church before it started raining again. Randy didn’t want to go to church and was trying to go back to the car. I was turned to him trying to pull him into church. Then I heard it - the racing engine and the car driving onto the sidewalk and crashing into the wall. I saw this Mercedes go into the wall dragging Beth and the stroller along. I’ll never forget the sound and what I saw then.”

Ken started to wail. He produced a sound that was more than a wail. It was a primal scream. Rita took Ken’s hand and Ed put his hand on his shoulder, but the wailing grew louder.

“Why God? Why did you take the loves of my life? Why? Why?”

It took him several minutes to finally gain control.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t control myself.”

“That’s understandable,” said Rita.

“Who was driving the car?”

“An elderly man named Joe Silver. His wife Martha was in the car too. They’re both critically injured.”

“What happened? Why did he speed up?”

“We think he had a stroke or a heart attack which caused his foot to come down on the accelerator.”

“I think I know those people from church.”

“Yes, they’re members.”

“I hope they die. I know that sounds heartless, but if they knew they killed Beth and Sabrina, they wouldn’t want to live. Would you?”

Ed ignored his question, but silently agreed that he, too, might not want to live if he had killed a young woman and her baby.

Rita said, “Rich West is here now. Do you want to see him? Do you want to have him say a prayer for Beth and Sabrina?”

Just then Ken’s cell phone rang. It was Matt. He had to tell him. He knew Matt would be devastated. Matt and Beth had always been close, but after their mother’s death, they had become even closer – more like mother and son than sister and brother.

Matt was 29, three years younger than Beth. The only physical resemblance they shared was their light blue eyes. Matt’s hair was brown, and physically he was totally different. Beth was short, 5’1” and plump, while Matt was tall, 6’1” and reedy. Beth looked like her mother, Abby, and Matt looked like his father, or at least how he looked in the few photos they had of him. They couldn’t really recall him since he’d left when Matt was two and Beth was five. Matt and Beth were alike personality-wise. They were both kind and caring, and genuinely liked people. They radiated a sense of calm even in difficult situations.

Their mother had been like that too. She chose a profession that utilized her special talents: she was a hospice nurse. Ironically, at the end of her life she needed care from her colleagues because she died six months after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She had been an outstanding mother giving her children the love of two parents. But she gave them another gift – the strength and bravery to face death. During the last six months of her life, she set an example for how to face a painful death. This enabled Beth and Matt to face her death as well the deaths of others. Beth became known in her church for comforting people who were grieving the loss of loved ones. Matt learned to face death head-on in war, and more painfully when he lost Beth.

After high school, Matt didn’t know what he wanted to do with his life so he enlisted in the Marines. He was stationed in the Middle East where he saw combat which transformed him from an 18 year old kid primarily interested in sports to an old man in a young man’s body asking philosophical questions about the meaning of life as well as the meaning of death.

On the streets of Iraq, he witnessed innocent civilians killed in bombings. He could never forget the bodies of children destroyed by bombs. The sight of a child’s severed hand holding a doll was indelibly etched into his memory. He saw his fellow Marines being blow up in roadside bombings. Having talked to his buddy Charlie about the upcoming World Series, and then seeing him dead an hour later was another memory for his picture album of

death. He created a mental cemetery for two close friends he lost. Occasionally throughout his life, he visited them in this cemetery only he could access.

It is enigmatic why some soldiers react to brutal war experiences with PTSD, and others do not. Matt didn't respond with PTSD. His close brushes with death made him think that there must be a reason that he survived and some of his friends did not. His experiences gave him purpose, direction, and strength. He was committed to dedicating his life to preventing violence, death, and injustice. Why do some people, like Matt, come out of war stronger and changed in a positive way after their traumatic experiences, while other people like Ken respond to trauma by becoming lost and filled with hate?

After four years in the military, Matt returned to Charleston a greatly-changed, mature 22-year old. He enrolled at the College of Charleston unsure of his major. He considered becoming a psychologist or a lawyer. Finally, he decided on the law. Although he worked two jobs to support himself, he was able to maintain an almost straight A average and he achieved high LSAT scores. He was accepted to several law schools, but decided on USC so he could stay close to Beth. He was in his final year and hoped eventually to work in a public defender's office so he could help the needy with the challenges of the legal system. He wasn't interested in making a lot of money working for a large law firm. This was another area where Matt and Beth were alike. He cared for other people, especially people in need. They both had inherited an empathy gene from their mother.

Matt was eager to embark on a new life after graduation. He wanted to start his career by working in the public defender's office in Atlanta. He had a law school friend who had started work there the previous year and had encouraged Matt to join her. They also had a budding romantic relationship and hoped that Matt's move to Atlanta would strengthen it. Now his plans had to change. He needed to put his family before his career and love life. He had to return to Charleston.

Matt asked, "What happened? I got a call from a social worker at the hospital telling me that Beth had been in an accident. Is she ok?"

Ken gathered as much strength as he could muster. "There was an accident in the church parking lot this morning. This old guy lost control of his car and hit Beth and Sabrina. They're dead. They're dead. They're dead."

When he spoke the words *they're dead*, his mouth burned as if it was being incinerated by the message. He screamed the words to put out the fire.

There was complete silence for a while as Matt digested the meaning of Ken's words. It seemed like an hour before he spoke. And then he made a sound. It was hard to tell what kind of sound it was. Perhaps it was a cry for help; perhaps it was a sob from his soul; perhaps it was a gulp for air from a choking man. Probably it was all of these and more.

In a strained voice, Matt said, "I'll be there as soon as possible. I'm leaving now."

"Drive carefully. I love you brother. I can't lose you too."

"I love you too brother. Oh, what about Randy? Is he okay? Where is he?"

"He's okay. I haven't seen him since the accident. He's at the church with his Sunday School teacher. The Damicos are taking him for a few days. Now it's just us three guys. Our beautiful loving girls are gone forever."

He heard Matt sob, and hung up because he didn't want to cry too. He had a whole lifetime to cry. He knew his tears would never dry up. They would be his life-long companions.

There was a knock at the door. It was Don. He had rushed to the hospital as soon as possible. He didn't want Rich to be with Ken. Because of his close relationship with Beth, he felt compelled to be with him. Although Don dreaded meeting with Ken after he cursed God, he was energized by his closing remarks to his congregation. They had filled him with confidence that he could comfort Ken. He quickly learned how wrong he was. He couldn't give Ken the solace he needed. Ken didn't want to be comforted by anyone.

He tried to hug Ken, but Ken stiffened his body and held his arms clamped by his sides. He said words that were supposed to be comforting, but they weren't. They sounded hollow.

"Ken I'm here for you. What can I do? What can the congregation do?"

"Bring Beth and Sabrina back."

"I wish I could. I wish I could. What a loss for you, and for the whole congregation. She was our ministering angel. I don't think anyone can take her place."

"Don, I don't want any visitors. I can't face people right now. I just feel like cursing and screaming. I don't want to be comforted. I want to suffer."

"How about your friends from work?"

"Yeah. I want to see some of them, and my brother-in-law will be here soon. We can suffer together."

"When you're ready, let me know what you want to do for a funeral."

"I'm thinking of a small funeral with just some friends. I don't know if I can take a funeral with hundreds of people. I know I'll fall apart. I don't want to stand in the middle of the church and curse God in His own house."

“You do what’s right for you. I know that everyone from the congregation will want to come if you have a funeral, but they’ll understand if you decide not to.”

Don felt trapped, uncomfortable, and helpless. He had to leave. But first, he asked if Ken would say a short prayer with him hoping somehow to provide comfort the only way he knew how, by talking to God.

“Let’s pray to Jesus to watch over Beth and Sabrina’s souls and to comfort you, Matt, and Randy.”

Ken glared at Don. He was filled with smoldering rage. Through clenched teeth, he said, “Fuck Jesus. Sorry for the language Don, but that’s how I feel right now. Fuck, fuck, fuck Jesus. I can’t accept a God who kills goodness. I don’t want your shitty prayers.”

Although Don had heard Ken talk like this after the accident, he thought that Ken would moderate his feelings and language after the initial shock. How wrong he was. Ken was angrier now than he had been at the church. Time was inflaming his anger causing it to fester and infect everything.

Hearing someone say “Fuck Jesus” and “Fuck God” were the most sacrilegious statements Don had ever heard. To him, those words should never be paired. In fact, the word “fuck” had no place in anyone’s vocabulary. He knew it was commonly used by young people and the mass media, but he would never say it. He didn’t even use the word “damn.” He knew people considered him prim and proper, but that was the way he thought a minister should be. And he was sure that was the way God wanted him to be – pure and clean, and certainly not foul-mouthed.

Don started to talk, but Ken interrupted him. ‘Don’t give me all that God crap about how it’s better to have loved someone for a short time than never to have loved. Eleven months. That’s all I had with my Sabrina. How could anyone say I was blessed to have her for 11 months? Sure I was blessed, but having her for 11 months makes me realize what I’m missing. I should have had her for another 40 or 50 years. I’ll be cursed for the rest of my life not having her. The longer I live, the more I’ll be cursed.’

Don had to leave. He couldn’t take anymore of Ken’s blasphemy and he certainly couldn’t offer him comfort. His feelings of satisfaction at consoling his parishioners earlier in the day washed away the longer he was with Ken. He felt that not only was Ken assaulting his core beliefs, he felt like he was physically attacking him. He felt weakened. He had to escape from Ken. He had to retrench and find himself through God again.

He lamely said, “Let’s talk when you’re calmer. I’ll be in touch tomorrow.”

“I’ll be calmer tomorrow, but I’ll still hate your God.”

After Don left, he went to the men's restroom where he went into a stall and cried. His tears were not for Ken. They were for himself and his inability to help Ken. This was the worst challenge to his ability to minister. He couldn't think straight. He was totally overcome by the vile attack Ken waged on all that Don held sacred. He needed to pray, but he didn't want to pray over a toilet. He returned to his church to seek guidance in a place where he was certain he would find God. But even in his spiritual home, God was elusive.

For the rest of his life Don would be affected by Beth and Sabrina's deaths, but he would be even more affected by the challenge to his faith and his ability to minister. Over the years, he would dedicate his personal and professional life to being as good a minister as possible. He worked with hospice patients to help them meet death bravely. He tried to find what made it possible for some people to find peace as they faced death, but he couldn't. He knew it wasn't belief in God because some of the people who most bravely faced death were atheists.

Years later, Don worked with some of the survivors of the black church massacre to better understand death in God's house. He was encouraged by their devotion to God after the tragedy they had witnessed. He compared them to Ken to try to understand Ken's reaction, but he couldn't.

A while later, Al and Christie Damico came to the house. They each hugged Ken tightly and cried until it was clear that their tears would never stop.

"Can you take Randy for a few days? I'm in no shape to be a father. I don't know if I'll ever be."

Al said, "Of course, we'll take Randy for as long as you want, but I think it would be a good idea if he saw you every day. Randy might think you're gone like Beth and Sabrina. He doesn't understand what's happened. I don't think we should be the ones to tell him about Beth and Sabrina. You and Matt have to.

I talked to Jeff Boyd about doing some counseling with Randy. He said that he didn't work with children, but he knew a psychologist who specialized in working with children suffering from grief. Jeff's going to call her to set up an appointment. He's also available to you if you need him. I know he helped you after some really bad fires you worked. Ken, you're going to need help. Maybe not now, but in the future. You can't do this alone. You know Matt, Christie, and I are here for you no matter what, but I don't think we'll be enough. How about talking to Don or Rich from your church?"

"Hah. I just had a run-in with Don. I told him 'fuck Jesus.' I don't know if he would be the right person for me to see. I don't think he could handle my anger. I scared the hell out of him. I think he thought I would physically attack him. I've lost any belief in God I may have had. I don't know if I'll ever be able to believe in a God who kills goodness."

“How about going to a grief support group? Not right now, but in the future. You might be helped by people going through what you’re going through.”

“I don’t think anyone has gone through what I’m going through.

Anyhow, I’m not ready for therapy. I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready for therapy. And talking to other people who lost loved ones won’t help. We’ll just sit around and cry. It’ll make me more depressed, if that’s at all possible.

I need answers. I need to know why this happened. Am I being punished? Did I do something so wrong that my most precious loves were taken from me? I don’t know where to find answers. I don’t know who can even help me ask the right questions. Maybe Matt. He’ll be like me in a way. He’ll be devastated by the loss of the two people he loved most in the world. But he believes in God and he has goodness and strength that I don’t have. He’ll heal. I won’t. I’ll be broken forever.

I want to go home now so I can be with Beth and Sabrina’s things. I need to touch things they touched. I need to feel that I’m with them somehow.”

“I’ll drive you home. Christie’ll get Randy and bring him to our place.”

Ken returned to what was once a place of joy and comfort, a place to escape the worries of the world and find serenity. Now it was a mausoleum for memories.

When he got to the house, he told Al to come by later for some of Randy’s clothes and toys. He also told Al to call Matt and tell him to go to the hospital and say good-bye to Beth and Sabrina and then come to the house. Ken couldn’t go back to the hospital. He couldn’t see them again. He couldn’t be in the hospital which was no longer a place of healing, but now a place of death that housed the remains of his beloved wife and baby.

As Ken walked toward his home, he looked at this house which to him had been a sanctuary, a refuge, and a safe haven. That was before. Not now. He looked at the rose bushes adjoining the front steps recalling how Beth lovingly tended them. She wouldn’t be around to see their perfect yellow and red blossoms bloom in a few weeks. He walked up the steps and saw Randy’s trucks scattered about the front porch. He loved zooming them back and forth as he made truck noises... vroom, vroom, vroom. Randy would never make those sounds again because they would remind him of the noise the Mercedes made as it speeded up and crashed into the church wall.

His hands shook as he unlocked the door. When he stepped over the threshold, he was enveloped by smells: the delicate smell of Beth’s jasmine body lotion, the talcum smell from Sabrina’s diapers, and the smells of the unfinished breakfast foods left on the kitchen table, foods never to be eaten. He went into the living room with toys covering most of the floor making it necessary for him to tread carefully as if negotiating a maze. Finally he entered the

heart of the house, the big sun-filled kitchen. He sat down at the table and picked up Sabrina's bib still damp with milk from her leaky bottle. He used his right pointer to trace Beth's lipstick prints on the edge of the coffee cup she had used that morning. He brought his finger to his lips and smeared the faint lipstick traces on them like it was a last kiss from Beth.

He opened the door to the screened porch and saw the wind-up baby swing that Sabrina would sit in all day if they let her. He looked out into the back yard at the swing set he had put in just last month. There was the baby swing for Sabrina and a regular swing for Randy. Beth enjoyed swinging on that swing whenever she had a chance. When she was little, she never had a backyard swing because she always lived in an apartment with no back yard. She promised to make up for the lost swinging time of her childhood. She couldn't keep that promise now. Ken closed his eyes and pictured Beth swinging on an ornate golden swing among puffy white clouds in Heaven.

After a while, Ken walked upstairs. He went into Sabrina's room where he was engulfed in a pink world - pink walls, pink curtains, pink sheets on the crib. He sat in the rocker where he rocked Sabrina to sleep every night he didn't have to work. He had to force himself to stay awake because he feared he might drop her if he also rocked himself to sleep. Then he went into his bedroom. He didn't look around. He laid down in his bed, curled into a fetal position, shut his eyes, and fell into a deep sleep. It was too early for the nightmares which would start the next night and recur almost nightly.

Chapter 6

Strangely the night of the accident, Ken's dreams were filled with the many happy events in his life up to that day. His unconscious was trying, in vain, to etch these into his permanent memory so they couldn't be obliterated by future nightmares. He pictured his whirlwind romance with Beth. They both knew they wanted to marry the day they met so after six months, they did marry. Ken had been frugal with his money so he was able to afford a one-carat engagement ring. He surprised her with it on her birthday when he devised a scavenger hunt for an unknown present. He had hidden clues around the house: in the oven, on a bathroom cabinet shelf, in a shoe in her closet, until she finally found it hidden under her pillow. She cried so much when she finally found the ring box that she couldn't even say the word "ring." Ken got down on his knee and proposed. In response to his question, she screamed, "Yes, yes, a million times yes." She never took her engagement ring off, even when she bathed the kids or washed dishes. A week after the accident, Matt retrieved the ring along with Beth's other belongings from the hospital. Ken kept it in his bedside table drawer, and everyday kissed it as he said good morning to his girls – Beth and Sabrina.

They had their wedding at Beth's church, Charleston Methodist Church, the place where she started her life as the wife of the man she loved and the place where she died. Before Ken met Beth, he hadn't gone to church. To him, organized religion was hypocritical. His parents went to church every Sunday and put on a show of piety although they were not good people. As a child, Ken had to accompany them, but as soon as he reached adolescence, he refused to join them. When the minister came to their house to find out why Ken stopped attending church, Ken couldn't tell him the truth. He said that he was busy working. When the minister asked him to re-arrange his work schedule, he said that he couldn't. It was apparent to the minister that Ken didn't want to go to church anymore so he suggested that some kids from the church visit him. Ken firmly refused. Other than the time he was best man at Al and Christie's wedding in a Catholic church, he never went into another church until he started going every Sunday with Beth.

After Ken met Beth, he was confident there had to be a God because only a higher being could create perfection like Beth. He joined her church, and the congregation opened their welcoming arms to him. Although he felt part of the congregation, he never felt the passion and commitment Beth felt.

Beth was known as the angel of the congregation because she provided emotional support to those in need, especially when there was a death in a family. She was known for her tuna casseroles which miraculously appeared at people's houses as soon as there was an announcement that there was a problem in the family. Her freezer was always stocked with three casseroles ready for duty as solace food. And because she was a pharmacist, congregants asked her for advice about medications they were prescribed as well as general medical information. Even though she was careful not to overstep the professional boundaries

of her knowledge, some congregants viewed her as their personal medical consultant, trusting her more than their physicians.

When Beth's mother died, the congregation returned her kindness by showering her with casseroles and emotional support. Some of the older women congregants tried to step in as mother surrogates, but no one could take Abby's place for Beth.

Don was probably closer to Beth than to any of his other parishioners so he was overjoyed to officiate at her wedding. Beth had always dreamed of someday wearing an elegant wedding dress. She and Christie went to every wedding shop in Charleston and Columbia until they found her dream dress in Charlotte. It was an off-the shoulder full length satin dress studded with tiny pearls. She had an over-the-face veil studded with the same pearls. There is a saying that all brides are beautiful, but in Beth's case this was certainly true.

As she walked down the aisle holding Matt's arm, she glowed. Al was best man and Christie was matron of honor. Several of Ken's fellow firemen marched down the aisle in their dress uniforms. When Don pronounced Ken and Beth husband and wife, Ken dipped Beth and passionately kissed her to the applause and cheers of the people in the church. After the accident, it took Ken a while to watch the video of the wedding. But after the first time, he watched it regularly despite the battle between feelings of pain and feelings of joy waged behind his eyes.

Ken and Beth held their wedding reception at the church social hall. The lengthy guest list included Ken's fellow firemen and their families, many of the church parishioners, Beth's co-workers, and even some of the customers from the drug store. It was a joyous occasion. Ken felt like his life was perfect. When he considered his cold, silent unhappy childhood, he was so thankful for the happiness he was blessed with. He felt that God atoned for giving him unloving parents by giving him the most loving wife in the world. After the accident, Ken pondered why God cursed him again. He examined his life to find a reason for his punishment, but he couldn't find one.

For their honeymoon, they took a Caribbean cruise. On their island stops, they snorkeled and swam with dolphins. They especially enjoyed having sex on their tiny ship balcony in the dark of the night. They felt like little kids doing something wonderfully naughty.

They settled into a happy routine of work and play. They nurtured each other when there were challenges at work. When Beth talked to her customers who were filling prescriptions for drugs for cancer, psychiatric disorders, or other serious conditions, she offered more than information on the side effects. She offered support and hope. It was possible to tell the seriousness of a person's medical condition by how long Beth hugged

them. When she came home and shared these experiences with Ken, he comforted her and told her she was a ministering angel to her customers.

After Ken returned home from an especially serious fire, Beth comforted him. Just by holding him and not even saying a word, she was able to calm him and infuse him with the drive to return to the singed world of the fireman. She felt like she would burst with pride when Ken was honored for saving an elderly woman from a fire in a retirement home. In the newspaper there was a front page picture of him carrying the woman out of the burning building. Over the fireplace mantel, she hung an official photo of the mayor pinning a medal on Ken as well as a certificate documenting his bravery. At the awards ceremony, Beth cried from start to finish. To her and the city of Charleston, Ken was a true hero. Matt made a quick trip to Charleston to attend the ceremony. He, too, cried. Beth made a paper medal for herself saying “Wife of Charleston Fire Department’s Greatest Hero” which she wore around the house.

Ken also found a poster of “A Fireman’s Prayer” which he hung in the den. He told Beth that he thought the words were so apropos, but to Beth they were also frightening. Beth couldn’t talk to Ken about the last stanza. She didn’t want to think about the possibility of Ken dying in the line of duty. She couldn’t think of herself as a widow and her children as fatherless. Of course, she couldn’t predict that someday Ken would be a widower and Randy would be motherless.

The Fireman’s Prayer

When I am called to duty, God

Whenever flames may rage,

Give me strength to save a life,

Whatever be its age.

Help me embrace a little child

Before it is too late

Or save an older person

From the horror of that fate.

Enable me to be alert

And hear the weakest shout

And quickly and efficiently

To put the fire out.

I want to fill my calling
And to give the best in me
To guard my every neighbor
And protect their property.
And if, according to your will,
I am to lose my life
Please bless with your protection
My children and my wife.

When Ken first shared this poem with Beth, they discussed the special meaning of the line about helping to embrace a little child before it is too late. Ken talked about how he hadn't been able to embrace Angel and save her. Even though he realized that he had done all he could to save Angel, he still felt guilt. Beth comforted him by telling him that he would save another child in Angel's memory. She also reminded him that he had saved an older person from death. He was a true fireman, a true hero.

On September 11, 2001 a terrorist disaster changed everyone in America, including Beth. She had to face the fact that had Ken been in New York, he might have been one of the 343 firemen who perished in the flames of the Twin Towers. Since first meeting Ken, Beth tried not to think of the possibility of him dying, but she couldn't do this now. She became agitated and shared her worries with him. Ken tried to allay them, but was unsuccessful.

"Ken, I've always known that being a fireman could be dangerous, but 9/11 brought this home. You could die when you go to any fire, even a small one. Do you ever think about this?"

"No, not really. This is my job and part of it requires me to do what most people wouldn't do – enter a dangerous, possibly life-threatening situation. But I accept that. It's harder for me now that I have a family, but part of my identity that I could never give up is being a fireman."

"I would never ask you to give it up. It's who you are and one of the many reasons I love you."

Ken got the poster of the NYC firemen hoisting the flag in the ashes of the Twin Towers after 9/11. He hung it next to his poster of *The Fireman's Prayer*. He also put the photo of him receiving the medal for his valor and the accompanying certificate on the wall.

Ken looked at his fireman's wall frequently. It made him proud. Beth avoided looking at it because of the fears it aroused in her.

Had Beth been alive in 2009, she would have been overcome with grief when nine Charleston firemen died in a fire at a sofa store. She might have asked Ken to reconsider his profession, but she wasn't there to witness that tragedy. Ken, like his fellow firemen, was overcome with grief, but not crippled by it, knowing that death was a companion to all firemen.

During their first year of marriage, they saved their money so they could buy a house. They looked at 15 before they found the house that met two of their requirements: a wrap-around front porch and a spacious back yard. It was in Mt. Pleasant, a suburb outside of Charleston. Although it was a commute for both of them, they didn't want to change their jobs. Ken, especially, could not leave his fellow firemen. They were more than co-workers. They were his source of strength. They were his brothers.

In the second year of their marriage, they decided it was time to start a family. They had discussed having a big family. Beth wanted four kids and Ken wanted five. They kidded that they would have four and a half. Beth got pregnant the third month after she stopped using the pill. She had an easy pregnancy and birth. Randy was a good baby who ate heartily, slept well, and mastered all the developmental milestones on time. Like many first time parents, Beth checked his progress daily to make sure he was the perfect child. His personality was more like Ken's than Beth's. He was quiet, even placid. He studied people as if he were analyzing their motives. He was extremely attached to Beth. Every morning he cried when she dropped him off at day care. When the three were together, he preferred being held by Beth or holding her hand instead of Ken's. Ken kidded that Randy was a momma's boy, but he liked the special love they shared. Maybe because he had such a special love for Beth himself. He took countless pictures of Beth holding Randy. He called them his Madonna and child collection.

Randy was damaged by Beth's death as much as Ken, but in a different way, probably because he was three and couldn't conceptualize the finality of death. Ken couldn't be a father to Randy after Beth's death. Although he loved Randy, he secretly wished that Randy had died, not Sabrina. When he had these thoughts, he was flooded with guilt. For the first two years after the accident, Ken ignored Randy even when Randy touched him. He pushed him away when Randy tried to climb into his lap. He never hugged, kissed, or even touched him. He had unconsciously become like his parents. What saved Randy from Ken's rejection was his Uncle Matt who provided him with the unconditional love, affection, and the stability he needed to survive.

After Beth and Ken married, Matt lived with them off and on. He was close to them and shared many meals with them when he wasn't going to school or working two jobs. Their relationship was like Ken's relationship with Al and Christie had been before he

married. Although Matt saw Beth and Ken less when he moved to Columbia, he still talked to them almost daily. They were his only family and he treasured them.

When Randy was two, Ken and Beth decided to try for another baby, and they were blessed with Sabrina. Although Beth had a difficult pregnancy gaining 60 pounds and having high blood pressure, she had a normal delivery. Sabrina was a blessing from the day of her birth. She, too, was a good baby like Randy had been, but the difference between them was Sabrina's love of people which was evident from an early age. She smiled and cooed at people. She initiated social interactions by smiling first at people, even strangers. And she looked like Beth with her red hair, blue eyes, and ivory skin. In all ways, she was a miniature version of Beth. Ken called her his mini-Beth.

Sabrina's favorite parent was Ken. They had a love affair from the start. Sometimes he found that he confused his love of Sabrina with his love of Beth. They both overwhelmed him. Beth kidded Ken that Sabrina was her daddy's special girl, and she was.

Ken tried to forget the conversation he and Beth had the night before the accident.

Beth said, "How about trying for a third baby? That would make Sabrina about two if all goes well. I'll go off the pill starting tomorrow which gives us a few months before we create another McNair. But let's get some practice tonight."

Ken's happy dreams of his life before the accident were cut short by the phone. Those were his last happy dreams for many, many years. They were replaced by the dreams of the accident and dreams of revenge. He tried to keep his past alive by looking at the many photos and videos he'd taken. But after a while, they made him feel more anger at his loss than thankful for what he'd had.

Matt was on the phone. He was at the hospital and wanted to know if Ken wanted to meet him there. Ken said no. He told Matt to say his good-byes, and come to the house. They would begin their mourning period together. Eventually, Matt moved on to the healing period. It would take years before Ken could take his first step into the healing period.

Chapter 7

Matt went directly to the hospital knowing that the sight of the bodies of his beloved sister and niece was going to be the worst experience of his life; worse than seeing his mother's desiccated body after dying of pancreatic cancer; worse than seeing scattered body parts of Iraqi children who died after stepping on a land mine while playing soccer; worse than seeing one of his buddies burned alive after his truck hit an IED.

Matt was familiar with death; in fact, he was on speaking terms with it. During his time in Iraq, he faced it daily. He didn't dwell on it then. It was a presence in his life, like air.

If he dwelt on it, he wouldn't be able to do his job. He wouldn't be able to be a soldier, and a job requirement for being a soldier was killing.

After he returned home, he constantly thought about the meaning of life and death. His faith in God, his philosophy of life, his stable personality, and most of all his dialogues with Beth helped him find answers to the many questions that flooded his mind. He used these answers to design a life with purpose. But Beth and Sabrina's deaths rekindled the questions of the meaning of life and death in a whole new light. His answers had to be re-examined.

Maybe Matt's most painful wartime experiences involved his role in actually killing people. He knew he killed others, some the enemy and some "collateral damage," the inevitable innocent victims of war, usually children. After a battle, he would look at each body and wonder if he was the one who ended the person's life. When the body was obviously the enemy, he didn't feel guilt because in war it was *him or me*. But when the body was collateral damage, he had to work at not feeling guilt. But how could he not feel guilt when he saw a mother trying to nurse her dead baby? He could argue for collective guilt for all those responsible for the war, but individuals make up the collective, and he was one of the individuals.

Matt's best and worst wartime memory was his killing two rooftop snipers who had his unit pinned down. He had snuck up to the roof of an adjoining building and silently jumped onto the roof where the snipers were. Before they could turn, he shot each of them in the head. He looked at them sprawled on the roof, their keffiyehs soaked in blood and brain tissue. For a brief second, he pictured their wives and children wailing over their mutilated bodies, but he quickly dispelled the image. He knew he would rather see their relatives crying than the relatives of the men in his unit. When his unit wildly congratulated him on his killing the snipers, he felt jubilation and pride in causing their deaths. The medal he was awarded for his actions also reinforced his belief that this was a good "kill."

He knew seeing Beth and Sabrina would be worse than all of the war-time deaths combined, and it was. They were not victims of war or illness. They were healthy, good people taken in the prime of their lives. They were two of the four people in the world who he loved. They were half of his entire family.

Keisha Baker, a nurse, greeted him and led him to a room with Beth and Sabrina's bodies. When Matt saw Sabrina, he pressed his face into her tiny body as he murmured "I love you," over and over. At the sight of Beth's body, he froze in disbelief that the person he loved more than anyone in the world had been taken from him so cruelly. He felt a pain in his chest; it was his heart breaking.

He held Beth's hand, and said, "My darling Beth, don't worry. I'll take care of Ken and Randy. You know I can make it, but I'm not sure about them. I have my faith in God

and myself after surviving Iraq and mom's death. Maybe I'll even be stronger because you'll guide me every day for the rest of my life. I'll listen for your voice. Just murmur in my ear.

Ken and Randy are both fragile. You were the one who strengthened them. Now I have to do it. I know I won't be able to fill your shoes, but I'll do my best. I'll devote my life to them. Rest in peace knowing that I'll carry on your mission in life – to do good for Ken and Randy and the world. I'll miss you so much my beloved sister, but you'll always be with me. I'll live my life as I know you would want me to.”

As he left the room, he realized that he hadn't cried. Matt had no tears for death. He did not fear death for himself. What he feared were the scars death left on its survivors. He knew there were few people like him. He also knew that it had taken him years of dialoging with God and Beth to finally arrive at an acceptable interpretation of the meaning of life and death. He would have to re-examine the interpretation in light of Beth's passing.

Matt was a deeply religious man, but not in the conventional sense. He was a follower of deism, a philosophy that posits that God exists and that He created the universe. Matt rejected religions based on the Bible, miracles, the supernatural, and dogma. He knew most of the people on Earth needed religions and their comforting rituals, but he didn't. He was a follower of Thomas Jefferson's view that Jesus was a moral teacher and a good man, but not divine. He found the idea of the resurrection of Jesus a childish fairy tale, but he couldn't articulate that to anyone because he didn't want to belittle the beliefs of others. He believed that if people lived a moral life no matter their religion, even if it was paganism, they should be respected.

He had read the book *Jefferson's Bible* many times. Like Jefferson, he did not believe that God was involved in individuals' lives. He felt that man can only know God through reason and observation of the universe. When he was with Beth and Sabrina, he knew there was a God for only a higher being could have created such perfection.

Although he was not a member of any church, Matt frequently accompanied Beth to church. He and Don Smith got along well despite their differing theological views. They frequently discussed (or argued) about their interpretations of God and Jesus. Don respected Matt because his commitment to God and living a moral life was as strong as any member of an organized religion. Don suggested that Matt study theology because he thought he had the makings of a good minister. Matt kidded that a study of theology might turn him into an atheist. Matt respected Don because he was a good man and had been the source of strength for Beth and some troubled veterans in the congregation.

Later when Ken told Matt how he'd reacted to Don at the hospital, Matt felt badly for both of them. He understood Ken's fury and his rejection of God, and he understood Don and his reaction to the profane insults Ken hurled at God. He hoped that someday they could reconcile, and that someday did come years later.

Matt drove to the McNair house. He knew it well. He had eaten so many meals there, slept so many nights there, and enjoyed holidays and life celebrations there. Although he had lived many places, he considered this his home, the place he could always go and be loved. He sat in the car and stared at this house that was now haunted with painful happy memories.

He unlocked the door and called for Ken. When there was no answer, he walked through the house trying to ignore signs of Beth and Sabrina's last hours. He found Ken fast asleep. When he sat on the edge of the bed, Ken stirred. He opened his eyes and saw Matt, but didn't immediately understand why he was there. Then the realization hit him, and he cried as the memories of the day came flooding back. Matt held him and soothed him like a baby.

"Our girls are gone. We have to go on without them. And we have to make sure Randy is not damaged by this even though we are. We have to help him survive. That will give meaning to our lives, and help us make it."

In a raspy voice, Ken said, "I don't want to survive. Maybe I should kill myself and have you raise Randy."

"I don't want to ever hear you say that again. You know that Beth wouldn't want that. She would want you to carry on. She would want you to be the best father possible to Randy. Focus on Beth and the life she would want for us."

"I can't."

"You will. I'll be with you every step of the way. I'll always be here for you and Randy. We'll make it for Beth's sake. We have to keep Beth alive through the way we live. We constantly have to ask ourselves what Beth would want us to do. She'll be our guide. We must always listen to what she tells us."

Ken got up and showered while Matt prepared sandwiches. The kitchen was an especially painful room for Matt because it had been Beth's domain. She was either cooking, or just sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee, reading, or looking out at the backyard smiling with satisfaction at her blessed life.

While Ken and Matt were eating, the doorbell rang. It was Christie, Al, and Randy. They had come for some of Randy's clothes and toys, and for Randy to spend some time with Ken and Matt before he temporarily moved in with Christie and Al.

When Randy saw Matt, he ran to his arms and hugged him tightly. Ken knew that Randy loved Matt more than him, and that was okay with him. He knew that Matt was the only one who could help Randy meet the challenges of his new life. They went in the yard to swing Randy. After having Matt and then Ken push him on the swing, Randy looked around and asked, "Where's Mommy and Rina?"

Since Randy couldn't say Sabrina when he was younger and used the shortened version of her name, everyone called Sabrina - Rina.

They adults looked at each other knowing that they couldn't avoid telling him something. They couldn't lie. They had to build the foundation for an eventual understanding of what had happened. They wanted to give him the bare minimum tailored to a child's level of understanding, and gradually give him more information as he developed cognitively and emotionally.

They sat at the picnic table. Matt held Randy on his lap and took the lead because he knew that Ken couldn't explain the accident now, or maybe ever.

"Hey Randy, something bad happened to Mommy and Rina. A car ran them over at church this morning."

Randy immediately said, "Oh yeah." As he recalled the horrible event, his face screwed up, he cried like a new-born baby with pulsating sobs, and shook violently. Matt hugged him tightly as he rocked him back and forth.

"They went to Heaven to be with God. We won't see them for a long time. But they'll be fine in Heaven. God will take care of them."

"Where's Heaven?"

"Up in the sky."

"Can we take a plane there and see them?"

"No. Planes don't go there."

"How did they get there?"

The questions were coming faster than Matt had anticipated. He wasn't ready to explain transmigration of the soul to a traumatized three-year old.

Fortunately, Christie came to the rescue. "Hey Randy, we'll talk about this later. How about getting some ice cream now? Let's go to Dairy King. I think their special flavor this week is coconut, and you can even get a big kid's waffle cone."

While they had been in the backyard, Al had packed a bag of clothes and toys for Randy. Matt hugged Randy tightly and said, "Be a good boy for Aunt Christie and Uncle Al. We'll see you tomorrow. Maybe we can go to the park and swing on the swings there and go on the curly slide."

Trying not to cry, Ken hugged Randy tightly. Randy said, "Ouch. You're hurting me Daddy."

Ken replied, "I'm hugging you tight so you'll know how much I love you."

As Ken spoke these words, he was hit by their truth. When Beth and Sabrina were alive, Ken hadn't paid as much attention to Randy as to his girls. But now he knew that he had to be the center of Randy's world, but he wasn't sure he could meet this challenge. He felt too damaged to rescue his son. Someone had to rescue him first.

Then Christie, Al, and Randy left for the ice cream store to drown their sorrows in coconut ice cream. Matt and Ken continued sitting at the picnic table. On his drive from Columbia, Matt had thought about his plans after graduation at the end of May. He needed to share them so Ken would know he wouldn't be alone. Matt would be there for him and Randy.

"Ken, I've decided not to move to Atlanta as I'd planned. After graduation, I'm moving back here."

"But you wanted that job. It was your dream job. And you were so excited about living in Atlanta with your girlfriend."

"I'm sure I can get a good job here. There must be lots of opportunities. This area is really growing. I'll live with you and Randy for a while. And when I get a good job and you guys don't need me anymore, I'll get my own bachelor pad."

You know I can't leave you guys. You're my life."

Ken was relieved. He knew that he needed Matt as a substitute for Beth. He knew he couldn't make it without him, but he was saddened to hear of the end of Matt's dreams. At that moment, Ken was filled with a very deep love for Matt because of the sacrifices he was willing to make for him and Randy, and because he was Beth's beloved brother. He looked into Matt's blue eyes and saw Beth there.

Ken turned the conversation to the most pressing immediate issue in their lives – the funeral.

"We need to talk about the funeral. I wish we didn't have to have one, but I know we do. I'd like a small funeral for both the girls with just close friends. Let's ask Don to put together something for Friday. That should give him enough time to plan the funeral and for us to find a burial site."

Matt, you need to be with me when I talk to Don because I had a run-in with him at the hospital. I'll tell you about it later. I think he would be more comfortable dealing with you."

Matt was surprised at how rational Ken had become. Although he'd thought about his own future, he hadn't thought about the near future of the next few days.

“OK, let’s meet with Don tomorrow and set everything in motion.”

And they did. Don planned the funeral for Friday morning. He envisioned a service with pieces written by Matt and himself. He knew that Ken didn’t want to speak nor did he want someone to read what he wrote. His feelings were too raw to share. He also couldn’t trust Ken not to blaspheme God. They decided that Randy shouldn’t be there. He would ask too many questions they couldn’t answer. They would also have to explain that Beth and Sabrina were in the caskets and that would be too traumatic for all of them. Randy didn’t need to be haunted by that memory. They arranged for Kathy Moran to baby sit with him since she had comforted him at the accident.

On the morning of the funeral, Ken and Matt wore suits with ties that Beth had given them. She loved buying them ties for different occasions. Ken wore his tie with cartoon firemen on it. It was short because it was designed for children. Matt wore his tie with the scales of justice which Beth had given him for his birthday after he completed his first year of law school.

The two caskets were covered with flowers. Obviously, they weren’t opened considering the injuries that Beth and Sabrina had suffered. On each of the caskets was a picture of them alone, and between the caskets was a table holding several pictures of Beth and Sabrina together. Seeing the baby sized coffin was heartbreaking. It was so small; it looked like a violin case.

Although Ken wanted a small funeral, many of the church members came uninvited. They had such deep affection for Beth that they felt compelled to come. Ken understood. He knew that many people loved Beth. He didn’t want to deprive them of the opportunity to say good-bye to her, but their visible sorrow only deepened his. Also, many firemen came, including the Charleston Fire Chief whom he’d met at the awards ceremony.

Don led the congregation in readings: the 23rd Psalm, John 14 - *Do not let your hearts be troubled*; John 8 – *For God so loved the world*; Romans 8 – *If God is with us, who is against us*; the Lord’s Prayer, and the Serenity Prayer. Don’s wife played Beth’s favorite hymns – *Amazing Grace* and *A Mighty Fortress is our God*.

Don was calm and confident. He had overcome his initial uncertainty, and now readily resumed his role as religious leader and comforter to his flock. As he delivered his remarks, he felt Beth’s presence. He knew she was smiling down on him, approving the service. Before he spoke, he looked upward and blew a kiss to Beth.

“There are so many things I want to say about Beth and Sabrina. I don’t know where to start. Ah Sabrina or Rina as she was known to her family was a gift from God. In this baby, we saw innocence. We saw how humans are born – with faith and love and purity. In

her short life of 11 months, she made us all richer – richer in our knowledge of the innate goodness of mankind and our love of family.

Her death leads us to ask ourselves why God would take a baby's life. We all have different answers, but we must all return to the knowledge that God is supreme and we cannot always know His intentions. We recognize His greatness when we think of the perfection he created with Sabrina. We had her for too short a time, but the time we had her filled us with endless joy. Eleven months of life with Rina was more than 111 years with a hateful, evil person. If we look at the quality of Rina's life, not the quantity, we realize the life-changing impact she had on us. Thank you God for blessing us with Rina.

It is hard for me to talk about Beth because I loved her dearly. She was more than a parishioner to me. She was a model of Christ's message to give unselfishly to others. I cannot tell you how many families in this congregation were healed by Beth. She helped so many cope with death, illness, loss, and tragedy. I think it was part of her overall mission in life to be a dispenser of healing. In her profession as a pharmacist, she dispensed medications to heal physical ailments. In her life's work, she dispensed faith to heal spiritual ailments.

To the love of her life, Ken, she was the epitome of goodness and love. He talked about how Beth saved him from falling into the depths of despair and depression at a vulnerable point in his life. He was a fireman who rescued people from physical fires. Beth was a firewoman who rescued Ken and others from emotional and spiritual fires.”

When Ken heard Don's words about Beth rescuing Ken, he realized how much he needed rescue now. He was desperate. He realized that the only one who might save him now was Matt. There was no one else in his life. He shut his eyes tightly to stop the avalanche of tears threatening to erupt.

“We all are richer for having shared in the lives of Beth and Sabrina. Although I will miss her as I minister to my congregation, she will be at my side guiding me to help those in need. Thank you Beth. I will treasure your memory forever. And thank you God for creating Beth and Sabrina and gifting them to us.”

After Don sat down, there was silence for a few minutes. People were lost in their memories of Beth and their sorrow. Then Matt slowly walked to the pulpit. He didn't have any written remarks. He knew what he wanted to say since he first heard of Beth's death.

“I loved Beth with all my heart and soul because she was my big sister who always supported me with her unconditional love. When our beloved mother died, she stepped into her shoes and became my mother. She was everything to me – mother, sister, spiritual guide, and biggest fan. She believed that I could do anything, and I tried to live up to her beliefs in me. I will continue to do that for the rest of my life.

As Don said, Beth was a healer. She helped me heal when I returned from Iraq, a man confused by the death and destruction I'd witnessed there. Beth taught me to understand that life has no meaning without death. She said that we could die at any moment. She said that she could be struck by lightning and die. She wasn't struck by lightning – it was an out-of-control car. Because of this we have to make every moment we live worthwhile. We have to live a life that will make the world better even if it's only by doing small things because the small things add up and become big things. Beth lived her life that way – she made every moment count. By following Beth's example, she will not have died in vain.

Beth gave me a sense of direction. She talked about how being a pharmacist made her feel that she was helping people get better. She encouraged me to go to law school so that I could help people too. She especially wanted me to defend the poor and needy. She encouraged me to fight for equal justice for all. I will dedicate my life to that thanks to her.

I've told you about the role Beth played in my life. Now think of the role she played in your life. Didn't she see the best in you? Didn't she encourage you to do the right thing? She was everyone's biggest fan and we tried to live up to her image of us. Remember that image she had of you as you go on with your life. Try to dedicate your life to being the best person Beth thought you could be."

Ken knew this would be the only way he could survive – to live up to Beth's belief in him. If only he could do this. It would be so hard.

"Oh my Rina - I loved her with all my heart because she was Beth's child and because of the goodness she spread with her very presence. Whenever she laughed, which was often, my heart fluttered. Whenever I was with her, I felt the world got brighter. Ken called her his mini-Beth, and she was. If she had lived, she would have grown up to be much like Beth – a spreader of the joy of living."

He walked to the caskets and tenderly kissed each as he whispered good-bye.

The service at the cemetery was short with Don saying a few prayers. Everyone shoveled some dirt on the caskets and said their farewells. After everyone left, Ken lingered. He didn't want to leave, but Matt didn't want him to see the gravediggers fill the graves. After ten minutes, he gently pulled Ken away and they left to begin a new life, one neither of them wanted to live without Beth.

PART II

Chapter 8

It was about noon when the phone rang with news that would change the Nelson family forever. It's strange how we try to prepare ourselves for all eventualities that might come into our lives. We worry; we fret; we agonize. What if we lose our job? What if we get cancer? What if our house burns down? But there is no way that the Nelsons could have prepared themselves for the catastrophe that devastated their lives.

Amy Nelson answered the phone thinking that it was her friend calling about going out to celebrate her birthday. But it wasn't her friend. It was a Charleston police detective named Ed Brent who told Amy that her parents had been in a serious automobile accident, and that she should come to Charleston as soon as possible. For some irrational reason, Amy first asked about where the accident had taken place, rather than asking about her parents' condition. She wondered where the accident had occurred because she knew that every Sunday morning her parents attended church services in old Charleston which was about a 40 minute drive from their condo on the Isle of Palms. The weather was rainy and foggy in both North and South Carolina so Amy thought the accident might be weather-related. She also knew of her father's dread of driving over the bridge, and hoped it hadn't happened there. She was relieved when Detective Brent said that it occurred at the church since she naively thought that nothing serious could happen at a church. When Amy asked about details, he refused to elaborate. He said that he'd tell her all about it when she got to Charleston.

Detective Brent told Amy that he'd also contacted her brother, Mitch, who was flying in from Los Angeles with his wife, Annie. He said that he'd gotten their names from Don Smith, the Charleston Methodist pastor who was also a friend of her father's. Everyone was Joe Silver's friend. Joe liked everyone, and everyone liked Joe. He was known as Mr. Nice Guy which made his role as a killer all the more implausible.

Amy realized that the accident must have been serious if Mitch had been called. She nervously asked about her parents' status, but Detective Brent wouldn't disclose specifics on the phone. He told her to meet him at Charleston Hospital.

As soon as Amy hung up, she screamed for her husband, Jack, and her daughters, Lilly and Molly. Jack had been doing the crossword puzzle from the Sunday newspaper and the girls were getting ready for a friends' birthday party. From the look on Amy's face, they knew something serious had happened. She told them everything that Brent had told her. They pelted her with questions, but she kept saying, "I don't know, I don't know," until finally she exploded with exasperation, "Don't ask me any more questions."

Jack hugged her as she shed bitter tears. "I know they're dead."

"You don't know that. They're probably just injured." But as he uttered these words, he didn't believe them.

“I’m going to call Mitch.”

Mitch had no more information about the accident than Amy. He and Annie were taking the next available flight to Atlanta, and then connecting to Charleston. Upon arrival, they would rent a car, and meet them at the hospital. He would call every few hours to keep them posted on their progress. It wasn’t possible to make it to Charleston that day, but he hoped to arrive as early as possible on Monday. Neither Mitch nor Amy wanted to ask the dreaded question haunting them. “Are our parents dead?”

The Nelsons haphazardly threw clothes in suitcases, not knowing how much to take since they didn’t know how long they’d be in Charleston. Jack called their neighbors, Harry and Betty Pressman, to ask them to look after their house. Before they left, the Pressmans came over to tell them to keep in close touch. The looks on their faces mirrored the looks on the Nelson family’s faces – apprehension about the unknown and realization that the worst outcome was more than just a possibility; it was a probability. The Pressmans hugged them tightly hoping to infuse them with strength to face whatever the future held.

No one spoke much during the four hour drive from Charlotte to Charleston. They didn’t even play the radio. They were in a state of paralysis at how their lives had changed because of one phone call.

When they arrived at the hospital, they checked in at the front desk and asked that Detective Brent be paged. They were quaking with anxiety as they waited for him. In minutes, they were approached by a slight black man dressed in a dark suit and tie. Like Ken, they thought that he looked more like a minister or an undertaker than a policeman.

He greeted each of the family members and told them to call him Ed. A nurse named Keisha Baker joined them to explain the medical aspects of Joe and Martha’s status and to provide additional emotional support. She was a strikingly beautiful black woman. She looked like a nurse from the cast of *Gray’s Anatomy*.

They led the family to a conference room where Ed somberly told them what had happened. He looked directly into Amy’s eyes, and in a soft voice said, “Mrs. Nelson, I’m sorry to tell you that your parents were in a very serious accident earlier today. Your mother has passed away, and your father is in critical condition.”

“Oh my God. Oh my God. No. I can’t believe it. It can’t be. Dead. She can’t be dead. I just talked to her last night.”

But as she said these words, she knew they were true. Since Ed’s phone call she knew her mother was dead. She sensed that she was motherless. She felt as if one of her hands had been amputated. She felt incomplete. Oh how she longed to be held by her mother in the way only mothers can protect you with their arms sheltering you from the harsh world.

Amy sobbed uncontrollably. Jack hugged her as he soaked her hair with his own tears. Lilly and Molly cried and hugged each other. The Nelsons had always been calm, controlled people, but now they were out of control. It was as if their perfect world was a glass globe that had shattered into millions of shards. There was no way they could ever make the world whole again. The shards couldn't be glued together.

Finally, Jack gained some control and asked, "What happened?"

"They were going to church. Joe was headed to a spot in the back row of the parking lot when he lost control of the car. It seems that he accidentally accelerated and crashed into the church at a high speed. Martha had already taken off her seat belt so she was thrown into the airbag. She died soon after arriving at the hospital. Joe was badly injured."

"What's his condition?" Jack asked.

"We don't know yet. He's unconscious with severe head and facial injuries."

"Will he live?"

"We don't know."

In a trembling voice, Lilly asked, "Why did this happen?"

"We think that he may have had a stroke or a heart attack, and that's what caused his foot to slam down on the gas pedal. He was probably unconscious. He was approaching the parking spot head-on down an open lane so the car had time to accelerate."

We accessed his medical records and know that he has extremely high blood pressure that his doctors had been having trouble controlling with medication. And last month he had a mini-stroke. We won't know if these were factors until we get more information."

Amy said, "I didn't know about the mini-stroke, but I thought the high blood pressure was being controlled with the medication. Why didn't they tell me? I'm sure they didn't want to worry me. They were always trying to protect me even though I'm a nurse. To them, I was still their little girl. Every time I asked about his health, he'd say that everything was under control. I should have pushed, but he looked and acted fine. He shouldn't have been driving, but he never let Mom drive when they were together. It was a macho thing."

Where's my mother? Can I see her? I need to see her. I need to hold her. I need to touch her. I need my mommy. Mommy. Mommy." She spoke these last words with desperation, reverting to how she referred to her mother when she was a child.

"Before you see her or your father, there's more you need to know."

He hesitated and took a deep breath before continuing with what was possibly the worst news of all. “There was a woman wheeling a baby in a stroller on the sidewalk in front of the parking space. The car hit them.”

He intentionally did not say, “Your father hit them.” Rather, he made the accident impersonal, blaming the car, not Joe.

Amy whispered, “What happened to them?”

Ed stared at her, and in a hoarse whisper said, “They both died instantly.”

The Nelsons had been devastated by the news of Joe and Martha, but this was beyond belief. The four of them sobbed with the realization that Joe had killed a woman and her baby. Unintentionally, but nevertheless, he was responsible for their deaths. They were paralyzed. They didn’t know what to say or do.

Jack finally asked about the mother and baby. “Who are they?” Then he corrected himself. “Who were they?”

“The woman’s name was Beth McNair and the baby was Sabrina. She was 11 months old. Her husband, Ken, was walking a few feet behind them holding the hand of their son, Randy, who was pulling back because he didn’t want to go to church. That probably saved their lives.”

Amy asked, “So this man saw his wife and baby killed? And the little boy saw his mother and sister killed?”

“Yes.” Ed’s voice cracked as he sought to control his emotions. Even a hardened policeman like Ed who had seen all types of violence and brutality was not immune from the impact of witnessing the death of innocents. The sight of their mangled bodies, especially Sabrina’s, would haunt him for the rest of his life. He shared his feelings with the police department psychologist, his wife, and his minister who helped him find peace. However, that peace would be challenged when Ed had to face the cruelty of the deaths of innocents when he worked the murders at the Charleston black church twelve years later. He again had to embark on the road to find peace which proved more difficult because of three complicating issues not involved in the accident: premeditated murder, racism, and the existence of evil in our lives.

The accident was like a stone that had been thrown into a pond, creating expanding ripples that had no end until they reached the shore. Each ripple represented a survivor..... Ken, Randy, Matt, Amy, Jack, Molly, and Lilly. Even Ed Brent and Don Smith were gentle ripples. Each ripple had to find its way to the shore which could only be accomplished by coming to terms with the meaning of the accident. For Lilly, that distance would prove long and arduous. For Ken, the distance would be the longest and hardest to conquer.

Although all of the Nelsons were close to Joe and Martha, Lilly had a special relationship with them. Lilly idolized them. She thought they were the most perfect people in the world. And they, likewise, thought she was superlative in everything – kindest, smartest, prettiest, and best dancer. She was the one who was most devastated by their deaths. In the past, she found it difficult to deal with death. When their dog, Daisy, ran into the street and was run over by a car in front of their home as the family helplessly watched, she couldn't be consoled for days. It would take her many years to heal from her grandparents' deaths.

Lilly was different from her parents and Molly. They were stronger emotionally. She was vulnerable. Since adolescence, she had difficulty coping with anxiety. Before an exam or dance recital, she would be overcome with almost crippling worry. What if she failed the exam (which she never did)? What if she fell while dancing (which she never did)? For many years, she battled anxiety and depression which intertwined with her battle to cope with her grief over her grandparents' deaths.

For a while, the Nelsons didn't talk. They were lost in thought as they alternated between sobbing and sniffing. Everyone stopped when Keisha's cell phone dinged. She read the message, and took a deep breath. They looked at her knowing from the expression on her face what she was going to say.

Stiffening her body, Keisha said, "I'm so sorry to tell you that your father passed several minutes ago."

Amy was growing increasingly agitated. "I need to see my parents now. Now! Now! I need to say good-bye. I can't think of anything but them right now. I don't want to think of the accident. I can't think of it. That's a nightmare that will haunt me for the rest of my life. I need to spend as much time with them now as I can before they're taken away. I have to tell them everything that I would have told them over their lifetimes. Oh my God, they'll never see the girls graduate or marry or have kids. They'll miss their lives."

Lilly wasn't listening to her mother. Since Ed had told them about the McNairs, she was transfixed by mental depictions of the accident playing out in her mind. These weren't based on actual experiences like Ken and Randy's memories were, but on what her imagination conjured up. And they were even more dramatic than the actual event. She saw the Mercedes smash into Beth and Sabrina, sending their bodies flying ten feet in the air. Their hair and limbs splayed out as they floated slowly through the air, and then dropped precipitously to the ground. Black smoke and orangish red flames shot out of the car hood. Lilly saw Joe and Martha slumped forward, their heads soaked in blood from smashing into the windshield. Lilly stifled her screams at the imaginary accident scene playing a solo performance for her.

Over the years, Lilly's mental re-creations came to more closely resemble the actual accident due to her extensive researching of newspaper accounts and TV footage of the

accident. She became obsessed with knowing every detail, thinking that if she knew more about it, she could somehow roll back time and prevent it. She knew this was irrational, but the accident defied logic. Why would four innocent people die so cruelly? There was no rational answer so why couldn't she imagine time travel to change events. Much of her thinking about the accident was filled with "what ifs." What if Beth had walked beside Ken and Randy? Then she and Sabrina wouldn't have been hit. What if Joe had been stopped by a red light at the corner of the church? Then he would have hit an empty sidewalk. What if they hadn't gone to church that day? Then Beth and Sabrina wouldn't have been killed. The "what ifs" were endless, but alas you can't alter time no matter what Stephen King would have us believe.

One of the most painful sights she found from her research was Joe's damaged Mercedes. To her, the car was no longer a car; it had become a weapon of mass destruction. It was like a bomb had penetrated the brick wall. Years later, Lilly saw photos of cars used by terrorists to run over innocent people in public places. This was similar, only it wasn't intentional, and the driver, Joe, was a peace-loving man, not a hate-filled zealot. But the result was the same – mayhem, pandemonium, chaos, death.

Lilly collected print information and photos in albums, and she loaded videos of TV coverage of the accident onto thumb drives. Her family found her obsession with the accident morbid, and discouraged her from doing this. They refused to look at her collection. They wanted to erase memories of the accident along with memories of the burial of Joe and Martha, but never memories of Joe and Martha themselves. They wanted to remember the good times of which there were so many. They wanted to remember how they lived, not how they died. Lilly was different: she wanted to remember everything.

Joe and Martha were special in how they lived. Joe was an optimist who believed in the philosophy of focusing on the good things in life as a means of combating the bad things in life. He tried to imbue the Nelson family with this philosophy. When his daughter Amy was three, he started a bedtime ritual, which many years later, he used with his granddaughters Lilly and Molly.

When Lilly was young, she was sure that there was a bogeyman hiding in her closet and there were ghosts hovering outside her bedroom window. The bogeyman and ghosts only existed at bedtime. To allay her fears, Joe sat on the edge of her bed, and said, "Let's think of the good things. Shut your eyes. Now think of Minnie licking your face." Minnie was Lilly's black Lab who she pictured slobbering on her cheek. She even smelled her dog odor.

"Now think of eating a chocolate ice cream cone on a hot day. Be sure you lick the edges before it melts." Lilly's tongue moved fast to prevent the ice cream from dripping down the cone.

“Think of the beach and digging a giant hole for me to soak my feet in. You know how I love to soak my feet in cold water when I sweat in the hot sun.” Lilly felt sticky, wet sand webbing her fingers together. She smelled the salty air. She even pictured Joe’s hairy toes as he wiggled them like little puppets.

“Now think of how the sun will shine brightly tomorrow. There’ll be no darkness. Everything will be bright and shiny. You’ll be able to see the world clearly, and what you’ll see will be beautiful. And you’ll bring happiness to everyone you meet, and that’ll make you feel happy. And you’ll do things to make the world a better place. You’ll be Super Lilly.”

He’d give a quick tickle to Lilly’s tummy to make her giggle followed by a kiss and hug and a promise to stay in her room until she was asleep. As soon as Lilly’s head hit the pillow, she fell asleep. But the next night the bad things returned. They couldn’t be banished. They were stronger than the good things. The accident proved that.

With time, everyone in the Nelson family, except Lilly, adopted this philosophy again, and it helped them cope with the tragedy and move on with their lives. Lilly plodded on with her life, but with great difficulty because of her battles with anxiety and depression. But eventually she, too, was able to adopt this philosophy.

Chapter 9

Jack said, "I think we should see them as soon as possible. We all need to be with them."

Keisha replied, "I'll arrange it, but it'll be a little while. Please wait here. Meanwhile, I'll have someone bring you some sandwiches and drinks."

After she left, Jack asked Ed a question to which he knew the answer, but felt compelled to ask. "Will my father-in-law be charged with a crime? My brother-in-law Mitch is a lawyer and I'm sure he'll want to know the legal aspects"

"No. Mr. Silver won't be charged. He can't be since he's dead. But even if he had lived, I doubt if he'd had been charged based on what I know. It was strictly an accident. There was no negligence. However, there may be a lawyer who convinces Mr. McNair to sue Joe's estate, especially since he was comfortably off."

Then Ed changed the subject, eager to get away from the shroud of death that enveloped the room. "You're going to be here for a while so you need to make arrangements to stay at a nearby motel. Unless you want to stay at your in-laws' condo."

"No. Definitely not. We can't go there now. I don't know when we'll ever be able to go there."

But Jack did go to their condo the next week. He had to access their will and legal papers that were necessary to settle their estate, and he also wanted to take jewelry that was costly and/or of sentimental value. When the family got together for the funeral, they would divide the pieces.

When he first entered the condo, he went directly to Joe's office where he got his will and legal papers. Then he went to their bedroom where he knew the jewelry was kept. Up to this point, Joe had not been affected by seeing evidence of Joe and Martha's lives. But now he grew emotional as he saw their pajamas left on the bed. They had even left their bathroom light on expecting to return. Jack shut it. He cried as he thought about their unfinished lives. Then he went to the dressers where they kept their jewelry boxes. He placed them in his brief case. He felt like a jewel thief.

They knew it would take a while to sell the condo and settle the financial aspects of the estate. Joe was a wealthy man and had left everything to his children and grandchildren. But as the family discussed his estate, it became apparent that they wanted to give part of it to Ken. They didn't know if he was planning to sue the estate. They didn't care. They wanted to make sure that Ken and Randy never had to worry about money in the future. Some might have viewed this as bribery, but it wasn't. Some might have viewed it as a way to allay guilt they might have felt, but it wasn't. It was an act of kindness to make Ken's life easier. They

had their lawyer work with Ken's lawyer and accountant to give Ken three million dollars from the Silvers' estate. The money enabled Ken to leave the fire department for two years and then return part time.

Ed said, "I'll have one of the social workers, Rita Carnes, help you and your brother with hotel accommodations and anything else you might need. We'll also try to keep the press away. As you can imagine, this will be a front page story in the newspapers tomorrow. The story is already on the TV news. The media is trying to find something about your father to make this juicier. They even asked if alcohol and drug testing had turned up anything. If they could, they would link the accident to terrorism. Anything to sell a story."

Jack, in his usual take-charge manner, took charge. He said to Amy, "I'm going outside to make some calls. First to Patty to cancel all my appointments for this week and to tell everyone what's happened. They're all going to find out soon enough anyhow. I rather they hear what really happened instead of getting the media's version of the accident. Then I'll call Sheila so she can tell the staff and the docs that you won't be in for a while. I'll call Jackie to tell her the kids won't be in school and to contact their teachers. I'll call Harry to tell him that we'll be gone for a few days and to tell the neighbors what happened and to watch the house, especially with the possibility of a press invasion. I'll have him call the police to tell them to keep an eye on the house. I'll keep everyone updated through Patty, Sheila, and Harry. If we feel the need to talk to anyone, we'll call them, but we don't want anyone calling us. Is that okay with you?"

Amy nodded, not really knowing what she was agreeing to.

Patty was Jack's secretary. He was a partner in a CPA firm with two other accountants. They had been college classmates, and had just celebrated 25 years of being in business together.

Sheila was the office manager in the pediatric practice where Amy worked as a nurse, a job for which she was perfectly suited. She was magical with children. She even got kids to think that the shots she was going to give them wouldn't hurt. As she was poised to inject a child, she'd say, "You're going to feel a tiny prick or you might feel nothing at all because I'm going to sing the Barney song to you. Maybe you want to sing along with me. Look at the Barney poster on the wall." Then she'd yell the lyrics, *I love you, you love me. We're a happy family. With a great big hug and a kiss from me to you, won't you say you love me too?*"

Most kids didn't even notice the shot because they were distracted by a woman loudly singing a song.

Not only did Amy calm children, she calmed parents. She provided support to parents told about their child's serious illness by the doctors.

“As Dr. Epstein said, Timmy has Type I diabetes and he’ll need to be on a special diet, and he’ll also need to take daily insulin shots. I’ll go over the diet in detail with you, and I’ll teach you how to give the shots. It’s not really hard, and with practice, you’ll become quite good at it. With both of these medical procedures and most importantly your love, Timmy will be just fine. You can call me anytime to ask questions and get any help you need. I’m always here for you.”

Amy was a nurturer – to her husband, her children, her parents, her patients, and her friends. When she talked to people about their problems, they felt like she was applying a healing balm. They felt soothed and confident that good things would happen. And if she could do anything to make good things happen, she would. Amy was much like Beth, a woman she had never met and would never meet, but whose life was intertwined with hers forever.

Although Jack was an accountant, he found ways to be a nurturer too, but he did this through the community. He started serving as a Big Brother to Charlie when he was 11. On Friday mornings he read to kindergartners in a high poverty neighborhood. He believed that anything an individual did for the community, no matter how small, made the world a better place for everyone. He and Amy were living embodiments of not only thinking of good things, but of doing good things.

Lilly, who was 17, was a high school junior, and Molly, 15, was a freshman. They both did well academically and socially. They had a happy childhood. No, it was more than happy; it was idyllic. Everyone in the family loved everyone else unconditionally. Parents couldn’t love their kids more than Amy and Jack loved Lilly and Molly. Likewise, Lilly and Molly loved their parents. And everyone loved Joe and Martha. They were a great big happy family, just like the family in Barney’s song.

Amy and Jack were involved in Lilly and Molly’s lives, not from a sense of duty, but because they enjoyed being with them. Amy had been Molly’s Girl Scout leader, and Jack Lilly’s soccer coach. Lilly and Molly were passionate about dance, having taken lessons since the age of three. Amy and Jack always arranged their schedules so they could drive them to lessons although it was quite time consuming. They were happy when Lilly got her license and could do the driving. Amy and Jack always attended their dance recitals, and cheered and clapped more than other parents. They acted more like parents cheering on their kids at a football game than at a dance recital.

A word about ballet and how Lilly and Molly looked. Both girls appeared to have stepped out of a painting of ballerinas by Degas. They were both thin, but muscular. People often said that Lilly’s name fit her because she looked like a calla lily with her straight dark blond hair and reedy build.

The two girls looked similar, and were even mistaken for twins. But they were different in temperament and personality. Lilly was always concerned about what people thought of her. She became anxious whenever she was in a situation where she was the center of attention. She was more nervous giving an oral report to her history class of 20 students than she was dancing with a group before an audience of 300.

Like her parents, Lilly wanted to someday do good in the world. While in elementary school, she had volunteered to help in a preschool class for children with disabilities. She loved being with such children and was gratified when she helped them learn something new, however small. Since then, she thought that she would like to work with such children, perhaps as a special education teacher, a speech therapist, or a physical therapist. She didn't know exactly what she wanted to do, but she did know that she wanted to make such children's lives better.

Unlike Lilly, Molly was independent and didn't care what people thought of her. She had a clear career goal since she was eight. She wanted to be a vet. She claimed to love animals more than people, but not more than her family.

The family had season tickets to Charlotte Panthers football games. Jack was a fan. No, he was more than a fan. He was a fanatic. He often took Charlie, who was an excellent football player, to games. Like many kids who play football, Charlie hoped to someday play professionally. Charlie made it to his high school team and his team at the small college he attended. Then Charlie faced the reality that he wasn't good enough for the pros and became committed to becoming a successful accountant. With Jack's financial and emotional support, he achieved his goal. Jack helped him pass the test to become a CPA (on his second attempt), and then hired him to work at his firm.

When Joe and Martha lived in Charlotte, they lived just a few blocks from the Nelsons. Joe was a podiatrist and Martha worked in his office. The Silvers drove the girls places when their parents couldn't, especially to dance lessons; they babysat when the girls were young; they went to Panthers games with them; and they went on vacations together. Their lives were intertwined with each other.

Several years before Joe retired, the Silvers bought a one bedroom condo on the Isle of Palms, a beach community outside of Charleston. Once he retired, they sold the small condo and bought a spacious three bedroom condo overlooking the ocean so they could be at the beach 24 hours a day, on the sand during the day and on their balcony at night. They bought a large condo so there would be room for the Nelsons to visit frequently. Until the tragedy, their beach days were one of the very best things the Nelsons and the Silvers shared. How they treasured the long days swimming and sunning followed by evenings eating at seafood restaurants and strolling the historic streets of Charleston.

Every year, the Nelsons and Silvers went to the Spoleto Arts Festival in Charleston where they leisurely walked the aisles of arts and crafts exhibits in the slave market and went to plays and concerts. They had memories of good things like going to an Arthur Miller play at the historic Dock Theatre and enjoying a jazz concert on the quad of the College of Charleston on a humid, golden night. They loved taking horse and buggy rides through old Charleston, fascinated not only by the sights, but by horses wearing diapers so they wouldn't poop on the beautiful streets.

Until April 17, 2003, the Nelsons and Silvers led comfortable, affluent lives filled with love. At 8:45 A.M., their lives were demolished, literally and figuratively.

Chapter 10

Thirty minutes later, Keisha returned and said that she would take them to see Martha.

“I want you to prepare yourself for how she’ll look. Although she’s been cleaned, her face was seriously injured when she crashed into the airbag. In fact, you won’t see much of her face. She has bandages over much of her head.”

She led them to a room off the ER wing. Ironically, it was the same room where Beth and Sabrina had been taken to 12 hours earlier. The walls were witnesses to all the victims of the tragedy.

“You and your husband should go in first, and then the girls can go in afterwards.”

Lilly and Molly stood outside the door even though there were chairs down the hall. They held hands and looked into each other’s eyes seeking solace, but there was none to be found.

Amy and Jack were with Martha for about 30 minutes. When they emerged, Jack said, “It’s going to be very hard to see Mimi like this even though you won’t actually see her injuries because she’s all bandaged up. Each of you take our hands and let’s all say good-bye together.”

Lilly wasn’t sure that the body on the bed was really her grandmother’s. It certainly didn’t look like Mimi, the lady who always put on makeup even to go out for the mail because to quote her “you never know who you’ll bump into.”

Lilly took Mimi’s cold, rigid hand as she thought that this was the first time she had ever touched a dead person. In a husky whisper, she told her what she would most remember about her.

“Mimi, I love you so much. You were so much a part of my life. I can’t imagine going on without you.

I’ll always remember when we slept at your house and you sang songs to wake us up in the morning. You sang that song from *Oklahoma*, *Oh, What a Beautiful Morning*. You had such a pure, high voice. You told us to rise and shine, and find the surprises the day held because life was filled with wonderful surprises. Well, life was filled with a surprise today, but it was far from wonderful. Oh Mimi, I know I won’t be able to keep your optimism and Poppa’s alive in me. How can I be positive when there’s nothing positive in the world right now? I just want to roll up in a ball and cry forever, but I know you wouldn’t want me to do that.

Oh Mimi, I’ll always remember those nights when we sat on the balcony with Poppa who told ghost stories after he found out that Edgar Allan Poe had served in the military at

Fort Moultrie, the deserted army base down the beach. Remember when he took us to visit what was left of the fort to search for signs of Poe, but of course, all we found were droppings from birds, and they weren't even raven droppings. And to make matters worse, a bird pooped on you. You went crazy trying to get it off your shirt with a tissue. You even swore which you never did. You said, "I'm the cleanest, neatest person in the universe and I get shit upon by a goddamn bird. Okay, Joe wash my mouth out with soap." Then we laughed until we cried. I feel like saying every swear word in the world right now, but I know you wouldn't like that, and I'm sure Poppa would wash my mouth out.

I remember Poppa reciting Poe's poems to us. His favorite was *The Raven*. *Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary* which he spoke in his low, spooky voice. Sometimes he would read us Poe's stories. I still get goose bumps when I think of those scary stories about cellars and catacombs and beating hearts as we sat on a balcony of an elegant high rise overlooking a perfectly manicured beach. You held Molly and my hand protecting us from the creepy Poe images. Who's going to protect me from the creepy world now? Who's going to protect me from the bogeyman? You know, he's out there. He got you and Poppa.

Mimi, you won't be at my final dance recital next month or my induction into the National Honor Society. I know people will try to cheer me up and say that you'll be there in spirit, but you won't actually be there. I don't know if I can face the future without you and Poppa. You were my rock, my strength, my biggest fans."

Lilly stopped talking and blindly stared into space seeing the black hole in her future. She always had trouble conceptualizing what a black hole was; now she knew what it was.

"Mimi, I love you to the moon and stars, and I'll see you in Heaven someday. I know you'll be there to greet me because you were the kindest, most loving person I know. You'll light up heaven for everyone. It'll be a happier and classier place with you there."

Molly shut her eyes, folded her hands, and prayed silently before sharing her memories.

"Mimi, we were both so good at tennis. Neither Mom or Lilly liked tennis, and to tell the truth, that's probably because they were lousy at it. We always won or placed in the mother-daughter tournaments at the club. You were better than most of the young mothers on the other teams. And you lit up with such pride when you were mistaken for my mother.

You were one of the few people I knew who loved animals as much as me. We had so much fun volunteering at the SPCA. I remember you didn't even mind dirtying your expensive shoes when you stepped in dog poop. Well, maybe you minded a bit. It seems bird poop and dog poop were attracted to you."

Then the four Nelsons held hands and said, “We’ll love you forever,” and reluctantly left the room.

Keisha was waiting outside for them. She told them they wouldn’t be able to see Joe that night. Since it was midnight, she suggested that they go to the motel and get some rest because the next day would be even harder. She said that after they saw Joe, an autopsy would be performed because of the deaths of the McNairs and not knowing what caused Joe to speed up.

After seeing Martha and having to face the incontrovertible evidence that she was dead, questions flooded Lilly’s mind, but they were questions about the McNairs as well as her grandparents. Why would God take the life of an innocent baby? Why would God make Poppa, such a kind, good man, the instrument of the baby’s death? Why would the deaths of Poppa, Mimi, Beth, and Sabrina take place at a church, a place that is holy, that is supposedly a safe haven, a sanctuary? She had no answers then, and throughout her life she never found definitive answers. But eventually she learned to accept a positive philosophy of life without answers. She learned that being unable to find answers kept her humble. It kept her from what she viewed as the blind pomposity of others who claim to know the answers to life’s unanswerable questions. Saying that the untimely deaths of four innocent people was God’s will was simply unacceptable to Lilly.

The Nelsons went to a Marriott a few miles from the hospital where Jack had reserved a suite. Everyone wanted to take a scalding hot shower with the futile hope of washing away some of the day’s pain. If possible, all four Nelsons would have slept in the same bed so they could comfort each other with their body warmth and familiar smells. Amy and Jack slept in one bed and Lilly and Molly in another. No one wanted to be alone. They wanted to be physically connected to a loved one. This was a way of hoping no other loved one would suddenly be snatched from their lives.

Lilly had to block out the thought that someday her parents would die. She had to irrationally think that they would live forever, or that they would live to 100. She even hoped that she might die before her parents, but then she realized it would be too cruel for them to lose a child as well as their parents.

Although it was late and Lilly was totally exhausted, she couldn’t sleep. She lay awake thinking about death. She realized that not all deaths were equal. She thought that sudden deaths with no time to prepare good-byes were especially vicious. But on the other hand, seeing a loved one suffer over time could be viewed as crueler than sudden deaths by family members who have to helplessly stand by and watch their painful demise. It would be excruciating to watch a loved one with ALS lose voluntary control of every body part until all that was left was eye blinking. Death in such circumstances might be welcomed. Then there are mercy killings of terminally ill people or severely handicapped babies, like those born without brains. She had recently read about a man who shot his wife of 60 years because

she was in the advanced stage of Alzheimer's, and he couldn't see her suffer. Lilly thought it was wrong that he was charged with murder. He should have been charged with merciful love. Are there good deaths, justifiable deaths? What about people who want to commit suicide? Is it right to allow a person who cannot psychologically go on living choose to die? Should we be in control of our deaths as well as our lives?

Lilly thought of the discussions that Molly and Mimi had after they returned from the SPCA shelter where some animals had just been euthanized. At high kill shelters animals are put down because there's no one to adopt them. Injured horses are shot to put them out of their misery. Animals that are overpopulating an area and harming the environment are killed. Should people be treated differently than animals? Should animals be treated more humanely than humans? Interesting that the word human is embedded in the word humane. Humane refers to having the attributes of humans; namely, mercy, benevolence, and sympathy. Shouldn't mercy, benevolence, and sympathy govern decisions concerning life and death?

Deaths of good people are crueler than deaths of evil people. A police shooting of a serial killer is welcomed by the frightened public. Execution of terrorists, like the 9/11 terrorists, and Nazi mass murderers, like Eichmann, is viewed as right by most people. Capital punishment is considered justifiable for those who commit heinous crimes against humanity. Death of a despotic ruler like Gaddafi in Libya was welcomed by the citizens of that country. The assassinations of Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, and Lincoln were cruel because these people tried to do good in the world. No, all deaths aren't equal.

The questions Lilly asked herself that night of the accident multiplied over the years. Each question spawned dozens of others. And still there were no clear-cut answers to any of them. She spent countless nights asking herself these questions before she lulled herself into a fitful sleep.

The Nelsons rose early after a night of restless sleep and had breakfast in the lobby. Although they'd had only four hours of sleep, they were energized by the adrenaline pumping through their systems. They needed all the strength they could muster to face what the day would bring.

The Nelsons met Mitch and Annie at the hospital at 11:00. They had traveled all night and miraculously been able to get to Charleston from Los Angeles in 24 hours. And they indeed looked like they had traveled all night. Their eyes were slits, their skin was pale, their bodies were bent, and their clothes were rumpled.

They all kissed, hugged, and cried. Mitch and Amy went off by themselves for a few minutes to just hold each other tightly. Now their darkest nightmares had come true – their parents were dead. Mitch, the big brother, was comforting his little sister Amy.

Keisha had already taken them to say their good-byes to Martha. Their son, Adam, was in China on a studies abroad program and couldn't be with them to say good-bye. Although Adam went to Stanford in Palo Alto, he visited Joe and Martha as often as possible. Joe was so proud of Adam's fluency in Chinese, Russian, French, and German. Whenever they were together, Joe would make Adam speak in all four languages to impress his friends. At their Christmas gatherings, Joe, with his off-beat sense of humor, would pretend to be a puppet and have Adam sit behind him and act like a ventriloquist as Joe mouthed foreign words he didn't understand.

When Mitch and Anne were with Martha, they called Adam so he could say good-bye to her. In those days there were no phone cameras, no Skype, and no Face Time so he had to say good-bye over a static-filled international phone line.

Keisha escorted everyone to Joe's room. Before they entered, she told them to prepare themselves for how Joe looked. But her cautionary words could not prepare them for Joe's totally black and blue face. He looked broken. He was broken. He was no longer the vibrant funny man who was always telling corny jokes. Because he'd been a podiatrist, he told lots of stupid feet jokes. One that he told endlessly was: "What kind of shoes do lazy people wear?... Loafers." No matter how many times he told this joke, he always laughed louder than everyone else.

They took turns seeing Joe in small groups; first, Amy and Jack, then Mitch and Anne, and finally Lilly and Molly. When Mitch and Anne were with Joe, they telephoned Adam who said "good-bye" and "I love you" in Chinese, Russian, French, and German.

By the time it was Lilly's turn to say good-bye, she felt dazed hardly able to speak above a whisper. "Oh Poppa, I love you so much. I'll always treasure our walks on the beach. We walked farther than anyone else. We were the beach explorers who searched for special shells. You always said that we should create a psychological test like the Rorschach and see what people saw in our convoluted seashells. You'd say that we should call it the Silver-Nelson Test, and I'd say we should call it the Nelson-Silver Test. Poppa, I'll keep your seashells forever and picture you whenever I look at them."

Lilly couldn't bring herself to kiss Joe's battered face. She individually kissed each of his ten fingers tenderly.

After everyone said their good-byes, Keisha asked if they wanted the hospital chaplain to say prayers for Joe and Martha. They liked that idea, especially since they didn't know when or where their funerals would be. She said that she'd arranged both Joe and Martha's bodies to be brought to the same room and have the hospital chaplain make some comments.

They waited in the hospital chapel while Keisha made arrangements. The intimate, beautiful chapel soothed them. The sunlight gleaming through the stained glass windows lent a soft golden tinge to everything and everyone, creating the look of a religious painting.

While they waited, Amy, Jack, Mitch, and Anne discussed funeral plans.

Jack said, "We can't have the funeral at their church here in Charleston, not with the accident taking place right there and the McNairs being members. The minister might feel torn between doing a service for the McNairs and us. Not that there's a them vs. us. It just doesn't seem right.

I think we need to plan the funeral and burial in Charlotte. They belonged to Huntersville Methodist Church when they lived in Charlotte. I'll contact the minister there when I get home, and see if we can arrange for the funeral to be there. And they should be buried in Charlotte to be close to us."

Mitch commented, "You're absolutely right. We don't need to have the funeral right away. We can do it in a week or two when we know more about the accident and the results of the autopsy and after we get a burial site."

"Let's save the specifics until we get home. There's no question that there should be a joint funeral. They were inseparable in life, and they should be inseparable in death. Can you imagine if one of them had survived? I don't think Mom or Dad would have been able to carry on without the other. They really did love each other completely. Mom said that they were blessed with a perfect family – a loving marriage and two great kids and three great grandkids. She said that she and dad were a match made in heaven. Now they're in heaven together."

Mitch collapsed in convulsive tears. He had been somewhat controlled up to that point, but the fatigue and the realization of the finality of his parents' deaths caught up with him.

"I loved those two human beings so much. They were the best. Being so far away, I didn't see them that often especially since I've been so busy at work. How I regret not making more time to come home or have them visit us more often. It's been a nearly a year since they came out for Adam's induction into Phi Beta Kappa. God, they were so proud of him. Dad kidded that he wanted to take out an ad in all the newspapers in the country touting his grandson's accomplishments. We talked about a family trip for all of us to go to Hawaii to celebrate Adam's graduation next year. You always think they'll be time to spend together in the future, but suddenly there's no future."

Chapter 11

An hour later one of the hospital chaplains met with the family. Robert Hurley was a powerfully built black man. After he introduced himself, he told them an abbreviated autobiography. He played college football at Arizona and then professional football for the Chicago Bears for three years. After he retired because of injuries, he got the calling to the ministry. What a combination – a football player whose business was violence and a minister whose business was peace. Because of his massive size, he exuded an outer physical strength, but after talking to him for just a few minutes, the family felt his even greater inner strength – his spirituality.

He expressed his condolences and hugged each of the family members. When he hugged Lilly, she felt sheltered in his arms. She wished somehow his massive arms could have saved Joe, Martha, Beth, and Sabrina. He asked everyone to tell him a little about their relationship with Joe and Martha so he could see them through their eyes. He wanted to help them find ways to use their memories to honor their lives.

Robert said, “The best way to remember Joe and Martha is to change your lives in some way. You have to grieve, but you also have to do something special with your lives to ensure that Joe and Martha live on through you.”

Keisha led them to a large room where two beds with Joe and Martha had been placed side by side. Robert stood between them, with one hand on Joe and the other on Martha as if to serve as a conduit to connect them in death.

“I know this is the hardest thing you’re ever done in your lives – saying goodbye to your parents and grandparents. But I want this to be the start of keeping Joe and Martha forever in your hearts, to find ways to dedicate your lives to them, and always remember them, not only with sorrow, but also with love and thankfulness to God that they were in your lives. Because without them, you wouldn’t be who you are. I don’t mean physically. I mean as unique people. And I want you to find ways to even better use their memories as guides to better live your lives.”

He looked at Joe and Martha as he said, “On behalf of your loving family, I would like to thank you for filling their lives with joy, happiness, and love.

I’d like to start off with the Serenity Prayer.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change:

courage to change things I can;

and the wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;

*Enjoying one moment at a time;
 Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
 taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world
 as it is, not as I would have it.
 Trusting that He will make all things right
 if I surrender to His will;
 That I may be reasonably happy in this life
 And supremely happy with Him
 Forever in the next.
 Amen*

For the rest of her life, Lilly said this prayer. It guided her in her search for meaning. Daily, she had to remind herself that she couldn't change what had happened, but she could change what could happen that day.

Then Robert gave each of them suggestions for healing and honoring Joe and Martha based on what they had told him.

"Amy, you told me about the love you and your mother shared for musical theatre, and how every year the two of you went to New York to see several Broadway shows. That was your special time for mother-daughter bonding. Get tapes of shows you saw together and listen to them as you look at pictures of your mom. You said your favorite show was *Cats*. Sing the song *Memory* from the show as you recall your beloved mother."

Then he hummed the song *Memory*.

"I don't recall the words to the song, and with my voice you wouldn't want me to sing it. The song is appropriate for how we can best honor our beloved who have died – by remembering when we were happiest together.

Also, carry on the tradition of going to New York to see shows with Lilly and Molly and picture your mom with you."

They didn't go to New York, but whenever a good show came to Charlotte they went to see it. They always pointed out the parts of the show that Martha would have especially enjoyed. When they saw a revival of *Oklahoma*, they recalled how Martha sang the song, *Oh What a Beautiful Morning*, whenever she woke Molly and Lilly. They could hear her singing along with the performer on stage.

“Mitch, you told me about how you had severe asthma attacks as a child and your parents nursed you late into the night. You had this fear that you would choke to death, but it disappeared when they held you. On the nights when you miss your parents until it hurts, hold pictures of them to your chest and feel the same healing you felt as a child when they hugged you.”

When Mitch got back to L.A., he put a picture of his parents on his office desk, and every morning when he got to work, he’d say “Good morning Mom and Dad,” kiss his finger, and touch it to their faces, He did the same every evening when he left work, “Bye Mom and Dad.”

“Jack, you talked about Joe and Martha being more like your parents than your in-laws. Since your biological father left the family when you were young and your mother died when you were in college, they stepped in and became your parents. They were as loving as biological parents. Maybe more so since they chose you to love and you chose them. Perhaps it’s true what everyone has said over the years – you married Amy for her parents as much as for her.

And you were so impressed by Joe and Martha’s philanthropy. They always gave to others, either with their money, or more importantly, with their time. Joe set an example for you to follow. And that’s why you volunteer so much in the community. Jack, do something special just for Joe and Martha, like helping to serve at a Salvation Army holiday meal for the poor. Find ways to honor their memory every day, but especially on Mother’s and Father’s Days.”

To honor Joe’s memory, Jack mentored a refugee family from Somalia. He helped them adapt to American life and observe American holidays. He invited them to dinner on Father’s Day to honor Joe’s memory.

“Annie, you talked about how Joe and Martha flew to your mother’s funeral in Seattle after her death from cancer. They were so comforting. Return that kindness to others by becoming involved with groups that visit the needy or the sick. And with each healing word or touch you share, thank Joe and Martha for guiding you on this path.”

Following Robert’s advice, Annie became a Meals on Wheels volunteer, and delivered food to shut-ins.

“And Lilly, honor Joe’s love of Poe by reading from a Poe piece every night. Read it aloud as if you were reading to Poppa , even imitating his scary voice.”

Often at bedtime, Lilly did read some Poe. Although most people would find it scary, Lilly found it comforting.

“Molly, in honor of your and Mimi’s love of tennis and animals, consider raising money for the SPCA by organizing a tennis tournament in Mimi’s name.”

The next year, Molly and some friends set up a tennis tournament at the country club to benefit the SPCA. This became an annual event and raised thousands of dollars.

“These are just some suggestions for honoring Joe and Martha. I’m sure you’ll think of more meaningful ways to honor them. Think of how they lived, not how they died. The best way to remember Joe and Martha is to make the world a better place.

Now let’s pray silently.”

They weren’t very silent; they sobbed loudly.

“My philosophy for achieving a sense of peace after the death of loved ones is every day to mourn their deaths and every day to also celebrate their lives. You can’t have one without the other. They are inextricable – mourning because they are no longer with you physically, and celebrating because they will always be with you spiritually. They will dwell in your hearts forever.”

Robert hugged each of them and gave them his card and said to contact him by phone or email if they wanted to talk. He would always be available to them. He even followed up with a phone call to Amy two weeks later. He wanted to know how she was doing. She told him she was doing a lot better after talking to him.

After Robert left, everyone lingered in the room knowing that this was the end, but not wanting it to be.

Annie said, “I think God sent Robert to us to start us on the road to healing. What a wonderful human being he is.”

They all agreed. No one knew what to do next. They didn’t want to leave Joe and Martha. Finally, Amy led the group in saying good-bye and kissing them. It was time to get on with their lives without the Silver centerpieces.

Ed was waiting outside the room. He told them that he would be in touch when he got more information about the accident and the autopsy. They lingered not wanting to leave. Ed finally said that he had to go. Everyone thanked him for his kindness.

They decided to go out to eat so they could discuss what to do next. They went to Blossom’s, one of Joe and Martha’s favorite restaurants. Everyone ordered shrimp and grits, Joe and Martha’s favorite dish. They toasted to their memory with a glass of Pinot Grigio, their favorite wine. Jack gave his approval for Lilly and Molly to drink wine which they did reluctantly because they didn’t really like the taste of it, but they wanted to toast to their grandparents.

At first everyone kept the conversation light, but then Jack said, “I’m afraid Joe will be remembered for the accident, and not for the good things he did with his life. We have to make sure his legacy is not tarnished. That will be hard. Whenever someone googles his name, the accident will come up. People will always refer to him as that guy who killed a woman and her baby. We have to stop that. Let’s think of ways to make sure this doesn’t happen. Let’s set up a scholarship fund in his name. Let’s set up a charity golf tournament in his name. Let’s think of ways to make sure the real Joe is memorialized.”

Although they did all they could to ensure that the good Joe would be remembered, they weren’t always successful. In fact, the country club board refused to allow a charity golf tournament with Joe’s name thinking that it would damage the reputation of the club to be associated with such a horrible event. One cruel board member even said that naming an event after Joe was like naming an event for Jeffrey Dahmer. Some people blamed Joe even though he was as much a victim as Beth and Sabrina. Fortunately, no one told the Nelson family about this.

Their attempts to establish scholarships in their names were more successful. They endowed a scholarship at Davidson where Joe had been an undergraduate and a scholarship at Wofford where Martha had been an undergraduate.

When the family returned to the hotel, they sat in the lobby which was empty except for the person at the front desk. Suddenly Lilly erupted. As her face contorted with anger, she screamed.

“I’m tired of hiding my feelings and talking about all the good things we’ll do. We’ve just suffered one of the worst catastrophes imaginable. My precious grandparents are dead. Poppa killed a woman and her baby. I don’t want to be positive. I want to scream at the injustice of this. Why? Why? Why? My grandparents didn’t deserve this. Joe should be sitting here telling corny jokes. We shouldn’t be thinking of him as a man who killed innocent people. He was innocent too. I just want to strike out at something or someone, but there’s no one to blame. I wish there was.”

Then Lilly screamed as if she were being physically attacked. Jack tried to hug her, but she fought him off. She ran out the front door into the parking lot. Jack and Amy ran after her not knowing what she might do. They feared that she might run out into traffic and kill herself. They were relieved to see her sitting on the curb howling at the sky.

“Please Lilly. Please let us help you.”

“There’s nothing you or anyone can do. My grandparents are dead. They died violently. They were destroyed. They were such good people. Why would God do this? It doesn’t make sense. The cruelty, the mutilation, the carnage. It was a bloodbath.”

“I’ll call the doctor and get something to calm you.”

“That won’t help. That’s like putting a band-aid on a gunshot wound to the heart. Nothing will ever help me. There’s no medicine. There’s no cure. I’ll always hurt no matter what.”

They went to their rooms for a night of fitful sleep. They had all been superficially calm until Lilly erupted. Now they were all facing their own demons, but silently.

The next morning, they met for breakfast in the lobby. They sat away from the giant TV on the wall in case the news showed the accident.

They discussed the funeral again. Jack said that he would take care of it and keep Mitch and Annie involved. He also planned to call the condo manager to arrange to have the food left in the condo taken to a homeless shelter.

Mitch said, “I want to bring up an unpleasant subject and that’s their estate. Dad had lots of assets. He was a wealthy man. After everything is liquidated, we’ll split the estate into five equal shares, Amy, me, and the three grandchildren as per his will. But as we discussed before, we should also give some money to the McNairs to make their lives easier. Dad would certainly have wanted us to do this. I’ll arrange to do this with the minimum of taxes if that’s okay with you.”

Amy said, “Yes. I think it’s a good idea, but let’s talk about it at another time. I can’t talk about it now. I can’t think of the McNairs and what they’re going through.”

Mitch said, “I have a copy of yesterday’s local paper with photos of the accident. They’re hard to look at, but we have to do it. I think it would be easier if we did it together. If you’re not ready to look at them yet, sit over there.”

No one moved. Anne took a folded newspaper out of her purse. She passed it around. On the front page there was a picture of Beth McNair holding Sabrina at the beach. They had big smiles. The sunshine made them look like they were glowing. There was also a posed portrait of the four McNairs taken shortly after Sabrina’s birth. Ken and Beth were beaming, so proud of their beautiful family. Ken had tickled Randy just before the photo was taken so he was laughing. They had planned to take another posed portrait for Sabrina’s first birthday, but alas that wouldn’t happen.

Then there was the dreaded photo of the car lodged in the church wall. Parts of the stroller could be seen sticking out from under the car. Beth’s purse was lying on the sidewalk. Next to it was what looked like a baby’s pacifier. There was another picture taken after the car had been towed away showing the hole in the church wall and the church hallway inside.

Everyone was silent. They couldn’t stop staring at the photos. They were hypnotized.

Anne said, “I’m glad they don’t have pictures of Mom and Dad, but I’m sure they’ll get some.”

Mitch said, “I have a feeling that the media will be following us, and we may even see ourselves in the papers or on TV.”

Lilly cringed at the possibility that she would be exposed to the world. How could she handle that? She wanted to hide in a hole pretending that the accident never happened; that it was just a bad dream.

Everyone kept an eye on the giant TV waiting for the *Today Show* to break for local news. Then it came on - a reporter somberly describing the accident and video footage showing the car being towed away. The reporter said that the cause of the accident was still unknown and that funeral plans had not yet been announced. Then she went on to report on the previous evening’s city council meeting. For a while, the Silvers and McNairs would be old news.

They were all ambivalent about leaving, glad to get away from the constant attention to the accident and sad to say good-bye to beloved relatives. Even though they knew that they would think about it non-stop, they knew that being away from Charleston would lessen the pain.

Mitch and Anne were taking a plane out of Charleston in a few hours and the Nelsons were heading home. They all kissed and hugged knowing that they were survivors of a violent tragedy as bad as or maybe even worse than an earthquake or a terrorist attack.

Chapter 12

Although the ride home was silent, it was different from the ride to Charleston. On the first ride, the Nelsons had constantly asked themselves what could have happened that caused a policeman to demand that they and Mitch go to Charleston immediately. That silence was filled with dread and a strong suspicion, even a certainty that Joe and Martha were dead. During the ride home, they knew why they'd been called, but now they had questions about why the tragedy had occurred. This silence was filled with excruciating sorrow.

As they approached Charlotte, Amy discussed plans for everyone to return to school and work. They had to try for normalcy, or as close to it as possible. They decided that Monday would be best for starting their new lives without Joe and Martha. This would give them time to do whatever they had to do, even though they weren't sure what they had to do. Unfortunately, it also gave them time to replay what had happened in Charleston.

As soon as they arrived home, Jack got busy with funeral plans for a week from Thursday so Mitch, Anne, and Adam could fly in. He contacted the Huntersville Methodist Church, and learned that there was a new minister, Roger Sorenson, who had just started the prior year so he didn't know the Silvers. Jack was concerned about this because he felt that the service would be impersonal, and he was right. Don Smith, the minister who could best do the service because of his personal relationship with the Silvers, couldn't because of his involvement with the accident. Jack felt that he shouldn't even attend the funeral. Seeing him would be a reminder that he had witnessed the accident. He had seen the victims. He had touched the victims. He was inextricably tied to the accident forever.

Jack and Amy met with Roger who was 40, but looked 25 with his thick blond hair, wide eyes, and innocent look. Until now, he had been an assistant pastor at several churches. In his first position as pastor, especially at this "famous" funeral, he was eager to prove himself. The accident was still in the news with updates on the autopsy results, police reports, and funerals featured on the Charlotte and Charleston local news and in the newspapers. Roger wanted to be sure that the media attention brought to him and the church was positive. He made a mental note to get a haircut the day before the funeral.

Roger took detailed notes as Jack and Amy described Joe and Martha's lives. He seemed to be more interested in what they did than who they were as unique people. And he didn't seem particularly interested in other family members. He was such a contrast to Robert and his warm and caring attitude. They wished that Robert could conduct the service, but they knew that was impossible. They asked if Robert could make some remarks, but Roger didn't think that was a good idea and preferred to do everything himself. This was his pulpit and he wasn't going to share the limelight with anybody. Jack and Amy suspected that if Roger knew that Robert was black, he might have been even more opposed to his involvement. They decided that only family members would make remarks even though

some of Joe's friends had asked if they could speak. They also decided that there would be no mention of the accident although it would certainly be the elephant in the sanctuary.

After the meeting with Roger, Jack and Amy went to the funeral home where they picked out matching caskets. When shown an array of choices, they opted for a simple design. They didn't think that an ornate casket made out of the finest wood with elaborate faux-gold or brass decorations was called for. They felt that simplicity should dictate their choices. The funeral director seemed disappointed that such affluent people would opt for cheap caskets. They told the funeral director that they definitely did not want open caskets even though he assured them that he could make up Joe and Martha so their injuries would be hard to see. He asked them to write the obituary that they wanted to have in the papers and email it to him by the next day.

Then Jack and Amy went to a nearby cemetery to arrange for burial sites. The cemetery was crowded, but they found a nice spot on a hill with a view of a grove of trees, not that Joe and Martha would be enjoying the view. They hoped that the serene view would provide them with peace on their visits to the gravesite.

Finally, they went to a store that created memorials. After looking at lots of samples, they selected a simple headstone of black granite for both of them. They decided to have a cross in the center with a rose on each side and the information about Joe and Martha below.

In the center would be their name: *SILVER*. One side of the headstone would read:

Joseph Christopher

January 15, 1928 – April 3, 2003

Beloved husband, father and Poppa

The other side of the headstone would read:

Martha Evelyn Wylie

May 1, 1929 – April 3, 2003

Beloved wife, mother and Mimi

They had to fight off the salesman's attempts to buy a larger, more expensive headstone. Again, they wanted to keep things simple. Like the funeral director, the salesman thought they were cheap. Jack and Amy were unprepared for the business aspect of death.

When they arrived home, they were emotionally and physically drained from their dealings with the funeral business and the emotions engendered by having to make decisions that they never thought they'd have to make. Lilly and Molly had wanted to go with them, but when they heard about what had happened, they were glad they hadn't. Then they wrote

an obituary for Joe and another one for Martha. They emphasized their loving family, their involvement in the community, and Joe's profession. They couldn't seem to get at their uniqueness. But they realized that to get at what made them special, they would have to disclose private emotions which didn't belong in a newspaper. They belonged in their hearts. The final obituaries included only one line saying that they died in an automobile accident.

Since they got home from Charleston, they'd been flooded with calls from friends and colleagues offering to help in any way they could. At first, this was good because it took their minds off of the immediate concern – the funeral. But then they tired of repeating the same story and refusing offers of help. They even let the phone go to message so they could call people back later if they chose to. They were surprised to get calls from people they hardly knew who were most interested in the details of the accident. They were like ghouls.

Going back to school was good for Lilly. It kept her from dwelling on the accident and the McNairs. She openly talked to her friends and teachers about what had happened. She even talked to the school counselor. She was doing all the right things to start healing, at least on the surface. But she wasn't healing on the inside. In fact, she was getting more depressed as she kept reflecting on the accident. She couldn't sleep at night. She had no appetite. When she was alone, she couldn't stop crying as she pictured the accident and Poppa and Mimi in their final minutes. She lingered on the unfairness of the tragedy. It was unfair for the McNairs, especially the baby, to die ahead of their time. It was unfair that a good man was responsible for the deaths of innocents. She even basked in self pity, feeling that it was unfair that she had to face her future without her beloved grandparents.

On Tuesday, Mitch, Anne, and Adam flew in from California. It was good to have them there because it distracted everyone from thinking about the dreaded funeral. Much of the time was spent listening to Adam describe his experiences in China.

On Thursday, everyone got up at 6:00 to be at the church by 10:00. They all wore black and indeed looked like they were going to a funeral. But their appearances were brightened by Joe and Martha's jewelry which they wore. Amy wore Joe and Martha's wedding rings; Molly wore Martha's charm bracelet with charms for each of her grandchildren; Lilly wore a cameo locket that Joe had given to Martha for their first wedding anniversary; Jack wore Joe's Rolex watch which Martha had given to Joe for their 30th anniversary; and Mitch wore Joe's pocket watch on a chain that had belonged to Joe's grandfather. Throughout the service they stroked the jewelry to feel closer to Joe and Martha whose skin had touched the jewelry.

Every seat in the church was filled with Jack and Amy's business associates and friends, Molly and Lilly's teachers and classmates, and Joe and Martha's friends, both from Charlotte and Charleston. There were several reporters who tried, unsuccessfully, to be unobtrusive. TV cameras from Charlotte and Charleston stations were outside to record the procession with the caskets before and after the funeral service, but strangely there were not a

lot of bystanders. The funeral was of more interest to the media than to the average citizen. Police were stationed outside the church for traffic control and any undue media involvement because of the notoriety of the deceased.

Roger gave a “nice service.” He read all the right Bible passages and prayers. The choir sang all the right songs. Jack, Amy, Mitch, and Adam made remarks. They talked about what wonderful people Joe and Martha were and how much they had contributed to the community. Although everything said and done seemed right, there was no passion in the funeral. Sadness, sniffing, and controlled grief - yes; passion - no. The family had used up most of their passion at the hospital, and also they were uncomfortable expressing the depths of their feelings with 200 people looking on.

Some close friends and the family went to the cemetery for the internment. Here is where their blistering emotions were unleashed. Seeing their caskets lowered into the ground was overwhelming for everyone. The wailing was almost deafening. Amy cried uncontrollably as she said, “Good-bye my beloved Mommy and Daddy.” Lilly had to be held up by Adam. Lilly wanted to stay and see the grave diggers fill their graves, but Jack didn’t allow this. It would be too traumatic for all of them. He didn’t want to carry that memory forever.

They went back to the house where the Pressmans and other neighbors had set up a lunch for the people who had been at the funeral. Lunch was catered although there was also lots of food that people had brought. For several hours, the family mingled and talked to people who offered their condolences and shared fond memories of Joe and Martha.

They were relieved when everyone left. The events of the day had drained them, and now they were in a state of mental and physical exhaustion. There were just soft tears and sporadic conversations about the fact that they were glad that there was no mention of the accident, about the “niceness” of the funeral, and about the difficulty of seeing the TV cameras filming the caskets loaded into the hearses. They all vowed not to watch TV that night. They didn’t want a repeat of the funeral experience. They wanted their memories based on their eyes, not on a camera lens.

The next day the family discussed writing a letter to Ken McNair. They wanted him to know the depths of their feelings, but they were concerned about how he would react to a letter from them. Jack, Amy, Molly, Mitch, Anne, and Adam sat around the dining table as Lilly wrote down the right words they labored to find.

Dear Ken,

We are the Nelson family: Amy (daughter of Joe and Martha Silver), Jack (son-in-law), Lilly (17 year old granddaughter), and Molly (15 year old granddaughter) and the

Silver family: Mitch (son of Joe and Martha Silver), Anne (daughter-in-law) and Adam (21 year old grandson).

We are writing to express our most profound, deep-felt sympathy for the loss of Beth and Sabrina. Not an hour goes by when we do not think of you and the endless sorrow you and your family are experiencing. We don't know what to do or say to ease your pain. We feel so helpless.

We hope that you do not blame Joe for Beth and Sabrina's deaths. As you have probably learned from the autopsy, Joe died of a massive heart attack which caused him to accelerate and hit them. We are glad that Joe did not live because we do not think he could have emotionally survived the tragedy that he unintentionally caused. We know that he and Martha are in heaven along with Beth and Sabrina.

We pray that God will comfort you and give you the strength to carry on.

Very Sincerely,

Amy, Jack, Mitch, Anne, Adam, Lilly, and Molly

They weren't satisfied with the letter. It didn't seem to reflect the depth of their sorrow at Beth and Sabrina's deaths. They also didn't want to mention their own sorrow at the loss of Joe and Martha. They decided not to mention the money that they were planning to give him. They thought he might misconstrue why they were giving it to him. They preferred that Joe's attorney contact Ken's attorney about the matter at a later time.

They didn't expect to get a reply, and they didn't get one. When Ken got the letter, his first reaction was to throw it out. He didn't want sympathy from the killer's family. In his rational moments, he knew that Joe was not a killer, but in his irrational moments which outnumbered the rational ones, he blamed Joe and eventually others. Ken refused to discuss the letter with Matt and told him to throw it out. He said that he didn't want to think of the killer's family. Matt took the letter and saved it, never thinking that some time in the future he would share it with one of the writers.

Molly and Lilly got through the end of the year activities. Of course, the hardest were the events that Joe and Martha planned on attending. At Lilly's induction into the National Honor Society, Lilly pictured Joe and Martha sitting in the front row of the audience as they applauded enthusiastically when her name was called. At her dance recital, she imagined that she was giving a private performance for Joe and Martha as they gave her a standing ovation following her flawless solo performance. When she returned to reality, she saw that Jack and Amy were giving her a standing ovation along with the rest of the audience.

The family decided to cancel their planned trip to England in July. But they insisted that the girls go ahead with their summer plans; Molly to tennis camp and Lilly dance camp.

When she wasn't doing something planned by Amy, Lilly spent time in her room looking at family photos and replaying her imagined pictures of the accident which deepened her depression.

In August, Mitch, Anne, and Adam flew in so that they could join the Nelson family in going through all of the Joe and Martha's things and deciding what they would keep, what they would donate to charity, and what they would throw out. They thought that liquidating everything in the condo would provide some sort of closure to the tragedy or catharsis. It didn't. There would never be closure. The effects of the accident would always be present in their lives.

When they entered the condo, they felt Joe and Martha's presence despite the stale smell of rooms that had been closed up for months. Strangely, no one cried. It wasn't as if their tears had dried up; it was as if somehow by being in the presence of things Joe and Martha touched, they were communing with them.

It took them two days to go through Joe and Martha's personal effects. It would have taken longer if Jack hadn't hurried them. Every time, they came to something that stirred happy memories, they'd talk about them. There were Joe's three sets of golf clubs, Martha's collection of cookbooks, and Joe's seashell collection. There were seashells of all sizes and shapes in several decorative display cases. They decided to take them all. Amy displayed some and stored the rest in the basement. For the rest of her life, Lilly prominently displayed three of her favorites in her living room.

They had thousands of photos which Amy copied onto CDs for each family member. Also, they divided their art work. Amy took portraits of Joe and Martha painted by a talented, local artist that they had had commissioned for their 50th anniversary. She also took the many paintings of the beach and Charleston. Mitch took Joe's diplomas and awards. He was especially proud of Joe's award as Man of the Year by the local Rotary fifteen years earlier. They also divided Joe's electronics. He had just purchased a 40" flat screen TV that they decided to put in Molly's room. They took Martha and Joe's cell phones so they could remember their voices telling callers to leave messages.

They arranged for a man to buy the furniture and household items that no one wanted to take. They donated what was not saleable to the Salvation Army. Disposing of the physical aspects of their lives turned out to be easier than they expected, too easy.

They knew it would take a while to sell the condo and settle the financial aspects of the estate. They again discussed giving Ken money and decided that three million was a good amount. They wanted to make sure that Ken and Randy never had to worry about money in the future.

In September, Molly and Lilly went back to school. On the surface, life seemed to be returning to what it was like before the accident. But not for Amy and Lilly. Amy suffered from depression and was in weekly counseling with a grief therapist and was also on anti-depressants. She cut back her work hours to half-time because she found the job that she had always loved had become too demanding.

The one who suffered the most was Lilly. Although she was able to keep her grades up, she had significant problems with sleeping and eating. She took medication for depression and sleep problems. She also saw a therapist weekly and was in group therapy with other teens who had suffered grief. Most of the kids in the groups had lost parents. They somehow thought this made them have “bigger” losses than the death of grandparents. As if there was a ruler to measure who had the most grief. And Lilly returned to dance which was probably her best therapy. She was able to lock out all worries and cares when she danced. She was in a state of forgetful ecstasy.

Lilly cut back on her social life. Before the accident, she was on the phone or with her friends most of the time. Now, she felt uncomfortable with them. She considered their concerns trivial, inconsequential. Who cared if Jimmy and Lisa were breaking up? Who cared if Justin Bieber’s new c.d. was terrible? Who cared if Ben and Suzie were having oral sex? Although she occasionally went out with her friends, she did so because she knew that she was supposed to and because Amy pushed her.

Life took on a new normal for the Nelson family. For Lilly, the new normal was a damaged life that she had to work at reconstructing.

Chapter 13

It's April, 2004 - one year after the accident. The Nelson family has moved on, albeit with difficulty. Although Amy suffered from depression, she continued working thanks to psychotherapy and anti-depressants. At first, she worked half-time, but found that when she was at work she temporarily forgot the tragedy so she eventually returned to full time. Focusing on other people's lives helped her avoid focusing on her own. Whenever there was a patient who had bright red hair or was eleven months old or was named Joe, Martha, Beth, or Sabrina, she was jolted back to the accident for a fleeting few seconds.

Lilly led a double life. On the surface, she appeared to be coping with the tragedy. She did all the things expected of a high school senior, mostly applying to and visiting prospective colleges. She went to the prom and many end-of-the year parties. She shined in her final ballet performance as a special honor to her grandparents who she imagined sitting in the audience. She was accepted to all the colleges she applied to, but chose NC State because of its proximity to Charlotte and her possible need for parental support. She pledged a sorority and made new friends. Lilly found that depression and other psychological problems, especially eating disorders, were common among her new friends. She was deeply affected when Wendy, one of her sorority sisters, attempted suicide. She knew Wendy battled depression, but she had no idea that she was suicidal. This experience made Lilly look inward. What she found heartened her. She saw deep, deep depression, but no thoughts of suicide. She loved her family too much to inflict the pain of suicide on them. And she realized that despite everything, she loved life and wanted to live until old age. She found this internal paradox puzzling: she was very, very sad, but she was also optimistic. She was certain that someday she would be better.

Lilly's day-to-day adjustment was held together by delicate threads which were strained by Wendy's attempted suicide. She didn't know if she could make it through to the end of the semester. She called Amy to tell her she was considering dropping out of school. Amy immediately got in the car and was with Lilly in three hours. They talked all night and by morning, Amy had convinced Lilly to stay in school by stressing repeatedly that Joe and Martha wouldn't want her to drop out of school. She had to stay in school no matter how hard for their sakes. Lilly had been seeing a counselor from the university counseling center, but Amy knew she needed more intensive services so she arranged for her to see a psychiatrist. She made it through the semester and went home for the summer where her recovery was hastened when she found the career she wanted to mold her life around.

Amy had arranged for Lilly to volunteer at a summer program for preschoolers with disabilities. From the second Lilly walked into the door of the classroom, she knew these were the children she wanted to work with for the rest of her life. She bonded with the children with cerebral palsy, autism, and mental retardation. And the children responded to her. They sensed her love and dedication to them.

Although Lilly's mental health improved when she was at school, when she was alone at home, depression took over despite continued therapy and medication. She slept fitfully, cried uncontrollably, and constantly fondled the necklace with the photos of Joe and Martha as she talked to them. It was her talisman. She tried not to let her family see her like this, but they heard her nighttime sobbing. Their comforting helped for a short time, but as soon as she was alone, she reverted to her painful mourning. She was like a volcano that lies dormant during the day, but has deep internal fires that erupt nocturnally.

There were times when Lilly couldn't control her obsessive thinking about the accident. WHY questions reverberated loudly in her brain as if it was an echo chamber. She could see the question marks that accompanied each bellowed WHY. Why was her grandfather the instrument of death? Why did a young mother and her baby have to die? Why did this happen at a church? Why did good people die when evil people lived? Does doing good make any difference in how we're rewarded in life? If not, why do good? Why would God do this? Does God have a plan for each of us? If so, can we do anything to change it? Is there even a God? If not, does chance govern what happens in our lives? Is life just a random roll of the dice? Is there a heaven? Is there an after-life? If not, is the time on Earth all we have? And on and on with cascades of questions. She never got answers from herself or from God. These questions were like test essay questions with lots of possible right answers. She wished the test had questions requiring only facts, no opinions, no surmising, no supposing.

On the first anniversary of the accident, the Nelsons made a pilgrimage to Joe and Martha's grave. Although they had visited the cemetery over the year, this was different. They had planned to focus on celebrating their lives, and not mourning their deaths. This was an effort to carry out Robert's suggestion to be positive and an attempt to live by Joe's philosophy of thinking of the good things. As they stood at the grave site, they realized that they had not healed as much as they thought they had. They felt no joy in celebrating their lives, only sorrow at their deaths. They had difficulty recalling the good things which were overwhelmed by the one gigantic bad thing looming over everything – the violent accident that took the lives of four innocent people.

Lilly wailed loudly and had to be supported by Jack. She was crying like she cried the night at the hotel in Charleston, when she sat on the parking lot curb and howled at the sky. Amy cried so much she almost fainted. She leaned on the headstone to stop herself from collapsing. Even Molly who was usually stoic had difficulty breathing. When they all regained some composure, they each tried to say what they had done over the past year to honor Joe and Martha. But their remarks sounded stilted, like they were making oral book reports in English class.

Molly asked, "Why is this happening? Why has our celebration of their lives turned into a second funeral?"

Jack replied, “Maybe we didn’t mourn enough. We were so intent on being positive that we didn’t allow our true feelings to be expressed. We squelched them, but they seeped through today. We didn’t allow ourselves to ask questions to each other, and I think that was wrong. We have to ask questions even though we don’t have any answers. We have to talk about this no matter how much it hurts.”

Lilly said, “I don’t think that’s true for me. I mourn for them all the time. I constantly ask questions and look at me. I’m a basket case.”

Amy said, “No, you’re not. You’re so much better.”

“On the surface only. I’m still a mess inside.”

They all hugged each other, but felt a sense of incompleteness and uncertainty.

From the cemetery, they went for dinner at one of Joe and Martha’s favorite restaurants. Lilly brought up another taboo topic – Ken. They wondered if he had returned to work and if he had found good child care for Randy. They didn’t know about Matt. They realized that if they were still suffering so much a year later, then Ken must be steeped in unimaginable pain. They added their unanswerable questions about Ken to their unanswerable questions about why Joe was selected to be the executioner for Beth, Sabrina, Martha, and himself.

Lilly harbored a thought of someday seeing Ken, maybe even stalking him. She had to find out about his life. She could never face him. He might blame her for Joe’s actions in causing the accident. Even though she knew Joe was innocent, she couldn’t withstand an accusation of him being guilty for Beth and Sabrina’s deaths. She even imagined Ken pointing a finger at her whole family as he said “J’accuse.”

In her junior year Lilly met Tommy, an engineering student from Florida. They hit it off immediately and Lilly had sex for the first time. Everything seemed perfect – they got along and they both enjoyed sex. In fact, Lilly couldn’t get enough of it which amused Tommy. She was always asking to go to his apartment or even his car so they could make love. He called her his sex fiend. She thought that she was falling in love with Tommy, and felt that he might be the one she was destined to marry someday.

Their only problem was that Tommy felt Lilly was overly emotional. He was what some might call placid, while others might call him easy-going. He laughed at Lilly when she shared her concerns about her friends’ problems with boyfriends, school, health, or money. He said that they weren’t her problems so she should ignore them. She also was outspoken about her politically liberal views, especially concerning women’s rights and abortion. Tommy refused to take a stand politically. He said politics didn’t matter. He changed the subject whenever she brought up political issues.

Lilly hadn't told Tommy about the accident nor had she shared her problems with depression. Thanks to the meds she was taking and her new love life, she felt no sadness or depression. But after four months of dating, she felt that she had to share the accident with him. It was too important an event in her life to keep secret.

They were enjoying a lunch outside on campus because it was a perfect spring day. In fact, it was April 16th.

"Hey Tommy, there's something that happened four years ago that had a terrible impact on my life that I need to tell you about."

"What could be so bad, especially if it happened four years ago?"

"I've mentioned that my grandparents are dead. They died four years ago tomorrow – April 17. I try not to think about their deaths, but I couldn't put them out of my mind today. I loved them so, so much. My family was very close to them. But they didn't have a normal death. On a Sunday morning, Poppa had a heart attack when he was driving to church with Mimi. He crashed into the church wall after killing a woman and her baby. The accident was all over the news. People accused him of taking drugs, but he had a massive heart attack which caused him to black out. I was so affected that I became very depressed and had to see a psychiatrist and take meds. I'm still on anti-depressants which help."

She showed him the locket with their pictures.

"This is them."

"Gee, that's terrible. I can't imagine losing my grandparents like that. I didn't know you had depression. You seem so normal. They must be really working. I know it's been hard on you, but you have to put that behind you and get on with your life. I hope you don't obsess about it."

"Well I did. Not that much anymore. I'm living life. Just look at our times together. You see I'm having a good time, but I can't forget them. I have to honor them."

"I didn't say don't honor them. Just don't blow this out of proportion. Hey, let's go up to my room and talk about this more."

Lilly looked at Tommy in disbelief. He didn't want to really talk. He wanted to have sex. He had no understanding of the impact of the accident on her. How could he be so callous? He was thinking of sex while she was sharing the saddest part of her life.

"I don't feel like it now."

"Well, that's stupid letting this get you down. Come on upstairs. Let's talk. I'll make you feel better."

As soon as they got to his room, he pushed her onto his bed. Lilly told him she wasn't in the mood for sex. Tommy got angry. She had never seen him like this before.

"You mean that this shit about your grandparents dying is more important than us screwing."

"Is this just screwing to you?"

"It's good screwing."

"Well yes, right now my grandparents are more important than you getting screwed."

He laughed and tried to kiss her. She punched him in the chest and left. That was the last time she saw Tommy. He called several times a day, but she never answered. Two weeks later, she heard from a sorority sister that he was dating a new girl who looked very much like her. Lilly found that she didn't care. She realized that Tommy was not the type of man she could really love. She needed to find a guy who respected her feelings.

After graduating from NC State, Lilly went on to graduate school at the University of North Carolina to major in Early Childhood Special Education. She realized her dream of working with young children with developmental problems when she interned in a class in the pediatric ward at the university hospital. Children in the class had significant medical problems, such as brain tumors, head injuries, leukemia, and cancer. Along with the top-notch medical care they were receiving, she wanted to help cure them with her love. But she found that wasn't possible when Walter, a five-year-old boy with a brain tumor, died. She found that she was able to accept Walter's death because of his illness which was in contrast to her difficulty accepting Joe and Martha's deaths. She knew that she along with his family and the other professionals, made his final days better because of their care.

Like Lilly, Molly also realized her dream. After high school, she went to Virginia Tech because she wanted to get into their vet medicine graduate program after she got her undergraduate degree in biology. She eventually became a vet for large animals and joined the staff at Brookfield Zoo in Chicago. There she met her husband who was also a vet. Lilly devoted her life to the welfare of children with disabilities while Molly devoted her life to the welfare of animals. They knew that Joe and Martha would be proud of their dedication to making the world better.

Part III

Chapter 14

The Nelsons' concerns about Ken were well grounded. During the first year after the accident, Ken had been immobilized with depression. He sat in his room vacantly staring into space, either lost in his jumbled thoughts or with a blank mind. There were times when an EEG would have shown almost no brain activity for Ken, when he suspended all mental activity to block out any thoughts of the accident.

Sometimes he looked at pictures and videos of happy times with Beth and Sabrina. These made him sadder and increasingly bitter as he realized what had been taken from him. He ate when Matt forced him. Over six months, he lost 10 pounds. Matt made him shower every few days. He even helped him into the shower and soaped him up. He also bathed three-year-old Randy so Matt made sure that everyone in his family was cleaned and fed. He was Ken and Randy's parent.

The only place Ken went in the first year after the accident was to the cemetery. He had stopped driving so every Sunday Matt drove him to a nearby supermarket to get flowers and take them to Beth and Sabrina's graves. Matt left him alone because Ken talked aloud to Beth as if they were actually together. Matt felt like he was intruding if he listened to Ken's one-sided conversation. Ken discussed their past life, not alluding to the accident, Randy, Matt, or his changed living situation. He was frozen in time to any day prior to April 17, 2003. If it was a warm day, Ken recalled their trips to the beach. If it was a cold day, he'd remember an early frost that killed their roses. If he'd eaten breakfast, he'd talk about his favorite breakfast foods that Beth made. His conversation always included two topics: their first meeting when Beth saved Ken and their joyful wedding. After two hours Matt returned to find Ken looking contented, as if he had actually spoken with Beth.

During that first year, Ken rarely talked to Randy or saw any of his old friends, except occasionally Al and Christie. He adamantly refused offers of help because he didn't want to stop his suffering. He wanted to exist in a living hell. But he didn't consider the living hell he created for Matt and Randy. Their grief at losing Beth and Sabrina was compounded by the grief of witnessing Ken's suffering.

When Matt moved to Charleston, his most immediate challenges were taking the SC bar exam and getting a job. While in school, he interned in a public defender's office in Columbia. Matt had always known that he wanted to represent low income people who were entitled to counsel despite their inability to pay. In law school, he worked closely with his favorite professor who was a legal advocate for liberal social causes. He also became friends with a group of students who shared his philosophy and political views. They were all moving to Atlanta. In the group was Victoria, Matt's girlfriend. When he told her that he couldn't go to Atlanta, she said that it would be best if they ended their relationship. She didn't want a long distance romance, and she also realized that Matt's family was more important to him than she was.

Matt got a job as a public defender in Charleston. There were several openings since the job was poorly paid, emotionally taxing, and viewed as a short-term entry-level stepping stone. Matt didn't respond to the change in his career plans like many others would have. He wasn't bitter or angry. He viewed this as an opportunity to realize his dreams in a new way and in a new place. The same inner strength that enabled Matt to cope with his war experiences and Beth and Sabrina's deaths enabled him to reshape his career plans. He was a living example of the saying, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." He was unusual in that he had a resilience that allowed him to adapt no matter how high the obstacles in his way.

In his usual organized manner, Matt did all the right things to start his new life in Charleston. He took the South Carolina bar exam which he passed. He got a job as an assistant public defender for Charleston. He was assigned to work with youth charged with crimes or delinquency in Family Court. Practically all of the youth seen in Family Court were impoverished and needed to be represented by a public defender. Matt had a heavy case load, but always made time for Ken and Randy. What he didn't make time for was a social life. He had none.

Many young attorneys working in Family Court were adversely affected by the lives of their clients. These were kids who came from the depths of poverty and deprivation. Matt looked at his clients' backgrounds as a challenge to help improve their lives, and not as an excuse for doing the least for these kids who needed the most. He never gave up on a kid. His co-workers viewed him as a wide-eyed, naive optimist who, with time, would become jaded by the system and the inability of the kids to overcome their life predicaments. Matt never became jaded. He never lived down to his colleagues' expectations for him.

After three years, Matt was promoted to Deputy Public Defender and got involved in capital defense cases as he had planned to do had he gone to Atlanta. He loved his work, but he wouldn't have been able to keep his low-paying job without the money Ken received from the Silvers. With it, Matt paid off the mortgage on Ken's house and paid daily living expenses. He declared Ken and Randy as his dependents so that he could use his health insurance to pay for their medical needs, especially therapy.

Matt didn't have much time to think about the accident. He was busy with his job and taking care of Randy and Ken. When he did have a quiet moment, his thoughts turned to Beth and Sabrina. He didn't feel sadness or depression. He felt a sense of having been blessed. He believed in the cycle of life and saw Beth and Sabrina's lives as having been on short cycles. He concentrated on the quality of their lives, not the quantity. If the quality of their lives could be translated into years, they each lived 100 years. He felt that God had given him the responsibility of caring for Ken and Randy because He knew that Matt had the strength to do it. He felt that this was the purpose of his life.

Initially, the one who suffered most from the accident and maybe more importantly Ken's rejection was Randy. Ken rarely spoke to Randy and never showed him physical or verbal affection. When Randy tried to sit on Ken's lap, Ken pushed him away. When Randy asked him a question or made a comment, Ken ignored him. When Randy proudly showed him a drawing he'd made in day care, Ken averted his eyes.

When Ken looked at Randy, he saw Beth. He had her light blue eyes which seemed to ask why he survived while Beth and Sabrina hadn't. One would think that Ken would have been glad that he had a child who survived the tragedy, but he wasn't. His wish that Randy had died instead of Beth and Sabrina filled him with crippling guilt and self-loathing. How could a father wish that his son would have died? How could a father wish to sacrifice his son for his wife and daughter?

Although Randy had both the trauma of witnessing the accident and being rejected by his father, four things saved him from psychological destruction: excellent therapy from Louise Nelson, a psychologist who specialized in childhood grief; a day care program that provided him with playmates, a semblance of a normal life, and caring teachers; a resilient personality like his Uncle Matt's which gave him the strength to fight off the ugly realities he had experienced; and most importantly, the selfless, unconditional love from his Uncle Matt who stood in for his absent mother and his father. Two children can have the same horrible experience and respond quite differently. One can collapse and be permanently scarred. Another can survive and use the experience to build a purposeful life. Randy was a survivor.

But there was also another unexpected person who came to Randy's rescue: Minerva Brown, the all-purpose housekeeper Matt hired. Minerva did the cooking, cleaning, shopping, child care when Randy was not in day care or when Matt was busy, and anything that Matt asked her to do. She spent many nights working and refused to make up the hours by taking time off during the day. She never said no to any request from Matt. To Matt, she was more than a housekeeper; she was part of the family.

Minerva was a 50 year old, black woman with a mouth of perfect white teeth any teenager with braces would envy. She had a cheery disposition and usually had a faint smile playing on her lips. She proudly wore a white apron which she considered her housekeeper uniform. She was reminiscent of the black mammies of Charleston's slave past. But she wasn't a slave. She was well-paid and respected by Matt, adored by Randy, and ignored by Ken.

A deeply religious woman, she read her well-worn bible whenever she had free time, which was rare. She seemed to internalize what she read as her facial expressions changed from horror when she read about Jesus's crucifixion to joy when she read about Jesus rising from the dead.

One of the major job benefits to Minerva was her relationship with Randy who she treated like a grandchild since she didn't have a biological one. She indulged Randy like a grandmother, baking his favorite cookies and allowing him to eat as many as he wanted, reading books to him, buying him toys, and cradling him in her arms as she told him what a good person he was and how he was going to grow up to be a great man. She was elated when Randy kissed her and told her that he loved her. Those words meant more to her than her salary.

Randy told everyone that he wanted to grow up to be a fireman like his daddy used to be. When he was felt sad, he held the photo of Ken receiving the award for bravery. He would stare at the picture for long periods hoping that the man in the picture would materialize. He wanted this hero to save him. He never asked Minerva or Matt why his father was like he was. It took him over a year of therapy before he talked about Beth, Sabrina, or the accident. Gradually, Louise explained the accident, Beth and Sabrina's deaths, and Ken's behavior in a way a five-year old could understand. Whenever he left his therapy sessions, he made Matt hug him hoping that his protector wouldn't be taken from him like Beth, Sabrina, and Ken.

Minerva rarely talked about herself or her family, but Matt knew that she'd been married and had grown children. Eventually, he learned that her husband had been murdered in a robbery at a food store where he worked. Her son, Henry, was in the army and based in Germany where he'd had married a local white woman. And her daughter, Mary, was an unmarried, third grade teacher in Pittsburgh. She was very generous to Minerva and had given her money for a down payment on her first house.

When Matt interviewed candidates for the housekeeper position, Matt had asked Ken if he wanted to be involved. Ken said no, not realizing how this person would impact their lives. Had he been involved, he wouldn't have selected a black woman. To him, all black women were synonymous with Myra Jackson. For the first few months that Minerva worked in the house, he didn't talk to her. She often brought meals to his room, emptied his laundry hamper of dirty clothes, and put his clean clothes in dresser drawers. He tried to avoid looking at her. When they did meet, she would politely say, "Good mornin Mr. Ken." He would ignore her, but mentally note that she was polite and good at her job.

So life for Ken was on hold until Matt and Al forced change and put Ken on the road to recovery.

Chapter 15

It took two years for Matt and Al to finally succeed in persuading, or really coercing, Ken to accept help. It was the second anniversary of the accident and like the previous anniversary, Ken was filled with despair, hatred, anguish, and distorted, deranged thinking. During the first year after the accident, Matt and Al didn't push Ken to get help. They were pre-occupied with their own lives and felt that Ken needed time to grieve. Although he did more than grieve, he alternated between vegetating and stewing in his juices of hatred of the world and the unfairness of life.

During the second year, they made a number of attempts to pull him out of his paralyzed state. They gave him new experiences, but the only thing he seemed to enjoy was boating. They brought people over – old firemen friends, Christie and Al's parents, some of Randy's playmates from day care. He would either sit silently and ignore them, or excuse himself and go to his room. Matt lectured him about how to live life despite the tragedy, and how to emulate people like Senator Joe Biden, who after losing his wife and daughter in a car crash, continued living a productive life. Matt's lectures fell on deaf ears.

The nature of Ken's mourning changed over the two years. The mental and physical paralysis of the first year gave way to an obsession with Myra Jackson during the second year. He returned to his psychotic thinking that she was responsible for the accident and Beth and Sabrina's deaths. He didn't share these thoughts with anyone so they grew like untended weeds after weeks of rain. He didn't want anyone to challenge him with rationality.

Over the past year, Matt and Al had tried to force Ken into getting professional help, but this was their last attempt. They took Ken outside to swing on the swings, something he hadn't done since Beth's death. It was a beautiful spring day, a day ripe for new beginnings.

Using an authoritative tone of voice like Matt used in court or legal dealings, he said, "Ken, we're giving you an ultimatum. You have to return to the living. We'll do everything we can to help you, but we can no longer stand by and watch you destroy yourself and Randy and me. You're wallowing in self pity now. It's past grieving. We've let this go on too long. It's time. Now.

First, you're going to see a psychiatrist who I've lined up. I know you've resisted seeing one in the past, but I won't take no for an answer. It's time to get on with living whether you like it or not. You have to do it for Beth's sake. It's what she would want. She wouldn't want to see you destroy your life and Randy's. Think of Beth. Stop thinking of yourself.

I even have some pictures of her that I don't think you've seen before. Beth and I found them with my mother's things after she died. We split up the pictures and I got these. But now I want to share them with you so that you know that Beth is here with us. Here's one

from when she was five, Randy's age. He looks like her with those piercing blue eyes staring right through you. I think she's looking at you right now and you know what she's saying. It's time to start living my darlin. I remember she always called you her darlin. She dropped the g. That was her way of talking Southern."

Ken looked away resisting Matt's attempts to have him look at the pictures. But he couldn't resist any longer. He had never seen these pictures before. He had to see them. There was one of Beth when she was about a year old, Sabrina's age. Abby was holding her and they both looked deliriously happy. It was the same mother and child pose as in the newspaper picture of Beth holding Sabrina. Then Matt showed him a picture of Beth and him at the beach. She was probably 16 and he was about 13. They looked so innocent. He couldn't help but smile when he looked at Beth's flaming red skin. Being a pale redhead, she burned after five minutes in the sun. She was laughing even though Ken knew she must have been in pain. Then there was a picture of Beth, Abby, and Matt at Matt's high school graduation. They all looked so proud with their heads held high and their shoulders pulled back. Beth was wearing a green pant suit. She looked so good in green.

Ken asked, "Why didn't you share these with me before?"

"I was waiting for the right time, and it's now."

"Do you have more?"

"No. This is it."

Then Matt handed Ken his large framed wedding picture. "Do you think she would want her wedding vows to end with her death? No. She would want you to love, honor, and cherish her, but not until death parts you, but forever. You married for eternity, not five years. You had a special love that was made in heaven and that the two of you will renew when you meet in heaven someday."

Al said, "And you have to go back to work. I know you don't need the money, but you need to be involved with other people and you have to go back to the job you love. Being a fireman isn't just a job to you. It's who you are. We need people like you. Your friends need you as much as your family does. We love you and miss you."

Al handed Ken the newspaper picture of him getting the award for saving the woman from the burning nursing home. Ken silently stared at it for a few minutes. He felt like a kid being ganged up on by the classroom bullies. He finally accepted that he had to do this for Beth. He couldn't fight Matt and Al any longer. His whole body collapsed into submission. He heaved a huge sigh. He no longer had the energy to fight them.

He asked: "What if I don't do this?"

Matt said, "I'll take Randy and move out. You can live alone and kill yourself. You'll either starve yourself to death or die of filth and disease. I can't stand by anymore and see you destroy Randy and me and yourself. I am serious. I will do this!"

Ken looked at Matt and saw that he was serious. He would follow through if he didn't agree to change. Ken was quiet for a long time and then kissed Beth in the wedding picture.

"I'll need your help. I'm so afraid. I don't know how to start living again."

Al said, "We'll be with you every step of the way my friend. You know how much we all love you. We want you back from the dead. You died with Beth and Sabrina at the church. Now it's time to come back. It's time for resurrection."

Matt said, "There's a psychiatrist who's agreed to see you. His name is Dr. Mike Allain. He was head of psychiatry at USC Med School, but recently retired to spend more time with his wife whose health has deteriorated because of Parkinson's. He cut back his patient load, but he was convinced to take you on by Joe Riley. Remember, he's the mayor. He heard about you from Commissioner Groves who reminded him of the accident."

"So everyone, even the mayor and the fire commissioner, is involved in this. How did they find out about me?"

Matt said, "Your best friend Al here pushed for this. He deserves the credit. Now that's he a lieutenant and has command of his own station house, people listen to him. He's a big shot.

Ken, you're important to a lot of people, not only for yourself, but for Beth. You forget about the people in the church she touched and the many people who depended upon her at the store. You're important in your own right, but maybe more so because of what Beth meant to so many people. Your identity as Beth's husband is as important as your own identity."

Up to that point, Ken hadn't looked at Matt or Al, but then he made eye contact, and said, "I suppose I don't have a choice."

"You do. Life or death. Which one?"

"I hear Beth telling me to choose life so I suppose that's it. I'm reminded of when she saved me when we first met. I feel like I did then. I feel her soothing touch. She stroked away the horrible memories of that fire and the dead children, and now she has to stroke away the horrible memories of the accident."

Matt and Al went over to the swing and leaned down to Ken as the three men hugged. This was Ken's first affectionate physical contact with anyone in two years. His body tingled.

“Matt, will you go to the first session with me? I’m scared shitless. I’m afraid to live again. It’s easier for me to stay in my cocoon. It’s like I’m suspended in time and space. I’m not dead or alive. I’m just existing.”

“I’ll go to therapy with you for as long as you want me to. I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll call for an appointment for this week. And you’re going to have to take a shower or the shrink is going to shrink away from you and your body odor. Ha-ha. Like my joke? Shrink – shrink.”

Ken and Al groaned.

“And you have to get a haircut. You look like you’re homeless. We’re even going to buy you some new clothes. I’ll pick them out since you have the taste in clothes of a 90 year old. I got news for you - nobody wears polyester anymore and orange is not an in-color.”

Ken actually laughed. His facial muscles hadn’t moved in the laugh position for so long that they were rusty and his laugh looked and sounded creaky. Then they went into the house to have ice cream with Randy and Christie who had just returned with coconut ice cream from Dairy King.

Randy asked, “Why’re we having ice cream? Is it somebody’s birthday?”

Matt replied, “Yep, it’s your daddy’s new birthday, the day he was reborn.”

“Does he have two birthdays?”

“Yep.”

“Can I have two birthdays?”

“Yep. Let’s make today your second birthday.”

Ken kept his head down and ate his ice cream, the first he had in over two years. He forgot how good food could taste. He hadn’t really tasted what he’d eaten in the past two years. He had four scoops, and even ate the tiny drippings left in the container.

When he looked up from eating, he saw Randy staring at him. He pulled Randy to him and hugged him as he cried, “Please forgive me. I love you Randy.”

Although he was only five, Randy reacted like a mature adult.

“There’s nothing to forgive you for. You didn’t do anything wrong. You were just sick and now you’re better. I know you love me Daddy and I love you.”

That was all Ken needed to know that he had made a choice that he couldn’t and wouldn’t ever rescind. He’d stepped over the line between existing and living.

Matt was able to arrange the first session with Mike Allain on the following Friday. Mike was a short, pudgy man with a goatee that gave him the look of Freud. When he wasn't working, he had a perennial smile and a twinkle in his eyes. He sent the message that life was good and was to be enjoyed to the maximum. But he was very different when he was in therapy with a patient. He created an intense, serious environment where he and the patient were on a joint quest to identify the patient's problems and their solutions. When he was with a patient, the air in the room became heavier and darker.

Mike didn't usually allow anyone into a therapy session other than the patient, but because of the special circumstances of Ken's case, he allowed Matt to stay until he thought he was no longer needed. Matt went to the first two sessions because Ken didn't speak. He only answered questions with a yes or no head movement.

At the end of their first session, Mike prescribed medication for Ken that he knew would have minimal side effects. He didn't want to complicate Ken's already precarious mental state. The first sign of improvement was that Ken slept more. Up to that point, he rarely slept more than two or three hours a night so his traumatized mind was further addled by lack of sleep. As he slept more, he became more responsive. Gradually, Mike increased his drug dosage, and upped their meeting schedule to twice weekly.

At the end of the second session, Ken unexpectedly spoke, "Do you think Beth is watching us? I hope she approves of the meds you've prescribed. You know she was such a smart pharmacist. I think she knew more about meds than most doctors. She was always worried that patients were being over-medicated and becoming zombies. Do you think I'll become a zombie?"

Mike laughed, "No, but you were a zombie these last two years. These meds should help cure you of your zombieism."

Matt and Mike looked at each other with shock that Ken had spoken so lucidly. Mike decided that Matt wasn't needed at any future sessions. Mike extended a life-line to Ken who was slowly taking hold of it and pulling himself out of the quicksand in which he'd been mired over the past two years.

Mike viewed Ken as a special challenge. He needed to give him a reason to live. After six months, Mike faced the same challenge when his wife died. Mike cancelled their sessions for three weeks. When he returned, Mike shared his own grief.

"Ken, as you know my wife Violet died."

"Yes. I know and I extend my condolences to you. In a way I know what you're going through. And in a way you know what I've been going through. But Violet was old and Beth was young, and Violet was sick and Beth was healthy, and Violet's death was expected and Beth's wasn't."

“There’s another difference. You have a surviving child and a loving brother-in-law. We never had children so I’m the sole survivor. I have no siblings, only a few nieces on Violet’s side. I have lots of friends and colleagues, but I’m alone. I may need help from a colleague to manage my aloneness. I haven’t had psychotherapy since I was studying to become a psychiatrist and it was required. I haven’t needed it till now. I have to follow the adage, *Doctor, heal thyself*.”

“Are we going to have a pissing contest to see who has more reason to grieve?”

“I think you would win that. But the death of a person you loved with all your heart and soul is the same no matter their age, their health, or how they died. The loss is the same. Your soul mate is gone leaving you with only half your soul.”

And that was the beginning of countless discussions of death and how to live life fully and find meaning through suffering.

Four months after starting therapy, Ken returned to work. The department had arranged for him to have a half-time desk job. He was based at his old station so it was like going home. On his first day back, his fellow firemen hugged him and treated him as if he only been away for a short while. They hung a huge “Welcome Home” banner over the entrance to the firehouse. Ken felt like he was indeed back in his second home.

After Ken had been on the job for three months, Matt suggested that he take Randy to the firehouse. Ken knew that Randy wanted to be a fireman like him, but he was still unsure about reaching out to him. He was afraid that if he made contact with Randy and something happened to Randy, he would be totally destroyed. He couldn’t lose another child. Then he would definitely commit suicide. There would be no one to live for. He also harbored the fear that he couldn’t really love a child because he was like his parents. He had loved Beth, but had he really loved Sabrina and Randy? He discussed this with Mike who led him to understand that his distant relationship with Randy was not because he was like his parents, but was because of his fear of losing him.

The day Ken took Randy on a tour of the station was the happiest day of Randy’s short life. He climbed all over the fire trucks, slid down the fire pole, and sprayed a water hose. He even put on one of the fireman’s pants and jacket making him look like a circus clown. The firemen gave him his own fire hat and badge. Before they left, Randy jumped up and pulled Ken down so he could kiss him. He smothered his face with wet kisses as he said “thank you” and “I love you” over and over.

Occasionally when there was a fire, Ken felt the urge to suit up and get on the truck. But he knew that he couldn’t take the stress, especially if there were any injuries or fatalities. Once in a while, memories of Myra Jackson and her kids’ deaths seeped into his consciousness, but he quickly rejected them.

Al came up with a new responsibility for Ken so that he would feel more involved – conducting fire safety programs in the local elementary schools. For his visits, Ken wore his uniform and drove a small fire truck to the school so the children could spray the hoses. He talked about the importance of fire detectors and not playing with matches or lighters. He tried not to think of Isaiah setting the shack on fire with the lighter. His school visits did as much to heal him as his therapy.

Another school visit also contributed to Ken's recovery. When Randy was in second grade, Ken made a presentation on his job as part of a school unit on parents' careers. He wore his uniform and brought a small fire truck to school. After he described a fireman's responsibilities, a student asked if he'd ever saved anyone. Then he shared his experience saving the woman from the nursing home and the award he was given. He passed the newspaper photo of himself around. The teacher asked if she could photocopy it and put it on the occupations bulletin board. The kids were in awe of Ken. He was a genuine hero. Ken was the most popular speaker of all the parents, and afterwards a number of boys, and even some girls, said that they wanted to be firemen. Randy beamed with pride. He felt that he had the best dad in the class, maybe even the best dad in the world.

Gradually, Ken and Randy spent more time together. Ken drove Randy home from after-school day care; he gave him baths and sometimes they took showers together; he read him books; they played with his toys, especially his 12 fire trucks; they went to the movies together, and he put him to bed with a kiss from himself, his mother, and his sister. They reached a milestone when Randy started to prefer Ken over Matt. Both Ken and Matt were so happy when they went to a restaurant and Randy chose to sit on the side of the booth next to Ken, not Matt. Ken was now Randy's father, his loving father. There were many times when Ken looked into Randy's blue eyes and saw Beth looking back at him approving of his parenting.

As Ken progressed with therapy, Mike had an idea for Ken to help others as an aid to recovery. Ken had chosen being a fireman because he wanted to save others. He couldn't do that anymore, but there was a chance for him to help save others in a different way. Mike led a therapy group for vets with PTSD. Because he'd seen combat in Vietnam, he was accepted by the vets. Although he hadn't suffered from PTSD, he was one of them. He suggested that Ken join the group, not because he'd experienced the trauma of war, but because he'd experienced the trauma of loss.

Mike asked the vets in the group how they felt about the possibility of Ken joining them. At first, they were reluctant to have him join because he hadn't suffered "real trauma" like they had. But they agreed to let him sit in for one session. That would prove to be the first of many sessions. The vets learned that his trauma was not any less than theirs, just different. Ken realized that seeing Beth and Sabrina's deaths was not that different from these vets seeing their comrades die. He bonded with some of the vets in the group and began

socializing with them outside the therapy sessions. For the first time in four years, Ken made new friends.

Mike and Ken became more than therapist and patient; they too became friends, even quasi-family. Mike felt fatherly to Ken and grandfatherly to Randy. He knew he stepped over professional boundaries by changing their relationship from professional to personal, but he needed them to help him survive the loss of his wife.

On Christmas, Matt, Ken, Randy, and Mike went out for a holiday meal at a historic Charleston mansion. Most of their conversation revolved around how they needed to find a new girl for Matt because he and his current girlfriend had broken up the week before. Matt had been dating Jackie, a paralegal at a friend's law firm. Instead of spending his free time with Randy and Ken, Matt spent most of his time with Jackie. He enjoyed staying at her apartment, but it was very small so they were talking about moving into a larger apartment together. It was time for Matt to have an independent life. Ken was ready to take over all the parenting responsibilities.

But there was a change in their relationship after Matt cancelled two dates with Jackie because he had to take care of Randy who had strep throat. Ken had work and therapy, and Minerva was unavailable. Jackie was especially upset because one of the dates was to an office party where she planned to introduce Matt as her significant other. She felt that she had to make up a "better" excuse than Matt having to baby sit with Randy who was his nephew, not even his son. Jackie told him that he'd have to decide who was more important – her or Ken and Randy. It turned out to be an easy decision for Matt. He would not and could not give up Ken and Randy as the center of his life. He loved Ken and Randy more than he loved Jackie. But there would come a time when he would love a woman more than Ken and Randy. The woman would be his Beth.

Chapter 16

Ken had made steady progress toward living a "normal" life, thanks to Mike, medication, work, friends, and Randy and Matt's love. But eight years after the accident there was an unexpected setback that could have erased much of the progress.

It was Labor Day and Ken was home from work. Matt had moved out three years earlier. He had gotten a new job in the private sector and even had a social life. But he still talked to Ken almost daily and visited often. He was visiting on this day because he'd promised he'd join Ken and Randy at the neighborhood picnic and softball game. Matt was a good ball player, and Randy wanted to make sure he was on his team. Matt also wanted to go to the picnic to again thank Ken's neighbors who'd kept an eye on him since Matt had moved out.

Despite it being a holiday, Minerva had come in to work because she'd volunteered to prepare food for the picnic. That was generous Minerva, always giving freely of her time to help Ken and Matt. She was making everyone's favorites – fruit salad and black-eyed peas. Ken was on the screened porch dozing while Matt was in the kitchen eating a late breakfast. Although Matt loved living on his own, he was not a good cook nor did he have any interest in cooking so whenever he was at the McNair house, he ate heartily of Minerva's cooking. This morning it was a cheese omelet with biscuits. Minerva usually made extra food so Matt would have something to eat when he returned from work at eight or nine.

Ken was listening to Matt and Minerva's conversation with half an ear when there was a change in topic that caught his attention. They'd been talking about the damage from a tropical storm that had struck Charleston a few weeks earlier, when they switched to talking about Ken in hushed tones thinking that he was asleep, but still not wanting him to possibly hear their conversation.

"I hope you don't think it's wrong for me to talk about Mr. Ken, but I'm so glad to see how much he's changed. He's normal now. He changed so much since I started working here eight years ago. Ya know he never used to talk to me or even look at me the first two years I worked here. I didn't know if he didn't like me cause I'm black or cause he didn't like nobody. I think it was both."

"Well, the trauma of losing Beth and Sabrina paralyzed him, but since he's accepted help, he's improved steadily. That psychiatrist he sees really saved his life.

Minerva, I don't know if I've thanked you enough for all that you did for Randy when he was little. You helped him get through losing his mother and for a while losing his father. You were like a grandmother to him. Thanks to you he's grown up to be a really good kid. Can you believe he's 11 and starting to get hair on his upper lip?"

“Oh Mr. Matt, I know what he and Mr. Ken went through cause my sister had a terrible tragedy like that. Her three children burned up in a fire. They all died. That was 13 years ago, but the pain never goes away. I cry every day. I miss those babies. They were like my kids.”

Ken roused from his state of semi-wakefulness. His body stiffened and his eyes opened wide. He realized Minerva was talking about Myra Jackson - her sister. He couldn't believe this coincidence. He thought it couldn't be true, but then he asked himself how many fires were there where three children had been killed 13 years ago. He felt his heart pulsating louder and louder. He was sure that Minerva and Matt could hear it in the next room.

He asked himself why he never knew about this before. The one time he'd asked Minerva about her family, she just told him about her husband and kids. Why didn't she tell him about Myra? Then he realized that if someone had asked him about his family, he wouldn't have volunteered information about Beth and Sabrina. Of course, she didn't tell him about Myra. It was too personal to share with a stranger, and in a way Ken was a stranger although they had lived in close proximity for eight years.

He wanted to go into the kitchen, and ask Minerva if Myra was really her sister. But he didn't move. He felt the return of the demons demanding revenge and retaliation. He thought they were gone, but they weren't. They'd been lying in wait for the right moment to re-appear. This was the moment. Myra Jackson invaded Ken's life again. He thought he'd banished her from his mind, but he was wrong. Suddenly Ken recalled every aspect of the burning shack and the sight of the three dead children. But most of all he recalled the dead stare of Angel's eyes. And with it, the image of Sabrina's brutalized face. The two babies became enmeshed in his mind again.

He had to make sure that Minerva was Myra Jackson's sister, and he had to find out what had happened to her. But first he had to get control of himself and work at not showing his renewed obsession with her. He practiced the relaxation exercises Mike had taught him. Gradually, his heart slowed and his body eased. He thought he had banished his obsession over Myra, but he was wrong. This island of craziness in the sea of sanity in his brain had resurfaced.

After Minerva finished cooking, she looked in to see if Ken was awake. He feigned sleep so she left without saying good-bye. He wasn't ready to talk to her. He had to gain control of himself. At that moment, feelings of anger, revenge, hatred, and confusion roiled around in his brain. What had happened to the six years of psychotherapy? Was he back to the date of the fire – June 18, 1998 or the date of the accident - April 17, 2003? Had the two dates somehow merged?

After Minerva left, Matt came in to get Ken for the picnic. He acted groggy from sleep so he wouldn't have to talk. By the time they got to the picnic, he was able to assume

the façade of the rehabilitated Ken. He played softball on the team opposite Matt and Randy, and was happy to lose to them.

One day the following week, Ken came home early from work so he could talk to Minerva. He found her in the laundry room loading the washer. He casually asked her if they could talk for a minute. Minerva looked surprised because Ken only talked to her when necessary, and the topics were always food, clean clothes, or something to do with her chores.

“Minerva, last week I heard you mention your sister when you were talking to Matt. I’m curious. What happened to her and her kids?”

“I thought you were asleep or I wouldn’t have said nothing. You sure you want to hear about her? It’s a sad story. I don’t know if you really want to hear about other people’s hard times. You sure had enough of your own.”

“I want to know what happened.”

He led her to the screened porch and asked her to sit down. Without any prompting, Minerva told the story of Myra Jackson. She seemed to find catharsis in sharing her story.

“My sister Myra had four kids: Elijah, Isaiah, and beautiful baby Angel. That was her name Angel, and she was an angel – so good, so sweet, so loveable. I saw goodness in her and I knew someday she’d grow up to be like me, not Myra. They all lived in our mamma’s old house out in the woods cause Myra had no money to pay rent. It was a falling-down shack. And it was so dirty. Nobody ever cleaned it. Myra was into drugs and booze. She’d go out every night and leave the kids alone. I told her that something bad was going to happen to them, but she never listened to me. She never listened to nobody. Most of the time the kids were half-starved and wearing filthy rags. I used to bring food over there whenever I could. I don’t have a car so I couldn’t go there unless somebody drove me. Sometimes I’d bring the kids clothes or toys. When I’d go there, they’d cover me with hugs and kisses. They were loving kids. Me and my momma were the only ones who ever loved them.

Social services come out a couple of times to check on them, but they didn’t do nothing. They said there wasn’t enough proof that Myra was neglecting them. Jesus, if you just looked at those kids you’d get all the proof you needed. You’d see how skinny and filthy they were. They even had lice. You could see that no one was taking care of them. They were like weeds, just growing on their own. Social services just didn’t want any more kids in the system. They didn’t want to pay for them. So they let them die. I say that Social Services caused those kids’ deaths, but nobody listens to me.

But they did do something about her other kid – Monique. She was 11, but looked older because she’s big and fat. They took her away because she was drunk at school. At 11!! Can you imagine going to school drunk in the morning? She and her momma liked to

drink together. They were probably up all night drinking. Maybe they even did tricks together. I dunno. I can't think about that. That's why Monique wasn't there the night of the fire. If she was there, maybe she could have stopped Elijah from playing with the lighter or she could have put out the fire. But no one was there to save those babies. No one cared enough to save them. Even me. I should have taken them when Social Services turned them down. I didn't cause I didn't have money to support them and I lived in a one bedroom apartment back then. I had no room for them. I make up excuses. I blame Myra and social services for killing them, but I'm to blame too. I should have taken them to my place and have my friends from church help me take care of them. I should have asked my daughter, Mary, to help out. Every day I pray to God for forgiveness for not saving them. I'm a sinner and I hope I don't burn in hell for that someday."

Minerva stopped talking, shut her eyes, and put her hands together to pray silently, to ask God for forgiveness. When she looked at Ken, her eyes were brimming with tears.

"I don't know how Elijah set the house on fire. He didn't do it on purpose. Maybe he dropped the lighter when he lit it. Maybe he was playing and setting fire to things. We won't ever know. It doesn't matter. They were out in the woods so no one saw the fire for a while. The kids all burned up. I think of how they must have felt when they were burning alive and I just want to cry forever and ever."

She stopped and wailed. Ken knew that wail of desperation and hopelessness. He'd heard it many times emanating from his own lips. After seeing their bodies and Angel's face at the fire, he could imagine how they must have felt. They would have futilely gasped for air as smoke filled their tiny lungs. They would have beat at the flames as they engulfed their clothes and skin. If he told her this, he would be guilty of soulless cruelty. He would have to be the sole keeper of these secret horrors.

"I hope God took them fast so they didn't have to suffer too long. There was one funeral for all three kids. They put all of them in one adult coffin. It was cheaper than three small coffins.

Everyday since the fire 13 years ago, I ask myself why Jesus did this. Why did He take three beautiful, innocent babes in such a cruel way? They didn't deserve this. But Jesus says that they're with Him now in Heaven and they're better than they were when they were here on Earth. They're not hungry and they're clean and they have peace. I miss them so much, and I know I'll meet them in Heaven one day and we'll all be jubilant. Hallelujah Jesus."

Ken couldn't believe his ears. Minerva was asking the same questions about her tragedy that he asked himself about his tragedy. And they both had the same answers – their loved ones were in heaven under God's protection. They were safe for eternity. He realized that Minerva was stronger than he was. She'd been able to survive her tragedy without

psychotherapy and drugs. Her belief in God had saved her. He couldn't rely on God for answers because he doubted that He existed, even though he believed in the existence of heaven.

At that moment, Ken thought of telling Minerva that he had been at the fire, that he had seen the dead bodies of her beloveds, that he had held Angel in his arms. He knew he couldn't. Somehow he felt that sharing that experience with Minerva would harm their relationship. He was a witness to the worst tragedy in Minerva's life. Whenever Minerva would see him, she would relive the tragedy. He couldn't do that to her. He felt the same way about seeing Don Smith. If he ever saw Don Smith again, he would relive the accident.

Minerva continued with her story. "Myra felt she killed her kids, and she sure did. The police didn't charge her with any crime. There were lots of things she was guilty of, but they figured that losing her kids was worse than going to jail. After that, she got worse. She was evil before the kids died, but afterwards she became the devil. She couldn't get money for booze and drugs and she was too ugly to whore so she started stealing. She got arrested a couple of times for small stuff, but she didn't go to jail till she broke into this rich old lady's house and beat her up. She almost killed her because she wouldn't tell her where she hid her jewels. Myra heard from some of her drunk friends that the old lady hid jewels someplace in the house. Turned out she didn't have any jewels. And even if she did have jewels, where was Myra going to sell them? Junkies and drunks don't want jewels. The poor old lady almost died and couldn't go back to her house after that. They had to put her in a nursing home. Myra's in jail for 15 years now. She should have gotten life. I'm glad she can't make any more trouble for anybody, at least for 15 years."

"Do you ever see her?"

"I never saw her after the funeral. I don't want anything to do with her. No one in the family sees her. We all blame her for what happened to the kids. It was like she took the lighter and set the shack on fire herself."

"Where's Monique?"

Chapter 17

“Well that’s another story. Monique’s a drunk and a druggie, just like her momma. She had a baby three years ago. She named him Elijah after her dead brother. That put a real curse on that baby. He was born with this small head, a funny looking face, and a heart problem. They said the baby had F-A-S. I think it means Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. I practice saying that because it’s hard. Someone told me that fetal means the baby in the belly and, of course, alcohol is booze and syndrome means a medical problem. You get that when the mother drinks a lot and she poisons the baby in her belly and then the baby’s born with all kinds of problems. Monique didn’t do nothing for that baby after he was born. She just kept him home. She didn’t even take him to the doctor when he was sick. Social services came out a few times, but they didn’t make her do nothing. She took him to the emergency room when he stopped breathing, but the doctors couldn’t save him. It was too late. Poor Elijah died. He was just 11 months old.”

Ken heard the magic number – 11. His beautiful Sabrina and this poor handicapped, neglected baby died at the same age. But their lives had been so different. Sabrina had been loved by everyone and had the best of everything. She had 11 months of joy. Poor Elijah was never loved and had nothing. He had 11 months of living hell. He asked himself if Sabrina’s death was worse or better because there were loved ones to mourn her passing. Was Elijah’s death worse or better because there was no one to mourn his passing? He could convince himself that Sabrina’s death was more tragic because of the future life she was deprived of living and because the effect her passing had on her loved ones. But he could also convince himself that Elijah’s death was more tragic because he never experienced a day of happiness and there was no one to grieve his passing. But Ken knew there really was no competition about tragedy. It wasn’t possible to measure tragedy with any objective yardstick. The tragedy in both cases was equally heartbreaking.

Minerva continued.

“The story got in the newspapers cause someone found out that Elijah was just kept home with Monique. She didn’t pay no attention to him. He just laid in bed all the time. She hardly ever gave him food and she hardly ever cleaned him. When she brought him to the emergency room, he weighed 10 pounds and he was 11 months old. Ten pounds – that’s what a newborn weighs. He was covered with poop and he had bites all over his body.

Social services got blamed for not taking him away from Monique or not forcing Monique to take him to a doctor. Now that was neglect and that was what killed Elijah. Neglect killed both Elijahs. But the story didn’t stay long in the papers or on TV because there was an explosion in the harbor and everyone was more interested in that than a handicapped, sick baby dying of neglect. There are lots of babies like that I fear.

Monique got arrested for selling drugs about six weeks ago. This was her third offense and she could get 10 to 30 years. She's three months pregnant. The judge wants her to get an abortion because the doctors think this baby has F-A-S too. They did some kind of test that lets them see the baby inside her belly. The baby's got a real small head and something's wrong with his heart and his kidneys. They think this baby is just like Elijah.

Don't you think that it's kinda interesting that all these redneck holy rollers don't believe in abortion unless you're black? They would love to murder all black babies before they're born. They also say that the baby will be a burden to the taxpayer because Monique will be in jail so she can't take care of him. Even if she wouldn't be in jail, she wouldn't take care of him anyhow. She killed the first kid with neglect so she'd probably kill this one too."

Minerva's demeanor changed as she talked about Monique and abortion. She became increasingly agitated. Her speech even changed, becoming more strident. Her usual quiet tone of voice became amplified until she was almost yelling. The Minerva Ken had known for eight years seemed to be morphing into a stranger before his eyes.

"Anyhow it's up to the court now to decide if Monique should have an abortion. I'm not sure how I feel. I don't think abortion's right if a kid is going to be handicapped or poor. Kids with handicaps and poor kids have a right to live like everybody else. I suppose I don't think abortion's ever right. Nobody should play God and nobody should decide who gets to live and who gets to die. Only God decides and God decided that Myra's three kids should die and we can't question why God decided that."

Ken wanted to steer the conversation back to Myra.

"Let me ask you, how do you feel about your sister?"

"I always hated her. Since I was a little girl, I was well behaved and church-going. She never went to church. I go to church every Sunday. I never miss prayer meetings or bible study. I try not to sin. Myra was always a sinner — doing drugs, drinking, violent, and going off with men. She beat her kids, even baby Angel. She hit her when she cried to make her stop crying so Angel cried some more. And then Myra hit her more. When we were little, she tried to beat me, but I hit her back so she left me alone. Right now I feel relieved that she's in prison. I don't want to ever have anything to do with her or Monique. I hope they both spend the rest of their days rotting in jail. I'm ashamed to be related to them."

"Minerva, I don't know how you and Myra could be sisters. You're so good and she's so evil. Thanks for sharing this with me. I know it was painful.

And Minerva, I don't know if I've thanked you enough for what you did for Randy. You've loved him like a blood relative. You helped him survive. You're a very special person who's filled with love."

Ken hugged Minerva. Well, it wasn't exactly a hug. He pulled her to him and lightly patted her back. He didn't want her to misconstrue the purpose of his physical contact, no matter how limited. He had never before intentionally touched a black person. In fact, he usually cringed when he had to touch a black person's hand, like when he got change from the black clerk at the gas station. He was sure that there were times when the clerk purposely touched him so he could see Ken's reaction.

At that moment Ken didn't view Minerva as black, white, or purple. She was a good human being who suffered a tragedy just like he'd suffered. He felt a new kinship with her.

Ironically at that moment, Minerva's feelings toward Ken changed too, but not in a positive way. Her reaction was the opposite of Ken's. She felt a surging build-up of resentment over the years of bigoted treatment she silently endured all her life as well as the centuries of cruelty her ancestors experienced. Ken was a white man who was responsible for this treatment, just like all other whites. She recalled past instances when he demeaned her, whether intentionally or not. She would never forget how he made her clean up six-year-old Randy after he was covered with vomit and explosive diarrhea. He stood next to her and directed her to clean him thoroughly when he could have cleaned his own son. She recalled the night the police came to the house to investigate a rash of neighborhood break-ins. Along with the police, he questioned her as if she knew the thieves because she was black and they may have been black too. And there were times when it was storming and he didn't offer to driver her to the bus stop three blocks away. She had made a list of slights that she'd filed away until this moment.

She had buried ill feelings toward Ken because of his tragedy and because she never forgot her status as an underling. But now she felt herself changing. Although she hated Monique and all that she represented, she was infuriated by the hatred for all blacks, both good and bad, openly expressed and unchallenged in the media. She helplessly watched people state their vicious un-American, inflammatory views. With age, she was becoming more resentful of her past role as a good worker who never complained, no matter the injustice. She felt guilty for having accepted her role as a paid slave. She knew it was time to change.

There was a growing movement of resistance in the black community. She heard anti-white sentiment expressed in church, in shops, and on the street. She had always thought that she was too old to express her feelings, but now she realized age didn't matter. She had to add her voice to those of young people who were starting to resist.

Minerva returned to the laundry room, and Ken went to his room to think. He was so glad that Myra was in prison. He hoped she would spend the rest of her life there. She was a menace to society. He thought about Monique and how she was a carbon copy of her mother. He wanted her to be put away for the rest of her life too. He thought long and hard about his feelings of revenge, and realized he didn't really know how he felt anymore. He knew he

couldn't get revenge, but he wanted to find a way to retaliate somehow. He wanted to strike back against the evil they represented. He didn't think jail was punishment enough. Maybe the government could take welfare away from people like them so they had to work like everyone else. Maybe they could take welfare away if they kept having babies. That would stop them. Or maybe these people were punished enough by their poverty and ignorance.

Suddenly Ken pictured Beth as she looked the first day they'd met. He was back on her sofa telling her about Myra and Monique instead of the fire. He felt her stroking him and saying that revenge and retaliation were more harmful to him than to them. He actually heard her voice. He felt her calming presence. And with it, his hatred and anger began to dissipate. Beth still had the power to heal him, even after death. Knowing this brought him a new sense of peace he hadn't felt since the accident.

Ken had never fully shared his memories of the fire with Mike. He needed to do this now. He needed to lay out all his unresolved issues. As soon as he sat down at the next session, the words spilled out.

"Mike. I've told you about how I met Beth after that terrible fire. I didn't tell you about how I obsessed over retaliating against Myra Jackson, the mother who left her kids alone to burn to death. During the second year after the accident, all I could think about was killing her. I was going to be the avenging angel. Fortunately, I didn't know where she lived and anyhow I wasn't driving then. But I was crazy enough that I might have done something dangerous to her or to somebody else.

I had these crazy fantasies where I blamed Myra for the accident and that she actually stole Joe's car and intentionally drove it into the church killing Beth and Sabrina. I don't know what happened to Joe and Martha. They weren't in my fantasies. Rationally, I know that wasn't possible, but I wasn't rational. I was loony, totally nutsy. I'd picture Myra leading gangs of violent, armed blacks who were out to destroy whites. It was like a reverse KKK. I confused Angel with Sabrina. I'd see myself holding them both at the same time, one in each arm. I was so fucked up. I can't believe it now. I never told you about this because these feelings gradually died and once I started seeing you I thought they were gone for good. I was also ashamed of these feelings and the violent reactions they sparked in me. They scared me. But I was wrong. These memories were hiding deep in my bone marrow. They came back because Myra's sister is Minerva. You know that woman who's worked for us since the accident. I found out by chance recently. Since then, I've been obsessing all over again.

I don't want revenge now. Anyhow, not against her. Although I think of maybe taking revenge out on others. I don't know who. Maybe other black people. Maybe that's why I'm so racist. I know I am and I hate myself for it, but I can't change these feelings I have for blacks. I think that Myra is like all black people, but then I think of Minerva who's so good. She really helped save Randy during the first year after the accident. And she took such good

care of me when I was a vegetable. Matt couldn't have made it without her. But I always think of her as an exception. Most blacks aren't like Minerva and that kind cop Ed Brent who helped us right after the accident.

I just want to stop thinking about that horrible night and getting revenge. Revenge for what? There's no one at fault. There's no one to blame. That's the problem. I have to create someone to blame. I have to create a scapegoat. I'm scaring myself. I think that I might do something crazy like that racist who shot up the Charleston church. Fortunately, I don't keep a gun in the house, but not because of Randy. Because of me and what I might do if I lose control of myself. I don't trust myself, even after all this therapy and the meds. I'm afraid I still could do something crazy."

"I don't think you're going to do anything crazy. You're experiencing a return to a traumatic situation. I'm going to up your meds for a while and I'm also going to see you twice weekly. We'll get you through this.

Do you want to tell Minerva about your role in the fire?"

"No. I don't want her to know. But I do think I should tell Matt."

"How about telling the guys in your PTSD group? I think they could help you."

At the next PTSD group session, Ken shared his memories of the fire and his resulting desire for revenge, and then burying the memory, and now obsessing over it again. Several of the vets shared similar experiences and techniques they used to cope with haunting war memories. He found it helpful knowing that what he was going through was not unusual for sufferers of PTSD. There was security in knowing that his response to his abnormal behavior was normal.

Ken called Matt and told him that there was something he wanted to discuss privately. They arranged to meet Saturday afternoon while Randy was at his softball practice. Matt didn't have free time during the week so they had to meet on the weekend. He was working at a medium sized law firm that specialized in social issues cases. The partners hired Matt for his experience as a public defender and his expertise with issues such as abortion, jailing the mentally ill, over-incarceration of blacks, and the death penalty.

They met in the screened porch at Ken's house. Ken didn't start off with niceties, but immediately started telling the story related by Minerva. As he shared more and more, Matt's facial expression changed. He became visibly upset. Finally, Ken noticed.

"What's wrong Matt?"

"You're not going to believe this, but I'm representing Monique Jackson. After she was arrested and they found out that she was pregnant and that she'd had a handicapped kid

in the past that she killed through neglect, the issue of abortion arose. The earlier news stories about her neglect and death of her child were re-published.

The authorities asked Monique if she wanted an abortion. They wanted her to say yes and get rid of this potentially explosive case. She said that she didn't know so they did testing and found that the fetus has F-A-S, just like her first kid. They asked her to give permission for an abortion. She kept changing her mind. Every five minutes, she'd say no, and then five minutes later she'd say yes.

There was a pd defending her who told some anti-abortion groups about her and they got to her and convinced her to carry the baby. So when this threatened to become a big thing, I was asked to step in as her court appointed counsel to see if I could handle the issues and prevent an explosion in the press. Like that would really be possible. There's an uproar about this case because of a constitutional question of who makes a decision for a woman to have an abortion. If she's ruled incompetent, the court will make the decision. If she's not, then she'll make the decision and no one knows what that would be. And of course, there's the racial issue.

There are all kinds of groups involved. Black groups are saying that this is another attempt to murder black babies. Anti-abortion groups are saying all children have a right to life. Groups for the handicapped are saying the government is trying to kill the handicapped. Pro-abortion groups are saying that nothing should stand in the way of access to one's constitutional right to an abortion. If people have an opinion, no matter how crazy, they start a group to try to influence the decision.

The judge wants the state to make the decision because he wants her ruled incompetent. She's being evaluated now. If she's found incompetent, then the court can make the decision. So the issue is not that she will or will not have an abortion because constitutionally she can have one, but who makes that decision and who makes the most noise about what that decision will be.

Working with Monique has been crazy because she's crazy. One minute she says yes, she wants an abortion, and the next she says no, she doesn't. She's out of control and cries all the time. She bites her arm and grinds her teeth. I think she's even having hallucinations because she talks to people I can't see. I requested that she be sedated, but was told she couldn't be because the judge wants her ruled incompetent. And frankly, I have no doubt that she is, with or without meds.

I saw her in jail yesterday, and she told me that she wanted to kill herself and the baby. She said she wanted to drink poison, or stab herself, or shoot herself, or jump out of the window. I said stupid things to try to calm her, but I had no effect. She scared me. I'm sure she was serious, and if she can find a way to kill herself, she will. Maybe I'm overreacting, but I've never seen someone so out of control and I've represented lot of insane people in the

past. I told the captain of the police station where she's being held about my concerns. He said that he'd handle it. I suggested he put her in a straight jacket, but he again said that he'd handle it and that I should leave. He was pissed off at me. So I called the judge. He also said that she was just talking crazy and to ignore her, and that he was sure that the police would prevent her from harming herself.

I'm going to visit a class for handicapped children at Children's Hospital on Monday. I want to observe a kid there who has F-A-S, and I want to talk to the professionals about the prognosis of the fetus. I don't want the kid's handicap to be a factor in the final decision. That's a whole other issue. I just want to focus on who makes the decision, not the kid's problems."

"Let me know how this goes. I won't tell Minerva about this, but she may find out through the grapevine or the newspapers. I think there's something going on in the black community over this whole thing. I hope there's no riot. Can you imagine Charleston with a riot? That's Baltimore or Chicago, not Charleston.

"How do you feel about this Matt?"

"I don't think Monique should have an abortion because the fetus is handicapped or because she can't take care of it. I think the baby should be allowed to live and placed with people who can take care of it. I know a lot of people don't agree with me. But if we abort a handicapped fetus, we're going down a slippery slope. Who decides that the fetus is handicapped? How handicapped does a fetus have to be to be aborted? Should a fetus with Down's Syndrome be aborted when we know that many people with Down's have productive lives.? If we abort handicapped fetuses, do we become like the Nazis and their euthanasia program?

And the issue of who supports an unwanted baby has not been answered. All these people who want to save babies from abortion before a baby is born are absent after they're born. Their commitment to the baby stops with the delivery.

Ken, how do you feel about all this?"

"I would say that the baby should live, but having seen how those three kids lived, I wouldn't call that living. The state would take the baby and then we'd all pay for its care. I supposed the issue of government spending on such people would arise. Again, quality of life would be important. I don't know. This is above my pay grade."

Chapter 18

After receiving her master's degree in early childhood special education, Lilly found her dream job as a teacher in the preschool handicapped class affiliated with Charleston's Children's Hospital. Joan Miller, her supervisor at her practicum placement was taking over the Children's Hospital program so she would be working for someone she considered a mentor and friend. There was only one serious drawback - the job was in Charleston. She hadn't been back to Charleston since the accident. She didn't know if she could live in the place that was the site of her still recurring nightmares. She talked to her parents about whether she should take the job. They suggested she visit Charleston before making a decision, but they also told her that she had to put the accident in the past and get on with her life. That was easy for them to say, but not easy for her to do.

On the weekend after she talked to her parents, she drove to Charleston. Instead of taking the most direct route from Charlotte to Charleston, she took a longer route so she could see the Ravenel Bridge, the modern bridge over the Cooper River, which replaced the old rickety bridge that had so frightened Joe. She drove around the area of the hospital and then felt compelled to go to the church where the accident happened. She had to re-visit the scene of the crime.

When she got to Charleston Methodist Church, she parked in the space where Joe had been headed when he had his heart attack. She sat in the car trying to re-create the scene, but couldn't. There wasn't the slightest sign of the accident from eight years earlier. The church wall had been repaired so no damage was visible. Not one brick looked mismatched. Bushes had been replanted and were fully mature. All remnants of the accident that had damaged the Nelson and McNair families were erased.

She decided to brave going into the church although she was shivering with anxiety. She looked at the hallway where the car had smashed through the wall, and again saw no signs of damage. Everything was repaired, except maybe Lilly. She went into the sanctuary and sat in a back pew. She thought of how easily such a significant event could be physically erased. As she sat there, she thought of Ken. She wondered what had happened to him. Had he healed? What happened to his little boy? Her thoughts about the accident primarily centered on her grandparents, and rarely on Ken and Randy. Most of her reminiscing about the accident centered on how much she missed having her grandparents in her life. More than any other emotion, she felt self pity.

She left the church unchanged, not finding the solace she had hoped for. She hadn't even considered talking to God. She wasn't sure that God dwelt in a place where He had done so much damage. As she walked to her car, she pictured a sign on the church door reading: God – keep out. She laughed cynically to herself.

Being in Charleston, the scene of the accident, didn't seem to make a difference so Lilly decided to take the job. She loved the charm of the city and the perfect fit of the job to her career goals. She would just stay away from the church and Ken McNair. Anyhow, how was she going to stay away from him if she didn't know where he lived? She decided to use the old reliable way of finding people – the phone book. And lo and behold there was Kenneth McNair at 76 Magnolia Lane in Mt. Pleasant. She even memorized his phone number, 803-673-5233. She would stay away from Mt. Pleasant and she would make sure not to inadvertently dial his phone number. She felt safer knowing this information, feeling that she could protect herself by avoiding contact with Ken McNair, which didn't seem difficult in this city of hundreds of thousands of people.

Lilly answered an ad to share an apartment with two nurses, Tricia and Debbie, who worked at Children's Hospital. The apartment was in a remodeled antebellum house a few blocks from Battery Park. How beautiful, historic Battery Park was with its charming promenade and seawall on the harbor where the Ashley and Cooper Rivers meet. Fort Sumter, visible in the distance, served as a reminder of Charleston's checkered past. Lilly, who had become a runner in college, found the promenade perfect for jogging or sitting on a bench reading a book.

Over her first year of teaching, Lilly had many visitors to her class, usually from the fields of medicine, psychology, and education. One day in the spring, Joan said that she was getting a visit from Matt Hayes, an attorney working on a case involving F-A-S. He wanted to observe one of her students to learn about the condition from more than just reading scientific literature. One of Lilly's students was three-year-old Billy who had many of the characteristics associated with the condition: a small head, unusual facial traits, delayed intellectual and physical development, and health problems.

There was a knock at the classroom door. She sent her aide to answer it. That's when she saw Matt. She was surprised at how handsome he was. For some reason, she was expecting an old guy in a rumpled suit. Perhaps Spencer Tracy playing Clarence Darrow in the movie, *Inherit the Wind*. She didn't expect a tall, handsome, athletic looking man with a wide smile.

He warmly shook her hand and thanked her for allowing him to observe Billy. She knew that he had already read Billy's file so he knew that Billy's mother had been homeless, living under a railroad trestle. She was 40 and had been alcoholic most of her life. She had no prenatal care for Billy, and went to the emergency room when she went into labor. Two days after giving birth, she snuck out of the hospital leaving Billy. She was never seen again. He was placed in a foster home specializing in children with special needs where he has lived his entire life.

Lilly pointed Billy out to Matt and told him to sit on one of the small classroom chairs to observe him. Lilly tried not to laugh as all 6'2" of Matt struggled to fit into the chair. She

hoped that he didn't break it and fall on his bottom. As she pictured this happening, she suppressed a giggle.

Lilly was singing songs with a group of four children. They were working on *Old McDonald Had a Farm*. All Lilly wanted the children to do was sing the refrain, *EIEIO*. Billy tried to sing at the appropriate times, but could only say *E* over and over again. When they played Patty Cake, Lilly wanted the children to clap their hands which Billy did enthusiastically. Lilly and the aide praised the children for every response they made, and at the end of each song, they hugged them. When Lilly hugged Billy, he molded to her body and smiled adoringly at her. Like all children, whether disabled or not, Billy responded to praise and affection.

Next they sat on the floor and played with color blocks. Lilly suggested that Matt sit next to Billy. Matt was visibly relieved to get off the chair safely. Every child got a group of red, blue, and yellow blocks. Lilly held up a specific block and said, "Yellow block," and the children took a yellow block and put it in the middle of the circle as they tried to repeat yellow block. Billy couldn't do this so Matt helped him.

Next, they had their snack. Matt helped Billy drink his milk and eat his crackers. He also had milk and crackers which he visibly enjoyed. He placed his face close to Billy's and said, "That's goooooood." Billy smiled and touched Matt's face.

After 30 minutes, Matt left thanking Lilly for allowing him to see what F-A-S looks like and making school so much fun. Lilly didn't think about Matt again until the following Saturday morning when she was jogging on the promenade. It was 8 AM and although it was a gray, gloomy day, there were lots of runners. As usual, Lilly was in a semi-trance when she ran, but as she passed a guy running toward her, she recognized him as Matt Hart. He, too, recognized her and stopped.

"Hey, aren't you Lilly Nelson? I almost didn't recognize you without your clothes."

"Yeah. Aren't you Matt Hart? I did recognize you without your clothes."

"Wanna run with me?"

"Sure."

After running two miles, they rested on a bench.

"I really want to thank you again for allowing me to observe Billy. That brought F-A-S home to me. You're a natural born teacher. It was beautiful watching you interact with the kids. You seem to bring them to life."

"Thanks. It's what I love doing. From what I've heard about you, you love what you do too."

“Oh, I didn’t know I have a reputation to live up to.”

“I read about the abortion case you’re working on with a fetus having F-A-S. The article painted you as some type of crusader who would settle all the issues to satisfy everyone. Sure. Can you cure cancer too?”

He laughed just as the skies opened up and it started to pour.

Matt said, “Do you want to come to my place? I live just a block from here.”

“Sure.”

By the time they reached Matt’s apartment, they were drenched. Matt lived in a tiny one bedroom apartment in a renovated antebellum house. The only advantage of the apartment was its roomy balcony with a view of the harbor in the distance.

“Let’s sit on the porch until the rain lets up. I’m afraid we’ll flood my little cell if we sit inside.”

Matt brought out some bottled waters.

“This is all I have to drink except beer, and I think it’s a bit early for beer. I don’t keep much food or drink in my place so I have an excuse to go out or order in. I hate cooking, even microwaving.”

The water kept them hydrated as they perspired from the humidity even though they were not hit by any rain. For two hours, they talked about their jobs. First Matt told her about the Monique Jackson case and why he was committed to social justice. Then he talked about his previous work as a public defender and his commitment to the poor. Lilly talked about her commitment to helping kids at the preschool level when the brain is most receptive to learning. As they talked, it became apparent that they shared similar philosophies. They both were do-gooders who wanted to make the world better.

“Lilly, I think we’re a lot alike in what we want the world to be like and what we want to do to make it like that. We are really alike except you’re beautiful and sexy.”

Lilly felt herself blushing. “You’re beautiful in your own way too and of course you’re sexy with wet clothes and greasy hair.”

Matt realized they were moving faster than he wanted so he changed the subject. “I’m starving. Didn’t have any breakfast. Not even a breakfast bar. How about I order pizza?”

“Sure. Make mine just veggie.”

“Okay. Half veggie and half pepperoni and sausage. You can see I’m a meat lover. Are you a vegetarian, or God forbid, a vegan?”

“No. I just don’t like pepperoni or sausage.”

“I hope that’s the only difference between us.”

Lilly looked at him and saw that he was flirting with her, and his suggestion made it clear that he was interested in more than flirting.

“Why don’t you take off your wet clothes and hang them to dry in the bathroom. You can wear one of my shirts.”

Lilly knew what would happen if she took off her clothes. She looked at him and decided she would be reckless and do something she never thought she would do - sleep with someone after just meeting him. Lilly went into Matt’s bedroom, took off her clothes, and put on a white business shirt Matt had laid out for her. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she saw that the shirt was surprisingly transparent and she looked sexier than she had ever looked before despite her soaking wet hair and lack of make-up.

After pizza, they talked about F-A-S and got into a discussion of abortion.

“I’m sorta conflicted. Being a teacher of children with significant disabilities, I don’t believe in abortion because some or many of my students would have been killed in utero. Being a liberated woman, I believe that a woman has a right to decide whether she wants to carry a child with a disability or not. If I had such a child, I’d want to make the decision. Not have somebody else do it for me. If I couldn’t afford the baby, I might opt for an abortion. But if I could afford such a baby and knew how to access the best services, I might not have an abortion. I supposed I don’t know what I’d do until I was in the situation. But I do know one thing. I wouldn’t let anyone make the decision for me, especially old, white misogynists.

“I like your thinking. I like you.”

Matt kissed her tenderly. Then the kissing became passionate. They were on the porch so he said that they should go inside so the neighbors wouldn’t have a show.

They went to his bed and began to have sex. She stopped before Matt entered her and said, “I’m not on the pill. I haven’t been dating anybody so I went off it. Do you have a condom?”

“All the women I know are on the pill so I don’t keep them around. Let me check.”

He rifled through the bedside table drawer and found a pack.

“This must be from my youth. I hope there’s no expiration date on these.”

They laughed, and continued their passionate sex safely.

They spent the rest of the day and night in bed. Between talking about their pasts, their futures, their dreams, and their politics, they made love. They ordered Chinese for dinner. She called her roommates to let them know that she wouldn't be home for a while and that she was okay.

Lilly asked Matt, "What would you have done if you hadn't found those condoms?"

"Believe it or not, I would have run down to the drug store for some. Lilly, I wanted you from first second I saw you. You turned me on with EIEIO. I know it would have temporarily interrupted our sex, but I would have gone anyplace and done anything to have you. I've never quite been so overcome with passion. It must be the 12 year difference in our ages. You know how to turn on an old man. You're my Lolita."

"I'm not a teenager. I'm a 25 year old professional who is old enough to vote and buy alcohol."

On Sunday afternoon after a morning run, Matt drove Lilly home. Her roommates were out so she didn't have to explain what had happened. She took him on a tour of the apartment and her bedroom. Matt looked at the three seashells Lilly displayed on a table. As he examined each one, Lilly said, "These were my grandfather's. He had hundreds of them. When he died, my mom took all of them except these three. I keep them as a reminder of him. I loved him so much. He died some years back."

Lilly didn't share how her grandfather died. Had she done so at that point, their relationship might have ended.

Matt told her that he couldn't see her any week night because he usually worked till 8 or 9, but to save next Saturday and Sunday for another weekend of running, sex, and discussions of their plans for saving the world.

His parting words were, "Lilly, I like you a lot. I like everything about you – your body, but more importantly who you are and want you want out of life."

Lilly sat in her apartment in a daze. She was in love. She knew there was no one else for her other than Matt Hart despite just meeting him. This was the first time she was in love. She didn't want to tell anybody about him, not even Amy. For the time being, he was her secret.

She didn't expect to hear from Matt until the next weekend, but he called her every night to tell her his plans for what they would do in bed over the weekend. He surprised her by being explicit about every move he would make. It was like listening to a porn message on the phone. Surprisingly, she loved it.

Matt wanted to go on a real date with Lilly so on Friday night they arranged to go to dinner and an outdoor concert.

“I feel like a normal person.”

“Don’t feel like that too long. I have big plans for a marathon this weekend. Unfortunately, I’ll have to run the marathon with a condom.”

“I have an appointment with a doctor Tuesday to get a prescription for the pill.”

Over the weekend, they talked about their political and philosophical views, but only briefly touched on their families. Lilly said that she had parents and a sister. Matt said that his parents and sister were dead. He only had a brother-in-law and nephew. Neither mentioned the accident.

On their fourth weekend together, Matt decided it was time to tell Lilly about the accident.

“Lilly, I need to tell you about something that ripped my life apart. It’s an accident that happened eight years ago. My sister, Beth was going to church when she was hit by a car. She and her 11 month old baby Sabrina died. My brother-in-law Ken and my nephew Randy witnessed it. That accident tore my family apart for a long time.”

Lilly turned ash white. She didn’t say anything for a while. “The driver of the car who hit them was my grandfather Joe Silver. He had a heart attack. My grandmother died too.”

They both looked at each other with disbelief.

“What are we going to do? I’ve wanted to forget the accident and get on with my life, but now it’s the center of everything again.”

“Lilly, I want to marry you even though we’ve only been together for five weeks. I love you with all my heart. I’ve been involved with a lot of women in the past, but I’ve never been in love before. I don’t know if you can understand this, but I can’t marry you unless Ken approves. Ken has been most important person in my life until you. I can’t give him up. I can’t give you up either. I’ve told Ken that I think I’ve found the right one. Now I have to tell him that it’s you. He has to give his approval. I know you had nothing to do with the accident, but you’re guilty by association.”

“But my grandfather wasn’t guilty. How can I be guilty?”

Just then Matt’s phone rang. It was someone from his firm. His face looked like someone had died. In fact, someone had – Monique and her fetus.

Chapter 19

Matt, by nature an unflappable, calm person, was jolted by two shocking facts: Lilly's grandfather's involvement in the accident and Monique killing herself and her fetus. He told Lilly that he had to go to his office immediately to find out what had happened with Monique.

"Lilly, I love you, but this business with Monique has top priority right now. I don't know when I'll talk to you again. Remember I love you. Wait for me. We're in for some crazy times with the accident and this killing."

"Matt, I'm here for you. I'll wait forever."

When he got to his office, he found Cindy, his secretary, crying. She told him the story as she knew it so far.

"Monique wanted to get out of jail. She was screaming and fighting anyone who got close to her. She was totally out of control. She put things up her vagina to try to cause a miscarriage. She used everything she could find - a spoon, a knife, a fork, a comb. She even tried to swallow the knife. She kept screaming that she wanted to kill this baby and that she'd do her own abortion. The police couldn't control her. They couldn't even tase her. Finally, they handcuffed her hands and feet. When they got her to the emergency room, they removed the cuffs and she went on to create total bedlam there. I don't know why they removed the cuffs when she was so out of control.

Three critically ill patients, including an infant, had just been brought into the ER after a head-on collision so they had priority. No one was paying attention to Monique and in the mass confusion, she got a scalpel and stabbed herself in the abdomen and the neck, hitting her carotid artery. There was blood spouting from her neck and she was convulsing."

There would be many unanswered questions about how Monique had been able to kill herself. One of the major questions was how she knew that she would die instantly if she cut her carotid artery. Here was this psychotic, out-of-control woman who was able to carefully plan her suicide and the murder of her fetus. How did she know where the carotid was? How was she able to get a scalpel? They're not just lying around. She killed her baby first because she knew that she wouldn't be able to do this once she cut her carotid. These were some of the many questions that fueled conspiracy theories, even by some rational people.

"Everyone who witnessed the carnage was totally unnerved. They said that they'd never seen someone so out of control. Before she got the scalpel, she was hallucinating and talking to Mr. Tiger who she thought was going to eat her. People wondered if someone had smuggled PCP in when she was in jail. And indeed she did have a visitor earlier in the day. No one seemed to know who he was, just that it was a black man who said he was her brother, but we know that she doesn't have a brother whose alive anyway. He only stayed a

few minutes. Other people just said she was violently insane and didn't need drugs to do what she did. They'll do an autopsy to find out if she was on drugs. But an autopsy won't find out why she was so crazy to begin with.

Of course, the rumors started immediately. Some people said that the police wanted her dead. That's why they didn't stop her crazy actions and didn't hide the scalpel. Others said that anti-abortion groups killed her and some even said pro-abortion groups killed her. Take your choice – pro or anti. Then there were those who blamed Nazis and white power supremacists and the KKK. And all those rumors were going around just three hours after her suicide so you can imagine what other wild rumors will start once the story hits the news. By the end of the week, there'll be rumors that the Pope and Elvis were behind this.”

Matt was unsure what his role was now. His client was dead. The case was over, but he felt the need for some closure. He was unsure what closure meant. He talked to the senior partner in his law firm who told him to go to the police station and then to the hospital to see if he could get more information. He couldn't. The only fact he could establish was that Monique had killed herself and her fetus. Details were lacking and would be in the future despite hospital cameras showing that she'd acted alone because hospital personnel were attending to the injured from the accident. Conspiracy theorists insisted that the cameras were tampered with.

The attending doctor asked Matt to identify Monique's body since he'd been her attorney. He said that family members should do that, but they wanted him to do it so he could be sure that she killed herself and that she wasn't killed by someone else. How was he supposed to know by just looking at her body? They were afraid of accusations of a hospital cover-up. They wanted as many people as possible to see what she'd done to herself. He said that he trusted them, and he did. He knew what Monique was like and he knew the affects of drugs on her. He was certain that she had killed herself and her fetus. No one murdered her. No one made her kill herself. He was sure that the drugs and alcohol she'd ingested over the years had fried her brain. The authorities wanted to see inside her womb to check her fetus. They should have used an MRI to check her brain to see the devastation there.

The doctor took Matt to a room guarded by a policeman. The hospital was a little late in guarding this patient. In the empty room there was a gurney with a body covered with a blood-soaked sheet. When the doctor pulled back the sheet, Matt saw the hole in Monique's neck. There was dried blood all over her face, neck, and chest. She looked like something from a horror movie, and yet there was a look of calm on her face. It was as if she gladly left this chaotic world for the safety of whatever after-life she would have. Maybe she saw the light that people who are dying supposedly see. Maybe she knew that her horrible life was over and she was headed to a better place because anyplace was better than where she had been.

The doctor pulled the sheet down and Matt saw the jagged cuts in her abdomen surrounded by dried blood. Matt stared hard and said, “That was Monique. She’s no longer Monique.” He had seen many mutilated bodies in Iraq, but nothing like this. There was a reason behind the deaths of the people in Iraq – war. But there was no rational reason behind this death, unless insanity is considered rational.

Matt left the hospital and found a bench in a nearby park. He had to ponder what he’d just seen before he faced people who would expect answers from the dead woman’s lawyer. He had to try to find some clarity, some way to wash away Monique’s blood that blinded him. He didn’t know if he should feel guilt for Monique’s suicide. He didn’t. Was he at all to blame? Monique said she was going to kill herself, but she’d said lots of crazy things, like Mr. Tiger was going to eat her. Maybe he killed her. He’d told the police and the judge about her plans. He’d stressed that he thought Monique was serious about killing herself and she should be closely monitored. If anyone bore responsibility, it was the police and the judge for not doing enough to stop Monique. But if he looked at everyone and everything responsible for Monique’s suicide, he’d have a long list starting with abstract social issues, like poverty, racism, drug addiction, and untreated mental illness, to actual people, like Myra. And maybe even Matt himself was responsible for expecting this poor, demented, pathetic woman to make a rational decision. He put her in the limelight that ultimately killed her. He used her as a pawn in his fight for abortion policy. He didn’t care about her. In fact, he detested her for what she was. No one in the world cared about Monique. Matt knew that at a calmer time in the future, he would have to look inward to carefully examine his role in the Monique debacle, but now was not the time. There were too many raw emotions in his brain. Probably, the cruelest memory he would take away was Monique’s mutilated body. He’d seen many dead bodies before, but this was different. This was death caused by her insanity and by his blind passion for a cause without consideration of the human consequences. He was reminded of collateral damage when he fought in Iraq. Monique was collateral damage in this other fight, a fight she had no understanding of.

The next day Matt worked on wrapping up the case. In fact, there was no more case. He had to avoid the media. There were constant phone calls from the newspapers and TV stations. When he went to and from his office, he was filmed by TV reporters who screamed questions which he ignored.

Matt called Ken to tell him about Monique and find out what Minerva knew.

Matt asked, “Has Minerva come to work?”

“No. She called to say she wouldn’t be in anymore.”

“Do you think we should go to her house and talk to her about what happened?”

“Are you crazy? She doesn’t want us, or I should say you. You’re the villain, whether you like it or not. You’re the one who got Monique involved in this whole abortion mess. She needs her people, not us.”

The next day Minerva called to say she was quitting, and that Ken should mail her last check. Ken begged her to come in to pick it up so they could talk. He hoped that he might be able to convince her to stay on, or at least lessen her ill feelings toward them. Reluctantly she agreed to come in on Sunday after church. Matt arranged to be at the house when she came. He didn’t know what he planned to say or do, but he had to reach out to her. Maybe he was hoping she would grant him forgiveness, especially after having come from church. But then he asked himself why she should be in a position to forgive him. Wasn’t she partially to blame too? Wasn’t everyone in Monique’s life guilty, even good-hearted Minerva?

Matt and Ken waited nervously for 2:00, Minerva’s arrival time. When she came in, the atmosphere in the room changed immediately. It went from nervous anticipation to toxic anger. The kind thoughts that Ken and Matt planned to convey to Minerva hit a brick wall of resistance. Over the eight years they’d known Minerva, they’d never seen a facial expression like the one she wore at that moment. She looked hostile, as if she was facing the enemy in combat. Ken and Matt didn’t consider themselves her enemies, but obviously she did.

Ken started the conversation. “Minerva, we are so very sorry for ...”

Minerva interrupted him before he could continue.

“My momma, Monique’s grandma, is still alive. She’s been crushed by this. Even though Monique had problems, big problems, she was still her flesh and blood. She lost all her grandkids – Elijah, Matthew, Angel, and now Monique. And Momma thinks suicide is a sin so she’s extra mad. And right now she’s beginning to think that maybe Monique was murdered. And she’s not alone. A lot of black folks think she was murdered.

I keep asking myself where all that evil in Monique came from. Was it because she cursed God or because of the booze and drugs? Was she being punished for being evil? I dunno. I’ll never know. I got so many questions and I have to ask God to help me find the answers.

The black folks are madder than hell about this. They think that Monique was a puppet for this abortion shit. Who cares about what she was going to do with her baby? They didn’t care before. So why now? They think the police is behind this. Why didn’t they do something when she was locked up? They didn’t put her on a suicide watch or send her to a mental ward. How’d she get that knife? Those things aren’t just lying around for people to pick up. They’re locked up. Some people think the police killed her and made it look like a suicide. They think that this was another case of police abuse of blacks.”

Matt asked, “Do you believe that?”

“Maybe. I dunno. The police shoot innocent black people all the time. Yeah, it’s possible. Definitely possible.

We have a new pastor in my church who believes that blacks have to rise up against bigotry and hatred and he thinks that now is the time we need to stand up. I believe this man of God. He knows what he’s talking about.”

Matt thought that hatred of the police had blinded Minerva to the facts. Black and white eyes had different versions of the truth.

Then Minerva surprised Ken and Matt.

“I’m quitting. I can’t work here no more. I don’t really think you were ever my friends. You just used me all these years. You just look at me like a slave even though you paid me. I think you’re the enemy. Especially you Matt. You caused Monique’s death to get at this abortion issue which most black folks don’t care about. You wanted to make a name for yourself as some kind of crusader. That’s what people say. They say you just want to run for political office and this will make you look good. Black folks got more important issues like getting a job or getting enough food to eat or getting medical care or keeping the police from killing us Abortion is a white man’s problem.”

Matt was visibly upset by this attack from Minerva. “That’s not why I did this. This case has nothing to do with black or white issues. I would have done the same thing if Monique had been white.”

“If Monique had been white, she could have afforded an abortion and there wouldn’t have been a case. I’m outta here.”

With that, she charged out of the house leaving Ken and Matt with the feeling of not having finished the discussion, of not getting their ideas across, and of not lessening Minerva’s animosity toward them. They wanted to rush after her and continue the conversation. They couldn’t leave things the way they were.

Ken said, “What happened here? What happened to eight years? I thought that Minerva was more than hired help. I felt like she was family, like an aunt. Didn’t she see that? How did she really feel about us all these years? I can’t believe that she hated us. I always thought that she loved Randy. I think what happened with Monique changed her feelings toward us. Maybe it’s because of the turmoil in the black community and this new pastor getting people riled up. And she’s sucked right into the middle.”

“It’s ironic that Minerva hated everything that Monique represented and now she’s viewed as being part of that. That poor woman.

I wish there was something we could do to help her, but I'm afraid the gulf between her and us is too broad right now. Hopefully, we can reconcile in the future, but it will probably be in the far future, if ever."

"You know I feel like Minerva died. I'm just overcome with sadness at the horrible death of our relationship."

"I feel the same way."

When Randy came home later, they had to explain Minerva's departure to him. They decided that it was time that Randy learned about everything: the fire, Myra Jackson, Minerva, Monique, and abortion. He listened silently for almost an hour. When they finished, he said that he knew about what was happening with Monique from social media. He told them everything that he had learned so far. They were shocked at his knowledge of abortion and other social issues since he was only 11. They had never discussed these with him. Ken and Matt realized that he had more information than they had, including lots of unconfirmed rumors.

Randy said, "Lots of people on line believe that Monique's fetus was the love child of an important white person in Charleston. Uncle Matt, there are rumors that even you could be the father, but I know that's not true. I heard you talking about how much you hated her. Who the father is changes every day. And lots of people believe that white people arranged for her to be murdered to cover this up"

Matt asked, "Do you believe this crap you read on-line?"

Randy said, "Duh," and made a face as if to ask if they thought he was nuts.

Then Randy looked intently into Matt and Ken's eyes.

"I think Minerva always loved me, but right now she's blinded by this Monique thing. I hope that someday I can tell her how much she's meant to me. There were so many times when I felt alone and she came to my rescue. I want her to know that, but I know now's not the right time. But I'll tell her someday."

Both Ken and Matt looked at the man Randy was evolving into, and felt pride and wonder at how this happened. They had both been too busy with their own lives to notice Randy once he stopped showing problems. They failed to notice how he went from surviving to thriving. The love Matt, Ken, and Minerva gave Randy allowed his inner strength to emerge.

Within two weeks, everything having to do with Monique's suicide and murder of her fetus was forgotten by the media. She was old news to be revived again when there were issues having to do with abortion and race, and there would be lots of them. These two topics have a life of their own that leads to them being resurrected frequently.

Chapter 20

During Matt's involvement with Monique's case, Matt called Lilly every night to tell her that he was overwhelmed by the case, but that he loved her and that he'd see her when the situation calmed down.

Lilly said, "Matt, I want to help you with what you're going through."

"I don't need help. You know I'm strong. I just can't mix my personal life with my professional life."

"Matt, if I'm going to be part of your life, I have to be involved in everything. There can't be a wall between your personal and professional lives. We need to talk about this if we're to go on."

"I understand. I know you're right, but I'll need help making that happen. It's not how I've operated for 37 years. It won't be easy to change, but I will. I want to work at us having a true partnership.

I'm going to tell Ken about us sometime in the next few days. I don't want to put that off any longer."

Three days later Matt told Ken about Lilly.

"Ken, you know I've found the woman I love, but she comes with the most unexpected baggage imaginable. You thought that the problem with Minerva was big, but there's a bigger problem. Maybe not bigger, but different. The woman I love is Lilly Nelson, and her grandfather was Joe Silver."

At first Ken was confused, not recognizing the name Joe Silver. But with the realization of who Joe Silver was, his face took on a look of disbelief.

"You mean the guy who killed Beth and Sabrina?"

"Yes. That Joe Silver.

I got a different perspective of the accident and its impact from her. Her family suffered, but certainly not as much as we suffered. But that doesn't matter. There's no objective scale for measuring suffering. We can only quantify it by how it impacts the survivors' lives. Lilly worshipped her grandparents and has had problems with depression since the accident. She doesn't know if the accident caused her problems, or if she would have had them anyhow and they were just made worse by the accident."

Matt told Ken about Lilly's background and how they'd met through his involvement with Monique. When he was finished, he asked Ken's permission to marry her.

“I know this may sound silly, but I’m asking you to give me permission to marry Lilly. I can’t marry her unless you approve. I can’t give you and Randy up for her even though she’s the love of my life.”

“I don’t know what to say. In my wildest dreams I’ve never imagined anything like this, and believe me I’ve had some really wild dreams. You know, I can’t just say okay, marry her. But first, I need to meet her and see how we react to each other. And then I need to think about this and how it might change how I’ve resolved the accident in my mind. You know my mental health is still shaky. It’ll always be shaky.”

“I know that. Are you ready to meet her? I don’t think it’s wise to put it off. The longer we wait, the more anxiety. Maybe lunch here on Sunday.”

“Sunday’s fine. Waiting will make it worse.”

Ken’s face didn’t match his words. His face showed a mixture of alarm, worry, fear, and conflict. He was at a loss for words and suddenly went off to his room to talk to Beth.

Matt called Lilly and told her about his conversation with Ken.

“Oh Matt, I’m so overwhelmed by all of this. It’s like I’m being tested and if I fail, I’ll lose you. This is tearing me apart.”

“It’s tearing all of us apart, but there’s nothing else we can do. I don’t think this is a test. I think Ken can’t just say yes unless he knows what he’s saying yes to. Well, I suppose it is a test, a test for all of us.”

On Saturday, the day before Matt and Lilly were to meet Ken and Randy, Matt showed Lilly the letter her family had sent to Ken right after the accident. She recognized her handwriting and vividly recalled the family carefully choosing each word as they jointly composed the letter.

“Why did you keep this?”

“I don’t really know. I thought it was so kind of your family to reach out to Ken during their own period of mourning. We read it together and then never talked about it again. I thought he might throw it out so I kept it.

We were more affected when we got the letter from your lawyer telling us about the three million dollars. At first Ken didn’t want to accept it, but then he realized the difference it would make in our lives. We never told anybody about it because we didn’t want people to think it was a bribe. Most people thought that we got money from insurance and that was how it was possible for Ken to stop working.

Do you think I should show this to him now?”

“Yes.”

When Matt and Lilly arrived, Ken and Randy were just entering the house having returned from getting lunch from Kentucky Fried Chicken. Since Minerva quit, food had changed at the McNair house from delicious home-cooked meals to take-out meals from every nearby restaurant that had take-out available.

Ken was in the process of hiring a part-time housekeeper to clean and especially cook. He had two candidates, both of whom were white. He doubted that blacks would want to work for him if they found out about Minerva. He also doubted he would ever get someone as hard working and dedicated to his family as Minerva.

Randy had also been told about Lilly’s background. In less than a week, he had learned all the family secrets. Matt had slept over one night to talk to Randy. They stayed up until 1:00 AM. Randy asked questions, and Matt answered at length, not covering anything up. Then they switched roles with Matt asking questions and Randy answering.

“Do you remember the accident at all? After all, you were only three.”

“Probably not. I’ve seen so many picture of it so I don’t know what I actually witnessed and what I’ve heard and seen about it over the years.

“Do you think you experienced any trauma? Do you think maybe it’s buried?” The psychologist only worked with you for two years. She said that you were coping well and didn’t need any more counseling.”

“I really don’t know. If I had any trauma it’s from what happened afterwards, like staying with Al and Christie for a long time and Dad acting crazy and you moving here and all of a sudden being raised by a strange black woman.

I remember missing Mom and Rina so much and asking where they were and people avoiding answering or crying. I saw how uncomfortable people acted when I asked about them so I stopped asking. People must have thought that I forgot them. How wrong they were. I just kept my thoughts to myself. What I think I missed most were Mom’s hugs and kisses. She was a very physically affectionate person and no one gave me much physical affection after she died. You did when you were around which wasn’t much with you working long hours at your new job. I was so happy on the nights when you didn’t work late because you kissed and hugged me at bedtime. I remember we’d have a hugging contest to see who could hug tighter. I even remember you coming into my room when you did have to work late and kissing and hugging me. Even though I was asleep, I would wake up when I felt you touch me. I always slept better after that. I felt safer knowing you were home. Minerva gave me some affection when she’d hold me as she read me books. We sat in that old rocker and she’d rock fast when she read an exciting part of a story. Dad never gave me affection in those years. He even cringed when I touched him so I stopped touching him.

Even now, eight years later, I miss Mom every day. She's in my thoughts as much as ever. I talk to her every night before I go to sleep. I ask her if she's proud of me and what I did that day. I really feel like she's with me. I think she'll always be with me."

Matt hugged Randy tightly and said, "Me too. And I think she's here with us now."

Just a few weeks earlier Matt had marveled at the change in Randy after Minerva left. Now he again marveled at the maturity Randy was showing. Although Randy was 11, to be 12 the next month, he had the maturity of an older boy, even an adult. He was intelligent and unusually introspective. Matt looked at Randy and wondered when he'd grown up. It was like overnight he went from being a little boy only interested in toy fire trucks to a man, in fact a wise man. It was amazing how he had not only survived a great tragedy in his life, but had gone on to learn from it and build a strong foundation for living. He had inherited Matt's strengths. In fact, sometimes he seemed more like Matt's son than Ken's.

When Lilly and Matt reached Ken's house, they awkwardly greeted each other. Ken and Randy stiffly hugged Lilly. They started to eat right away so they wouldn't have to make small talk. It was a silent, uncomfortable meal except for comments about the food. Matt tried to lighten the atmosphere by joking, "I wonder if the Kentucky Colonel cooked this chicken himself because I think I see some of his white beard hairs. I hope they didn't charge me extra for them." No one laughed, but Randy did groan and roll his eyes.

After lunch, Ken asked Lilly if she wanted to tour the house. He showed her every room except his bedroom. She was surprised at how Sabrina's room had been preserved for the past eight years. It was as if Ken expected her back momentarily. Lilly gently touched the toys, the dresser, and the rocker.

They went into the back yard where they walked to the swings, which were a bit rusty, but still in working order. Lilly asked if she could swing. She said, "Swinging has always been one of my favorite things to do."

Ken smiled, and said, "Beth's too." And that broke the ice.

Matt took the letter from his pocket and said, "Ken, remember the letter Lilly's family sent right after the accident? We read it once. I kept it. I don't know why. Maybe I hoped that we would meet Lilly's family someday. I want Lilly to read it."

Despite her shaking hands and dry throat, Lilly clearly read the letter she had penned eight years earlier.

"Dear Ken,

We are the Nelson family: Amy (daughter of Joe and Martha Silver), Jack (son-in-law), Lilly (17 year old granddaughter), and Molly (15 year old granddaughter) and the Silver family: Mitch (son of Joe and Martha Silver) and Mitch (21 year old grandson).

We are writing to express our most profound, deep-felt sympathy for the loss of Beth and Sabrina. Not an hour goes by when we do not think of you and the endless sorrow you and your family are experiencing. We don't know what to do or say to ease your pain. We feel so helpless.

We hope that you do not blame Joe for Beth and Sabrina's deaths. As you have probably learned from the autopsy, Joe died of a massive heart attack which caused him to accelerate and hit them. We are glad that Joe did not live because we do not think he could have emotionally survived the tragedy that he unintentionally caused. We know that he and Martha in heaven along with Beth and Sabrina.

We pray that God will comfort you and give you strength to carry on.

Very sincerely,

Amy, Jack, Mitch, Anne, Adam, Lilly, and Molly."

While Lilly read the letter, Ken kept his face hidden. Then Ken took the letter and read it silently several times.

"Thanks to you and your family for these kind words. I realize how hard it must have been to think of me when you were suffering your own loss. I want to read it to Beth tonight. Matt, I think I'd like to keep this now."

"Ken, I don't really know anything about Beth. Tell me about her."

Ken talked non-stop for 30 minutes describing her family, her career, her love of others, and her talent for nurturing. He spent much of the time describing how Beth saved him after the fire. At the end, Randy went into the house and got pictures of Beth and Sabrina. Randy described each as if he had been there when they'd been taken. Randy was now part of the remembrance team along with Ken and Matt.

Lilly said, "I know I would have liked Beth if I'd have met her. I believe in so many of the same things that she believed in.

I'd like to visit Beth and Sabrina's graves so I can feel close to them physically. Would that be possible?"

Ken was surprised, even shocked, never considering that Lilly might be interested in their graves.

"Of course. Do you want to go now?"

"Yes, if it's possible. Unless it's too far."

"It's not."

They got into Ken's SUV and went to St. Paul's Cemetery which was 20 minutes away. Lilly asked if they could stop for flowers. The only place open with flowers on Sunday was Kroger, but Kroger's flowers were as beautiful as the ones from the best florist in Charleston.

Ken visited Beth and Sabrina's graves once or twice a week so he knew where they were in the crowded maze of graves of varying sizes from flat stones to ten-foot high mausoleums. His shoes had memorized the steps from his car to their gravestones. Lilly separated the bouquet of flowers and placed some on Beth's grave and some on Sabrina's grave.

She said, "I've had trouble believing in a benevolent God since the accident. I keep thinking that God is cruel if He could take the lives of such beautiful people. But now I believe that there is a God watching over us and blessing us with this moment. He's bringing us together so we can go ahead with our lives and dedicate ourselves to Beth, Sabrina, Joe, and Martha's memories. Thank you God."

She looked up and blew a kiss skyward.

Ken took Lilly's hand and brought it to his mouth and gently kissed it. They all said silent prayers and then good-byes. Matt kissed Beth and Sabrina's gravestones.

When they got back to the house, Ken said, "Lilly, I think you're perfect for Matt and for Randy and me. There's only one problem, whenever we see you we'll think of the accident and then go on to think of good things. So there will always be a bad memory that we won't be able to escape – ever."

Matt said, "Ken, with time I think that will lessen. You'll see Lilly for who she is as Lilly, and not Joe's granddaughter."

Randy deftly changed the subject.

"When's the wedding? I've never been to a wedding. I have to see one before I have my own."

Ken said, "I think we have at least 15 years before yours."

Matt added, "Make that 26 years, and then you'll be my age."

"I don't want to be an old fart like you when I marry. They'll have to wheel me down the aisle."

"Hey, I thought you weren't into girls."

“Well not 11 year old girls, but when I grow up I think I’ll change. I think my testosterone will start pumping away soon. You can tell by the hair I’m growing in places you can’t see.”

Matt said, “I think we’re on a topic I’d like to leave, fast, very fast, especially with Lilly here.”

Matt punched Randy’s arm. Everyone laughed. It felt so good to genuinely laugh.

As Lilly was leaving, Ken said, “Matt, I give you my permission to marry Lilly. I feel like the Pope granting you permission.”

Ken made the sign of the cross over Lilly and Matt.

Randy added, “Me too. I give my permission, but I’m not going to make the sign of the cross. That’s crazy. We’re not even Catholic.

Can I start calling you Aunt Lilly now or do I have to wait for the wedding?”

“Now would be fine.”

“Hellooooo, Aunt Lilly.”

Ken asked Lilly. “You passed the test, but what about us? If you marry Matt, you get Randy and me too. You get three for the price of one.”

“You pass with flying colors. I’m always up for a good sale.”

The next weekend, Lilly took Matt to meet her parents in Charlotte. Matt charmed Amy and Jack with his warm personality and his silly sense of humor, which was very much like Joe’s. At one point, Jack asked Matt about his role in the abortion case which had been big news in Charlotte as well as Charleston. Matt said that he’d prefer not to talk about it then, but at another time, a less joyous time. After a laughter-filled brunch, they visited Joe and Martha’s graves to introduce Matt to them.

Lilly said, “Poppa and Mimi, I’ve met the love of my life. I know you’d be so proud of him. He’s such a good person and he has the same philosophy of life as we have. He’s dedicated to doing good in the world.”

There were no tears, only sad, wistful smiles.

Lilly and Matt decided to have the wedding at Charleston Methodist Church in honor of Matt and Beth’s love of the church. Ken accompanied Lilly and Matt to ask Don if he would perform the ceremony. He hadn’t seen Don since Beth and Sabrina’s funeral. What Ken thought of was not the funeral, but the happy times when Don performed his wedding

and when he christened Sabrina and Randy. He tried to forget his tirade against God, and hoped Don could too.

They knew that Beth would have wanted Don to perform Matt's wedding because of Don and Matt's affection and respect for each other. Don said that he would be happy to perform the ceremony, especially since this represented reconciliation with Ken, something he had prayed for since April 17, 2003. After Don agreed, Ken apologized for his behavior and language after the accident. Don hugged Ken and said that he understood and that he had forgiven him long ago.

They had the wedding at Christmas time. Molly came in from Virginia Tech where she was studying vet medicine. Mitch and Ann came from California, and Adam came from England where he was doing post-doctoral work at Oxford. Ken and Randy escorted Matt down the aisle. Molly was the maid of honor, and of course, Jack and Amy gave Lilly away. Lilly radiated pure joy. She had her eyes glued on Matt from the second she entered the church. Matt was transfixed by the sight of Lilly. To him, she was the most perfect woman in the universe.

It was a joyous wedding made even sweeter with the pictures of Beth, Sabrina, Joe, Martha, and Abby placed on a side altar. Don pointed to the pictures and spoke with difficulty because he was choked up with conflicting emotions – sadness and joy.

"My special friend Beth and her beautiful baby Sabrina and Lilly's beloved grandparents Joe and Martha are here with us today. I feel their spirits. Do you?"

And many in the congregation nodded their heads as they sensed there were others not physically present, but spiritually present.

"This wedding represents a union of people who were tragically linked. Their deaths have brought these families together and they are now connected with a strong bond that can never be severed. This wedding is bittersweet because it represents renewal and the future as well as the spiritual presence of departed loved ones from our past who live on through us. I feel that Beth, Sabrina, Joe, and Martha are bestowing their blessings on these newlyweds."

Then Don raised his hands as he looked upward and said, "God, we ask that you bless everyone here today with your kindness and with everlasting peace. Amen."

What could have been sorrowful was transformed into a joyous, soul-enriching moment by Don.

The wedding attendees reflected the many lives that Lilly, Matt, Ken, and Beth had touched. Of course, Ken asked Mike to attend the wedding because he had been his savior for six years, and still was. He continued to have weekly sessions with Mike, and thought he would only stop therapy when one of them died. He was especially thankful to Mike for

recently helping him work through the process of exonerating the Nelson family from any guilt for Joe being the unwilling instrument of Beth and Sabrina's deaths. And Ken was also thankful for Mike's help in getting him to totally accept Lilly for who she was, a loving, caring woman much like Beth was.

The wedding guests crowding the pews included congregants who had been close to Beth many years earlier, Matt's work associates and his college friends, Lilly's co-workers and college and high school friends, and the Nelson family's friends and work colleagues. What a diverse group, but they all shared one message for the bride and groom – heartfelt best wishes for a happy life.

There was one person Matt wished he could have invited – Minerva – but he knew she wouldn't come. He regretted that she'd left his life. Although she wasn't invited, Minerva did attend the wedding from afar. She found out about the wedding from a housekeeper who worked next door to Ken and was a friend of Minerva's.

Minerva watched the wedding from behind a pole across the street from the church. She saw Lilly and Matt exit the church as Ken and Randy led people in pelting them with rice. She savored the sight of these people who she treasured for so long. She hoped that someday she might congratulate them in person, but she honestly didn't know if that would ever be possible. She didn't know what the future held for her relationships with Matt, Ken, and Randy. She didn't know how she felt about a lot of things that she'd been so sure of throughout her life.

Following the ceremony, there was a reception at a nearby wedding venue on the river. Everyone had a wonderful time, especially Randy who danced with all the old ladies. When Ken got home, he talked to Beth's picture and asked her what she thought of the wedding. She approved of everything, especially Lilly.

Sixteen months after the wedding, Matt and Lilly had a red-headed, brown eyed baby girl. Lilly wanted to name her Sabrina, but Matt thought that would be too painful a reminder for everyone. So they decided to call her Emily – Emily Hart.

When Ken saw her for the first time, he said, "Hello Emily. You look like your Aunt Beth. Hope you grow up to be a great lady like her.

End.