



Desperate

Amends

John F Baggett

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*This is a work of fiction. Any similarity between the characters in this book and persons living or deceased is coincidental and unintentional.*

# Desperate Amends

By John F. Baggett

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## DESPERATE AMENDS

This book is dedicated to my amazing wife, Diane Call Baggett, with gratitude for her encouragement, creative suggestions, and for twenty-five wonderful years of marriage.

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## Prologue

Don't Panic. Think. If you don't, he'll kill you.

The duct tape sealing Rebecca's mouth made it hard to breathe. Impossible to scream. She tried to ignore the involuntary tremble of her body—aching and bruised—and attempted to free her hands. One more time.

Hopeless. It was hopeless.

The man had tied them with such ferocity the chord cut through her skin with every wriggle. But if she didn't release them, if she didn't try, she couldn't loosen the ropes around her ankles.

Rebecca tested the bindings again as she'd done repeatedly since the man had shoved her in the trunk of her car and closed the lid. No use. Unless she could find something sharp, reposition, and cut the chords shackling her hands...

Can't think about that now. Her eyes had grown accustomed to the faint red glow inside the trunk as the tail lights filtered through cracks on the backs of their housings. Twisting her neck she surveyed the cramped surroundings.

An almost flat spare tire was mounted upright near her feet. Close to her head lay a soiled sour-smelling jacket she'd not worn in months.

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When had she put it there? When was the last time she'd even opened the trunk?

The car still moved. Where was he going? And who was he?

When he'd called, claiming he'd gotten her name from the note she'd posted on the clubhouse bulletin board, he said his wife had been injured in an accident. Said he needed to get to the hospital. That he'd tried their regular babysitter, but she was not available. Her father had spoken with the man on the phone. He'd verified that the name on the caller ID was the same as a family who lived at the address. He thought everything was OK.

But the man wasn't who he said he was. He'd broken into the house while the family was away and used their telephone.

She'd not been the least concerned until she got to the house. Found it unusually dark. Approaching the door she'd become vaguely aware of a knot in her stomach, but had it stopped her from ringing the bell? No.

Why hadn't she paid attention to her gut?

When she realized what was happening and tried to run away, the man—whoever he was—grabbed her arm and twisted until she writhed in pain. She resisted, at first, even after he threatened to kill her. She scratched and screamed and attempted to wrestle her way free. But her resistance only made him angry. More determined. She hadn't been strong enough to stop him. When she realized the

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inevitable, she did whatever necessary to curb his anger, in hopes that afterward he would let her live.

Foolish thought.

Now, as she continued her struggle to break free, every part of her body was in pain. And that was not the worst of it.

Rebecca shook her head. Forced herself to refocus. She could not think about that now. She had to find a way out. Otherwise, he would kill her.

Searching the cramped trunk once again, her vision came to rest on the tire rim. Why hadn't she seen it before? She wiggled closer and attempted to position her body so she could rub the ankle chords against it. After several attempts she achieved the proper angle and by pressing one foot against the rubber of the flat tire, she worked the chords on the backs of her ankles against the metal rim. One at a time, the strands began to fray and then break. And then ... her legs were free. Now, all she had to do was turn her body to work on the chord around her wrist.

She rolled. Slid. Pushed. Pressed the rope against the metal.

The car stopped. The engine went silent. The trunk went black.

Her heart pounded. A chill shuddered down her back. Tears erupted from her eyes.

Don't Panic. Think.

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Get ready.

Turning slightly she waited. Click. Creak. The driver's door opened. Wham. It closed, sending shock waves through the vehicle. Several minutes went by. What was he doing? Then the scent of cigarette smoke found its way into the trunk. What kind of man takes time for a cigarette break before he kills someone?

The click of a key releasing a lock. The time had come. She readied herself and prayed it would be too dark for him to see inside. He raised the lid. Leaned in. Rebecca invested all the strength of her fear and anger into thrusting her legs toward her attacker. The soles of her sneakers hit his forehead with a whack. The man fell backward, cursing in pain as he lost his balance and tumbled down.

Clambering out of the trunk into the murky night, she staggered a few feet, and tried to run. Darkness and thick fog surrounded her. She stumbled forward, unable to generate speed. Like the nightmare, when running is what you have to do and running is what you cannot do.

Run Becky run! Run Becky run!

The man's footsteps came closer. He grabbed her shoulder. Instinctively she moved to the side. One foot slipped, then the other. Hitting the ground hard she rolled downward, bouncing heavily as bits and pieces of her skin tore. Finally, she came to rest in a fetal position at the bottom of a ditch. She struggled to get up. Not possible.

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She turned on her stomach. Inched her way forward, twisting from side to side.

It was too dark to see the man, but she could smell him. Intense pain seared her scalp as he yanked her hair and jerked her head back. A ring of pressure tightened around her neck. Powerless to stop it.

Unable to breathe.

“No! Becky, no!”

Sharon Noble climbed out of the fog of her dream, threw off the covers, and sat on the side of her bed shaking, gasping for air. Not the dream again.

What time is it?

3:30 a.m.

She remained still for several minutes. It had been more than a year since the dream had ruined her sleep. Twenty-one years ago, when she was a thirteen-year-old grieving the slaying of her seventeen-year-old sister, the dreams had been much more frequent.

For all they gave her, the dreams left her without. Without a face. Without a name.

Without a sister.

Sharon walked unsteadily to the kitchen where she boiled some water and made a cup of instant decaf. Based on experience, it was not

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likely she would be able to get back to sleep, but she was going to try, if she could first shake off the lingering cloud of terror.

Scattered on the kitchen table was a copy of yesterday morning's paper. The feature section contained a cover article she'd spent three weeks writing. It recounted four murders, including Becky's, which had occurred over a few winter weeks more than two decades earlier. Pictures of the four females formed a collage around which the text of her article flowed.

Her eyes naturally found Becky's face.

"I promised I wouldn't rest until your killer was brought to justice." She raised her cup of coffee in a mock salute. "I hope you can see I'm not resting."

## Chapter 1

Wes Barrett's stomach growled. The visit with the critically ill inmate on the hospital unit had taken more time than expected. He glanced at the dashboard clock. Ten till nine. The refrigerator at the apartment contained nothing edible, and the neon sign announcing the place where he'd last worked loomed ahead. He swung the wheel sharply, pulled into the drive-thru, ordered a burger and fries, and waited his turn in line.

The grinning girl at the window handed him the sack of food, "You must really love us, Wes. You just can't stay away."

"What can I say? It must be the gourmet cuisine and classy service that keeps me coming back."

He waved, pulled forward, and eased his car into traffic.

What a stressful, miserable day. During his initial job interview, the supervisor of chaplain services had sternly warned him that a prison ministry was not suitable for everyone. No kidding. Never in his life had he felt so bewildered or out of place.

He drew a deep breath and liberated a prolonged audible sigh. So what if he felt like a fish out of water? It didn't matter. If he wanted to stay in the ministry, being a prison chaplain remained his only option, probably for several years to come. And the belief God still wanted

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him to be a minister was one of the more important things he'd determined during his days of self-examination in rehab.

Rehab. Ninety days in rehab. How could he have fallen so far? His drinking had ruined his career as a pastor. Almost destroyed the congregation he'd labored so hard to grow. Demolished the respect of his family, friends, and fellow pastors. And there was the bishop, who might never again trust him to shepherd a congregation.

He maneuvered his SUV through an old neighborhood, parked in front of a drab brick building, and descended the stairs to his basement apartment. He needed to eat. It was getting late, and his recent stint as a fast food cook had done nothing to dull his appreciation for the pleasing aroma of freshly cooked burgers and fries.

He sat at the kitchen table, prayed briefly, wolfed down his food, and stared wearily at the logo on the wrapper. At least flipping burgers had not involved any of the pressures and responsibilities of ministering to a congregation. He had to admit it'd almost been emancipating, at least for a while. But now the only thing he missed more than being a pastor was Katlin.

Katlin. His soul mate. His everything. Tears began to blur his vision. Oh how he longed for her presence, for the warmth of her smile, the scent of her hair. It wasn't supposed to be this way. Three glorious years of marriage. Shared dreams of having kids and happily growing old together. All of it snuffed out in one horrible instant.



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He picked up a napkin. With trembling hands he wiped his eyes and blew his nose. She was only supposed to be gone for minutes. According to the police report, when the light turned green she surged forward into the intersection. A pickup truck driven by a teenaged girl t-boned her. Katlin died at the scene.

After the funeral, his life swirled rapidly downward. He asked God why she had to die. And when no answer came he vented his anger on God, and anyone else who would listen. Not a great career move for a pastor, but, at the time, he didn't really care.

Then came the drinking. Talk about powerless. It had begun so innocently. He and Katlin had occasionally enjoyed a glass of wine together in the evening. After her death, the wine made him feel closer to her. Then, as things progressed from a glass to a bottle, and then to the hard stuff, he completely lost it.

Thank God for rehab. It hadn't been fun, but it'd helped him get sober and start to deal with his grief. Best of all, the AA program had allowed him to recover his faith, to get beyond his questioning and anger. He still didn't understand why Katlin had been taken from him. But he did know one thing for certain. He needed God in his life. That's the only way he had survived the past few months.

But now what? The only good thing he had left after Katlin died was his church. Now that was gone too. He needed a congregation to pastor. That was where he was supposed to be. But if that was ever going to happen, he was going to have to prove himself in this

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miserable chaplain job. Failure was not an option. The bishop had made that perfectly clear the last time they met.

“I have always liked you, Wesley,” the bishop had said. “I held high hopes for your ministry. Believe me when I say your personal troubles have caused me much grief, but today we are not going to dwell on what might have been.”

Warren certainly had a flare for the dramatic. He’d scheduled the appointment precisely one year to the day after relieving Wes of his pastorate. Sitting at his massive cherry desk and surrounded by floor to ceiling bookshelves, the bishop’s large frame, thick white hair, and thunderous voice would’ve intimidated any pastor under the best of circumstances. To Wes it had felt like a rehearsal for judgment day.

He wiped his moist hands on his pants. No surprise there. Every time he replayed the event in his head, they would sweat.

“I’ve heard good things from the folks at the rehab center about your recovery, Wesley,” Bishop Warren had said. “We all know you went through a tough time after Katlin passed away, but I sure hope you’ve learned your lesson. I wouldn’t want the church to lose someone from the ministry, especially one who was named for the great John Wesley. When I get to heaven, I would hate to answer to the founder of Methodism for that one.”

Wes had wondered where this was leading.

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A sly smile formed at the corners of the bishop's mouth. "I think I have an opportunity for you."

There it was. Opportunity. The word every Methodist pastor dreaded to hear. For as long as anyone could remember, the word had been shorthand for an assignment to a hopelessly divided, low paying church, one on the verge of closing its doors. It would be an opportunity all right—an opportunity to fall on his face, all over again.

"You may not know this, Wesley, but I am a relative of Governor Sanders's husband. As boys we played together at family reunions." The Bishop paused and looked Wes squarely in the eyes.

"At a meeting a few weeks ago, I learned Central Prison has a vacant position for a chaplain. I went to see the governor last week. Had lunch at the mansion. I told her about you and asked her to consider you for the job." He flexed his fingers, linked them together, hand-to-hand as though he were in prayer. "She was very gracious. She said you would have to go through the hoops of the personnel system, but she would speak to the Secretary of Corrections on your behalf. Of course, I'm sure you know the governor's recommendation carries a lot of weight."

Bishop Warren was no longer smiling. "This is a big personal favor on the governor's part. You need to get the paper work done as soon as possible. And if you get the position, which you probably will ..." He cocked a brow. "Don't let me down."

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Wes shook his head, cleared the table, and moved to the living room couch. Others might covet his new job, but he was fairly certain he would look back one day on this period of his life, and remember it as his own time in the wilderness, wandering, and not knowing when, if ever, he would see “the Promised Land.” He guessed he should be grateful for the “opportunity” but, instead, here he sat in a lonely apartment, awash in self-pity.

A rough tingling on his right thigh jerked him to attention. Retrieving the vibrating phone, he checked the Caller ID – North Carolina Department of Corrections. Why would they be calling him tonight?

“This is Wes Barrett.”

“Chaplain Barrett,” a woman said cheerily. “This is Connie at the switchboard. Warden Johnson asked me to call you. He said for you to come by his office tomorrow afternoon around two.”

“Did he say what it’s about?”

“No. Not really.”

Wes squeezed the phone tighter. Moisture vanished from his mouth. Had he messed up already?

“Did he say anything else? Anything at all?”

“He just joked about it being time for you to start earning your keep.”

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## Chapter 2

Thump! Thump! Thump!

What the...?

Harry Harrison bolted upright, jarred awake from a nap by the thunderous knocking. He swung his feet to the floor and leaned forward. Through blurry eyes he identified the all too familiar face of a guard named George Waters standing in the doorway of his death row cell.

“You got visitors, Harry,” the guard growled. “The warden wants to talk to you.”

Waters stepped aside, and Warden James Johnson, a six-foot-four bronze-skinned African American with graying hair, probably in his late fifties, strutted to the middle of the cell. Behind him a second visitor stepped carefully into the room.

The stranger had slightly receding brown hair and appeared to be in his early thirties. Harry rolled his eyes and slowly shook his head. During the twenty years he had occupied this cell, he had never known a warden to step foot on death row unless he was the tour guide for some politician or dignitary. Here was one more visitor getting his jollies seeing condemned men and fantasizing about their executions.

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Before the warden could speak, the man stepped forward, and offered a trembling hand, "I'm Wes Barrett, one of the chaplains. I haven't had a chance to meet you before now.

Harry stared at the man's outstretched arm, allowing it to remain suspended in mid-air. Since he had failed these many years to see the point in meeting any of the other chaplains, he certainly had no desire to make friends with this one. When the crimson-faced cleric finally retreated and stepped back, Harry turned toward the warden's stern gaze.

"I'm afraid we've come bearing bad news, Harrison." The warden's formal tone revealed zero sympathy. "The Attorney General has informed me you've been denied your final appeal, and the Secretary of Corrections has, according to law, assigned you the execution date of May 7, at 2:00 a.m. By my calculations that is six weeks from yesterday. On May 3, you will be moved from your cell here on death row to the death watch area to await your execution for the murders of Kimberly Gingotta and Brooke Smith. Do you have any questions?"

"Yeah, just one." Harry nodded toward the chaplain. "Why the hell is he here?"

"The warden asked me to come," Wes responded, folding his hands together low and in front. "Just in case you felt the need for some spiritual guidance."

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“It’s a little late for that,” Harry thundered. “Now get out of here,” he said, jerking his head toward where the guard stood. “All of you.”

Harry stared defiantly at Johnson. The Warden nodded and backed out of the cell, followed by the guard and the chaplain, who turned at the door.

“I’m sorry Mr. Harrison, I did not mean to upset you by coming,” Wes said. “Just remember, if you do need me, have the officer in the control center give me a call.”

Harry reached for the copy of a law book lying on the bunk next to him. He grabbed it and cocked his arm like a pitcher.

“Just get out!”

Waters slammed the steel door. The book sailed through the air, crashed against it and thudded to the floor.

The door again flew open. “Let it go Waters,” the Warden ordered. Another slam rocked the cell, followed by clacking footsteps descending the stairs to the dayroom.

Harry retrieved his copy of the book containing case studies of death penalty appeals. A corner of the cover was freshly bent and frayed, and the binding seemed looser than before. He tossed the bulky volume back on the bed.

He had been reading it all day with great deliberation until sleepiness overtook him. If only he could have found some obscure



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ruling to suggest a new strategy. Of course the odds against that were astronomical. Seven months ago the United States Supreme Court refused to hear his latest appeal. Their decision exhausted any reasonable hope for a new trial. Yet he had spent every day since trying to come up with something. He had read more case law in the past several months than in all his years as a law student, as an assistant district attorney, and as a medical malpractice lawyer, put together.

Six weeks. It's now down to six weeks. Hands trembling, Harry paced back and forth in his tiny cell, gasping for air. His heart raced. On the verge of a full blown panic attack, he felt powerless to calm himself. He had expected the news. But anticipation and actually hearing it were two different things. The warden's announcement conveyed an unbearable sense of finality. Harry desperately searched his mind for one more straw to grasp. Still nothing.

At 5:45 guards accompanied him, along with twenty-three others from his cellblock, to the dining hall. By now all of the inmates knew the purpose of the warden's visit. News traveled fast on the row. In sharp contrast to most evenings, the procession moved quietly. Soft voices and whispers replaced the usual raucous conversation. Despite the everyday arguments and conflicts, the scheduled execution had generated, at least momentarily, an unmistakable sense of solidarity among the condemned. Harry was one of their own.

How different things were from the early days. Upon arrival, his reputation as a former prosecutor had instantly made him a hated

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man. The inmates had left little room for doubt that he symbolized everything they suspected about the motives and methods of prosecutors everywhere.

Harry surveyed the prisoners as they claimed their usual chairs in the dining hall. Over the years they had begun to turn to him for advice. With his help, three of them had won death penalty appeals and been transferred to general population units. His legal advice had been instrumental in the delay of executions for several others now chowing down around him. They owed him, big time. Such irony. He had saved others from the needle, and he had always clung to the belief he would someday save himself.

Not now.

Returning from the dining room, he lay on his bed staring at the ceiling. The other prisoners were in the day room watching an NBA game, but Harry had no interest in being around anyone right now. And he certainly couldn't care less who won the game.

The cracks and lines in the ceiling plaster appeared sinister. He tried not to think about the execution, but he could not help himself. He pictured the morning they would take him from his death watch cell, strap him on a gurney, attach IV lines to veins in his arms, and lead him into a tiny room viewed through a window by a dozen or more witnesses. Then the executioners positioned behind a curtain would release lethal drugs into the lines leading to his veins.

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Suddenly Harry was cold, very cold. He shivered uncontrollably. If only he could think of something he could do. But nothing came to mind. Eventually the shivers subsided and he fell into a deep but troubled sleep.

About nine o'clock in the evening, Harry abruptly awoke to the stirring of an idea. Brilliant, he thought. A plan that just might work.

### Chapter 3

Wes stared at the lonely bare walls of his apartment. He still hadn't gotten around to hanging the pictures that were buried somewhere in the stacks of unopened cardboard boxes near the front door.

He pulled out his cell phone and slowly flipped through photographs of better days, pausing on one he had taken of Katlin only a week before her death. His beautiful Katlin, sassily posed, hand on hip, next to the grill, where she'd been cooking Friday night steaks and exhibiting her amazing smile and playful eyes. Tears trickled down his cheeks. Convulsing sobbing soon followed. He buried his head in the couch pillow as a primal wail erupted from the darkness of his wounded soul.

Twenty minutes later, when his body had ceased its tremors, he sat up, wiped his eyes with a shirt sleeve, and tried to pull himself together. Not an easy thing to do. Every place he looked, every thought in his head reminded him of his desolate life.

Retrieving a soft drink from the refrigerator, he pulled the tab and sipped on its fizz. It had been another tough day. The encounter with Harry Harrison had dropped a softball sized knot in the middle of his stomach. An angry death row murderer throwing things at him wasn't what he had signed up for. To make matters worse, he hadn't exactly impressed the warden with his skills as a chaplain.

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He checked his watch. Only a few minutes after ten. His body was tired and his thoughts gloomy. A shower might help. He slipped off his shoes and socks, emptied his pockets and removed his pants.

Bzzzzzzz. The vibrating phone he had just placed on his bedside table was inching toward the edge. He rescued it.

North Carolina Department of Corrections. Now what?

“This is Wes Barrett.”

“This is Connie. I’m sorry to call you so late again Chaplain Barrett, but a guard on Death Row Cellblock C asked me to tell you Harry Harrison said he wants you to come see him. He told the guard to tell you to bring your spiritual advice with you.”

He thanked her, ended the call, and returned the phone to the bedside table.

Wow! Harrison was asking for counseling. The shower could wait. Only moments before weariness engulfed him. Now, he could not be more energized if he had guzzled five cups of coffee. Despite everything, maybe God could still use him to minister to this inmate who was facing execution.

Initial excitement rapidly morphed into anxiety. His own faith was still shaky, and responsibility for the salvation of someone’s soul could be terrifying. To make matters worse, he knew virtually nothing about the man.

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Wes went to his desk, booted his laptop, pulled up the internet, and searched for articles mentioning Harry Harrison, Raleigh, NC. On the second screen a listing jumped out – a twelve year old story occasioned by the court’s denial of Harrison’s motion for a new trial. Wes skimmed the text and located a summary of the two-decade-old crimes. Good find. If he was going to counsel a death row inmate, especially one with Harrison’s history, he needed to understand the case. He grabbed a pen and pad and began to mine the article.

At trial, Harry had been convicted of killing two females. The first victim was Kim Gingotta, a 32 year-old nurse who worked in the neonatal department at a local hospital. Her body was discovered by a housekeeper on the morning shift at the Holiday Inn Hotel in downtown Raleigh.

Wes’s pen danced furiously across the page.

According to the medical examiner, she had been strangled 9 to 12 hours earlier. At the time of her death, Gingotta and Harrison had been involved in an eight-month-old affair. Harrison’s fingerprints were found at the scene.

Fingerprints. Really? Pretty sloppy for a former prosecutor.

The second victim was a high school girl named Brooke Smith, a sometimes babysitter for the then six-year-old child of Harrison and his second wife, Linda Tipton. Her body was found in a ditch near Falls Lake. At the time of death the seventeen-year-old was three months pregnant. Testing confirmed with near certainty Harry fathered the

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child. The prosecution theorized Harry had killed both females in an attempt to conceal his relationships with them.

Unbelievable! A seventeen-year-old girl pregnant with his child. How could anyone be so coldblooded? And he didn't even bury the body... But why not? It didn't make sense. Did the man want to get caught?

Wes finished downing his soft drink. It was getting late. His eyes still burned from crying. He needed to get some rest. Soon, but not yet. His curiosity juices were still flowing.

He searched again and selected another link, a two day old News and Observer story written by a journalist named Sharon Noble. It recalled the murders of Harry's mistress and babysitter, but it also described in detail two other babysitter strangulation murders which took place around the same time and had never been solved. The author identified herself as the sister of one of the other victims.

That took courage – to write about the murders when one of the victims was her sister. He examined the girls' pictures. So young and vibrant one day, and gone the next. Just like Katlin. It occurred to him that he would like to talk with the author, to understand what she had gone through, to ask her how she'd dealt with her sister's death all these years. He dismissed the inclination as quickly as it had come. A silly fantasy generated by the longings of his own grieving heart. He continued to read.

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The reporter questioned whether the police ever seriously considered the possibility that the three babysitter cases might be linked. Could Harrison have murdered all of them? Or could he have been framed by a clever serial killer, as he had claimed at his trial? Or, if the police were correct, and Harrison had taken only the lives of Gingotta and Smith, who killed the others? And why had the murderer never been caught?

Wes felt that knot in his gut growing. Shutting down the computer, he took a shower and crawled into bed. Physically exhausted, but wide awake, he could not get his mind off of the murders. What if Harry Harrison was a serial killer and had strangled four or more women? How was he going to help such an evil person prepare to meet his maker? Did he even want to? He knew he should, but... Or, at the other extreme, could it be possible there was another killer out there, and the state was soon to execute Harrison for a crime he didn't commit? Unlikely, but if true, what in the world could a chaplain say to a man about to die for someone else's crime?

He tossed restlessly for what seemed like hours. Sometime between one and two a.m., he slammed the pillow with his fist. What had he gotten himself into? If only he had a bottle of scotch stashed somewhere. There was nothing like the smooth, warm, comfort of Johnny Walker descending the throat to settle the nerves.



## Chapter 4

Wes craved a drink. He could picture it. If he didn't know better he would have sworn he could smell it. The familiar and cunning desire for alcohol had returned with a vengeance. Muscles began to twitch, his entire body commenced to tremble.

Only one problem. Getting a bottle of scotch would involve getting dressed, and going out. Even if he did, he had no idea where he could find one, since the state run liquor stores were already closed for the night.

He checked his forehead. Cool and damp. What was he thinking? Was he insane? Why would he even consider blowing a year's sobriety?

God help me. Help me get through the night without drinking.

Roger. He needed to call Roger. His sponsor had said to call any time of the day or night, and the man meant it. He had been sober for eighteen years. If anyone could help him right now, it would be Roger. He reached for his cell phone on the bedside table, and without turning on the light, speed dialed the number.

"Hello Wes, What's going on?" Roger's voice seemed to contain more gravel than usual.

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Wes repositioned his pillow and drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry to call you so late, but I'm really bummed out right now. I know better, but I keep thinking a drink would really help."

"Yeah. I know the feeling, but you know what they say. 'One is too many and a hundred would not be enough.' So, talk to me. What's going on?"

Wes told Roger about his encounter with Harry Harrison and his request for spiritual guidance.

"I think I know who you're talking about." Roger's voice sounded less raspy now. "If I'm not mistaken there was something in Sunday's paper about him. So what's your biggest fear here, preacher?"

Wes sat up on the side of the bed, flipped on the light, and braced himself. Being called "preacher" by Roger was usually followed by a good-sized dose of tough love. "I'm not sure," he responded weakly.

"Come on, Wes. You can do this."

"I guess I'd say it's fear of failure."

"Go on."

"The warden said this guy's a smart lawyer. He used to be a prosecutor and I'm told he got rich off of medical malpractice lawsuits. All I've got to go on is a first impression, but I'd say he's an angry man who's never had much use for religion. He's being executed in a few short weeks for murdering two women. He may have killed others.

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And I don't even begin to know how to help him get ready to meet God. If you haven't noticed, my own spiritual life hasn't been too great lately."

Several seconds of silence followed. Wes began to fidget.

"Tell me something, preacher. How many souls have you saved to date? Was it two? Ten? Forty? Over a hundred? More than a thousand? How many?"

Wes picked up a half full water glass from the bedside table and sipped. "I'm not sure what you're getting at. During my ministry I've led quite a few people to the Lord, but I don't exactly keep count."

"No! No! No!" the sponsor growled. "I'm asking, 'How many did you save? How many did Wes save?'"

Wes shook his head. He had walked right into that one. "OK. I see where you're going. I didn't save any of them."

"Right. And you can't save this Harrison guy either. You know what to do. You share your own journey, and you let him know what God has done in your life. The rest is up to God. This isn't rocket science. It's my experience you can lead a drunk to AA, but you can't stop him from taking a drink. You just do your part, and trust God with the rest."

"I hear you. But I'm not sure I'm the right one to do this. I'm wondering if I should go to the senior Chaplain tomorrow and ask him to go in my place."

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“Did Harrison ask for the senior Chaplain?”

“No, but...”

“No buts. He asked for you. That’s a pretty good sign God is trying to help you do some growing by giving you this assignment. Now, can you get through the night without drinking? I’m not asking if you can get through the rest of your life sober. Will you commit to me you will get through this one night?”

Wes weighed his willingness as he finished off his glass of water.  
“OK. I can do it.”

“You can do what?”

“I can get through this night without drinking.”

“You can do it with what?”

“With God’s help.”

“One more thing, preacher. When you see that Harrison guy tomorrow, remember, it’s not all about you.”

## Chapter 5

LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE. Sharon Noble sat at her cubicle desk on the second floor of the Raleigh News and Observer building staring at the message recorded in large red print on a white piece of paper.

She examined the envelope. It contained no return address, or any clue to the identity of the sender. Her name and office address were on a printed label. The local postmark revealed the container had been processed by USPS on Monday, the day after her feature story on the babysitter murders appeared in the newspaper. Not exactly a coincidence. She carefully looked inside. Whew! No white powder. At least it appeared to be clean.

The message this morning felt different from the disturbing letters and emails she had received from readers in the past. She had always been able to convince herself the others were harmless, sent by troubled individuals who had emotional problems. But not this time. This one was an obvious and overt threat.

She probably should show it to her editor, but that could spoil her plan. She would be meeting with him within minutes to pitch a new feature story about the murders. If he knew of the threat, he would be much less inclined to give his approval. And, after all, what could he possibly do about it? It was best to leave him out of it.

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Let Sleeping Dogs Lie. Goose bumps formed on her arms. A shiver sneaked down her back. What should she do? She had no intention of abandoning her investigation, at least not until her sister's murder had been solved. She could trash the message, but this didn't feel right either. She considered her options and came up with a plan, but it all hinged on whether her editor would approve her new project.

As she made her way through the maze of cubicles, Sharon was not entirely oblivious to the ubiquitous appreciative looks of the male reporters and columnists admiring the bouncing of her long black hair, and the natural curves of her five-foot-three figure. Some things never change. If only they admired her half as much for last year's North Carolina Press Association award honoring her series on meth labs.

Arriving at a corner office, she knocked on the door of Mark Owens, the feature editor. Owens invited her in and pointed to a chair.

Sharon had often charmed and disarmed celebrities, politicians, educators, and artists during her career, but she had never been able to beguile Owens. The sixty-something, no nonsense, white haired veteran of the news business, treated everyone who reported to him, no matter how long they had worked for the paper, with the same condescending demeanor as he did young rookies.

Owens cleared his throat. "We have already received several good letters to the editor about your piece on Sunday," he said without

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emotion. “I don’t think I’ve told you yet, but I thought you did a pretty good job with it.”

Sharon wanted to respond with, “Everyone else I have talked with thought it was a lot better than pretty good,” but she suppressed the urge. Praise from the editor was usually a commodity hoarded, rather than given. She forced a smile. “Thank you.”

A moment of silence created an opportunity. “Actually, I have an idea for a follow-up I would like to propose.”

Owens nodded poker faced, and waited.

“I would like to work on a set of related stories for a series I’m calling, ‘The Ripple Effect.’ When my sister was murdered I was only thirteen. Her senseless death profoundly affected everyone in my family. It created a hole in my mother’s soul that remains unhealed even today.”

Sharon searched Owen’s face for some indication of his response before she continued. Unreadable, as usual.

“My sister Rebecca was a remarkable person. When she was sixteen she went with her church youth group on a mission trip to Guatemala. While on the trip, she decided she wanted to become a teacher, so she could return one day to try to give the Guatemalan children a chance for a better future. Of course she never did. I don’t know for sure if she ever would’ve, but I think she could’ve done something special with her life.”

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Owens turned his chair sideways and appeared to be studying the awards and pictures on his office wall of fame. Was he even listening?

“I’ve been thinking,” she continued. “The murders of the other two babysitters changed their families too. Their parents will never know the joy of the grandchildren they might have had, if only their daughters had lived. I think their siblings must wonder about all this, as well.”

She leaned forward hoping to make eye contact. It wasn’t going to happen. His gaze remained on his trophies. “So, what I’m proposing, Mr. Owens, is a feature series on the ripple effect of the murders. I want to talk to the families about the hopes and dreams that were shattered when they lost their daughters. I plan to describe the positive differences their lives might have made to others, if only they had been able to live. And then, I want to write about the effects of the crimes that ended their lives. Harry Harrison is scheduled in a few weeks to be executed for the murder of one of the girls, so it has some current event interest. And I believe the feature series would be a good follow-up to last Sunday’s piece.”

Owens rotated his chair a hundred-and-eighty degrees and stared out the window for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he turned back and faced Sharon. “Do you think you can do such a story and keep the objectivity necessary? From the sound of it, this is very personal for you. It’s understandable, but...I just don’t know.”



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Thankfully, she had anticipated his response. “You’re right. It’s very personal. I won’t sit here and tell you I’ll be detached from this project. But I do believe I can balance my personal passion and my journalistic professional objectivity to deliver a truly powerful series. You may remember I had a personal connection when I did the stories on the crystal meth labs. I believe the personal relationship helped me do a better job. You know my work. I think you know I can do it.”

“If I remember correctly, your connection on that one was a friend’s husband who had overdosed on the stuff.” He grabbed the arms of his chair and leaned back. “This one hits a little closer to home, don’t you think? But I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll let you go with it if you’re willing to broaden it to include Harrison’s other murder, you know, the nurse he was sleeping with. And I also want you to expand it to address the impact of Harrison’s execution on the families of his victims. The execution is too good of a hook for us not to use it. My concern is, this story, if it focused only on the babysitters, could get overly sentimental. Expanding it should help you avoid any tendency you might have, under the circumstances, to moralize or be sappy.”

Sharon bit her tongue. “I would like to get started on it this week, if that’s OK.”

Owens nodded as he waved his hand. It was the signal for her to leave.

She again made her way through the maze of gawkers. Moralize, or be sappy. She couldn’t believe he just said that. She needed to let it

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go. Owens' approved the project. That's all that mattered. She returned to her cubicle where the manila envelope again greeted her. Empowered by her success in obtaining the new assignment, she considered its contents. LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE. Fat chance!

## Chapter 6

The door to the death row cellblock clanged open. Wes tightened the grip on his Bible. His nerves, as his daddy used to say, felt tighter than a tick. He hoped Harrison's request for spiritual help was sincere. But something told him to stay cautious, at least for now.

As the steel door secured behind him, he searched the dayroom. At the far end, Harry Harrison sat alone at a metal table. The prisoner waved him over.

Wes forced a smile as he closed the distance.

Harrison grinned back. "I'm afraid we got off on the wrong foot last time, Pastor. I hope we can start over, if that works for you?" He stood and stretched out his hand.

Wes hesitated. Surely not again. But as soon as he responded, Harrison grabbed his hand and gave it a firm vigorous shake.

"I wouldn't blame you if you were a little gun shy today, Pastor. I didn't intend to be so rude to you last time. I was having a bad day. Hope I didn't offend you."

Several possible responses crossed Wes's mind. He rejected all but the polite one. "No offense taken. I'm glad you changed your mind. Would you like to talk here or in a visitor booth?"

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“Well, neither place is very private. You can’t hear yourself think out here, and in the visitor rooms you have to talk through glass. Besides, they’re bugged. They videotape everything you say in there. I thought we might talk in my cell?”

Wes glanced at the glassed-in control room where a guard appeared to be scowling at them.

“Don’t worry about him. We can come and go as we please during the day. As long as we keep the door open the guards don’t mind, you being the chaplain and all.”

Wes considered his options. None of them great. “I guess that’ll work. I’m pretty new around here so I’m still learning.”

As the inmate led the way, Wes climbed the stairwell to the second tier and entered Harrison’s cell. A slight tingle danced along his neck. He hoped he wasn’t being stupid.

The prisoner pointed to the steel writing table. “You can sit there and I’ll take the bed.”

Before Wes could fully settle himself, the smell of sour sweat attacked his nostrils. “So how are you doing, Mr. Harrison? I can’t imagine what it must be like to be in your shoes.”

“Tell me, Pastor Wes... You OK if I call you Pastor Wes? Or would you prefer something else?”

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“Pastor Wes is fine. Or you could just call me Wes, whatever is comfortable.

Harry nodded. “Tell me, Wes, were you a pastor before you came to work at our fine establishment, less than a week ago?”

“I pastored a church right here in Wake County.”

“The way I hear it, you got in some trouble at that church, Pastor. I hear you had to leave the church. What happened? Did they kick you out because of your drinking?”

Wes’s face suddenly felt warm. “How did...? Who did...?”

“Oh there are very few secrets in this world. Even on death row. Let’s just say a little bird told me.”

“What else did that bird tell you?”

“It told me you spent a year in rehab?”

Wes’s face grew instantly hotter. “Your little bird got it wrong. It was actually ninety days. What’s the point of this? I thought I was here to give you some spiritual guidance. Instead I feel like a hostile witness at one of your trials back when you were a prosecutor.”

Harry grinned. “Looks like I’m not the only one in this cell right now who’s been checking somebody out. You don’t need to be offended. A man of the cloth who didn’t know what sin was would hardly be in a position to help an old sinner like me, now would he? In fact, from what I’ve learned about you, I’d say we’re a perfect match.”

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“And what makes you say that?”

“Let’s just say I need a man of your experience to guide me. Since you’ve been to rehab, I guess you’re in AA. Am I right?”

Harry was enjoying this way too much. “Your point is..?”

“I used to love my booze too. But my real loves were sex and money. They were the only things that ever turned me on. The trouble is, I’ve taken advantage of a lot of people over the years and I’ve had a lot of time to think about my life. When I first went to work in the prosecutor’s office in Asheville, there was an Assistant DA there who was jealous of my conviction rate. He made up a bunch of stuff about evidence tampering and tried to get me fired. A few months later he came by my office and told me he was in AA and asked me to forgive him. It blew me away. Of course, I told him I forgave him. But what he didn’t know was – some of the stuff he had made up about me was true. Ain’t that a hoot!”

“I’m glad you were able to forgive him. We all need...”

“Anyhow, now that I’m going to die and all, I’ve been thinking about some of the people I have.... you know.... and I want to....”

“Make amends?”

“Yeah. That’s what I want to do. And I need your help.”

The tension in Wes’s body eased. Maybe this conversation actually had a chance to go somewhere. “I think I can help. But did you

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know there are a number of steps AA people go through before they are ready to make amends? The twelve steps are a path to spiritual transformation. Is a change of heart, mind and soul what you're searching for? I know if I were scheduled to be executed in a few weeks, I would want to be spiritually prepared to meet my God."

Harry jumped to his feet, stepped forward, leaned within a few inches of Wes's face, and said firmly, "That's it. I want you to get me ready to stand before God."

Wes leaned back hoping to gain some personal space. "If you're serious... If being prepared to meet your Maker is your goal, then I recommend you let me work with you using all twelve steps as a guide. The one about making amends is step nine. The steps are like rungs on a ladder. It is best you take them one at a time. I can tell you from experience, if you do so with sincerity and effort you will experience a spiritual renewal. How would you feel about doing this one step at a time?"

"Sure. Sure. You're the expert. If it's what we need to do, then, by all means, let's do it, but there's one little problem. How long does all this take? I have one of those uh...uh amends, as you call it, that is, let's say, time sensitive."

Wes wondered if his sponsor would approve of what he was thinking, but here was an opportunity to build some trust between Harry and himself, and he wasn't about to pass that up. "I see no

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reason not to take care of one of your amends early on, if delaying it would mean the opportunity would be lost.”

“Oh, believe me, the opportunity would be lost. This is an apology I believe requires a face to face, and for reasons I can’t go into right now, it needs to happen right away. All I need, pastor, is for you to do me a little favor.”

Harry handed Wes a small piece of paper with a name and phone number on it. “I need you to call an old friend of mine. His name is Louis Kaminski. I’m fairly sure you can reach him at this number. If not, try Central Psychiatric in Butner where he’s a nurse manager. Just call him for me, and tell him if he comes and visits me in the next couple of days he won’t be sorry he did.”

Wes stared at the piece of paper, weighing whether or not it might get him in trouble. He decided it was worth the risk. He needed Harry to trust him. He tucked it inside his shirt pocket. “I’ll make the call if you promise to let me start working with you on the twelve steps. I’m going to leave this Bible with you now. I’ve marked a passage in it I want you to read. I will also get an AA book to you later today. When we get back together later this week, I want us to talk about the steps.”

“Sure, Wes, whatever you say. But I really need you to make the call as soon as you can.”

“You have my word.”



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Wes exited the cell and descended the stairs. His heart felt a hundred times lighter. Maybe... Just maybe, he was going to be able to help this guy.

## Chapter 7

Sharon pulled her Honda Civic into the parking lot of the Raleigh Police Department and walked inside. After handing over her briefcase for examination, removing her jewelry, passing through a metal detector portal, and being checked with a wand, she stuck her press ID under the nose of a stony faced cop at the desk.

“I have an appointment with Craig Daniels in the Cold Case Unit. He’s expecting me,” The officer checked Sharon’s credentials and raised his eyes. His stern expression instantly melted. He called Daniels to confirm the meeting, and eagerly gave her more directions than she needed to find his office.

Briefcase in hand, she bounded up a flight of stairs. “OK, Becky,” she whispered under her breath. “I’m pretty sure I’m going to need your help here.”

Daniels met her in the hallway and led her into a room with two desks, piles of file sized boxes, and messy stacks of manila folders surrounded by a sea of loose papers. The balding ruddy faced detective removed some folders from his partner’s vacant chair, placed them on the floor, invited her to sit, and proceeded behind his desk.

“Thanks for seeing me, Detective. I know you must be busy.”

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“You have no idea. You see all those boxes. Each one’s an unsolved murder. I’ve got thirty-five years on the force and I thought I’d be retired by now. But I don’t think I could live with myself if I did. My partner’s sick with emphysema and not likely to return anytime soon. With all the budget problems in the city, if I retired, they’d eliminate my position and probably close the unit.”

“I’m just glad there’s someone like you who’s still trying to bring some peace to the victims and their loved ones. As I mentioned on the phone, detective, I have a personal interest in a twenty-year-old murder.”

“You mean your sister.”

“So I guess you know why I’m here.”

Daniels leaned forward, lifted some folders blocking the line of sight, and moved them to the top of another pile. “I have a pretty good idea. After you called and asked to see me, I Googled you and found the feature story from last Sunday. I remember the murders. I was new in homicide at the time and it wasn’t my case, but I remember them.”

“Then you know the murderer was never caught.”

“Well, I know two of the babysitter murders, as you call them, are unsolved. But the third one was. And her killer is soon to pay for it with his life. I don’t buy your theory, Ms. Noble, that the same person

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could have killed all three babysitters. We got Harry Harrison dead to rights for the one. And we also got him on his mistress.”

Sharon studied the detective’s melancholy eyes. “But did it ever occur to you Harrison might have killed my sister too? There were some remarkable similarities between the three babysitter murders. All of them were seventeen-year-old girls who lived in North Raleigh and babysat for spending money. Their bodies were dumped in ditches near Falls Lake. And all three advertised on community bulletin boards and in the Northside Shopper.”

“I didn’t work on your sister’s case, but I did some footwork for the lead detective on the Harrison murders. There was one major difference. Harrison’s babysitter wasn’t forcibly raped. He seduced a seventeen-year-old and got her pregnant. He committed statutory rape. The other two...” Daniels tapped his finger on the top page of a thick open file. “The other two were viciously assaulted. I know this is a difficult subject for you, being her sister and all, so I am sorry to mention it. But the distinction is no small matter.”

Sharon’s pulse quickened. Becky’s cold case file was right there in front of him. Maybe, just maybe it contained a clue, something they had missed in the initial investigation. She craned her neck to peer over the piles of papers on his desk. She still couldn’t see it. Not from where she was sitting. Somehow, she had to get her hands on that file. Patience. She needed to be patient – build some trust. “It’s fine, Detective Daniels. I know what happened. It was a horrible thing. It’s

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why I decided a long time ago not to rest until her killer was brought to justice.”

“Believe me, I understand. Anyhow, as I was saying, Homicide was convinced at the time Harrison was a copycat. He was just trying to throw us off track.” Daniel’s eyes narrowed. “I can tell you one thing. Harrison is the most dangerous kind of criminal. He is smart, devious, and capable of doing anything if he decides it’s in his interests.”

“I think you’re making my point. Why didn’t you look at him for my sister’s murder too?”

He tapped the file again – harder this time. “There was no motive or evidence pointing to Harrison. We had a good case on the others. We had nothing as far as your sister and the other babysitter were concerned. Believe me, we would love to have tied that arrogant lawyer to them, but we had no reason to think he was guilty.”

“But...” Sharon hesitated. It didn’t take a genius to see this line of inquiry wasn’t going anywhere. Cops defend other cops. Time to switch tactics. “So, if you don’t think you have my sister’s killer awaiting execution, then you must consider it an unsolved case. Has any progress been made on it in the last twenty years?”

Daniel’s cheeks transformed from ruddy to a dark purple. “I know where you’re going. I wish every time a family member called or came by to try to get me to reopen a file, I could do it. But it just isn’t possible. I can only work so many cases at one time. I’m sorry. I wish I could help, but...”

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"I hope I can get you to reconsider. There are two very good reasons why you should."

"I'm listening."

Sharon pulled the manila folder from her briefcase, removed the letter reading LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE, and held it so he could see. "I found this in my box this morning. There's no question in my mind it's about my feature on the babysitter murders. Somebody out there doesn't want me continuing to look at this and raising a bunch of questions."

He studied the page. "You know as well as I do this could have come from anybody. It's likely from some kook."

"Maybe. But what if it isn't? What if my sister's murderer is out there and something I said in the article made him nervous."

"I thought you believed Harrison was the murderer."

"I never said he did it. I don't know who killed my sister. But I believe this note is from someone who didn't like my linking the murders. Maybe it's just because they don't want the unsolved murders looked into. I don't know. But I was hoping you'd examine the envelope and letter for prints or DNA."

"You said there was a second reason."

Sharon reminded herself to be careful with her words. If they sounded like a threat they could easily backfire. "I thought you might be interested in the fact my editor has agreed for me to do a new series

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about all four murders and how they changed people's lives. I felt, if I were in your position, I would want to know about it. Once the article is published, the public is going to wonder why nothing's been done about this investigation in years. I don't know how your chief prioritizes these things, but I imagine she would rather be proactive on this than wait until the TV cameras show up."

Daniel's stiffened. "I see. I suppose I should be grateful you're giving me a heads up. But I still have all these other cases." He stared past her for a moment. When he looked back his eyes seemed warmer. "You do make an interesting point about the chief. She has a reputation for being concerned about public perception. So here's what I'll do. I'll speak with her about it, and if she thinks we should reopen the cases, I will."

"And what about the note?"

"Leave it and the envelope on that stack in front of you. If she agrees, I'll get the lab to examine them both. Of course, they'll need your prints and DNA for the purpose of elimination. One of the officers downstairs can help you with that today if you would like,"

"Of course." She retrieved her card from the briefcase and handed it to him. "Will you call me and let me know what she says?"

Daniels nodded. "Look. Please don't get the wrong impression. I don't mean to give you a hard time. This has to have been terrible for your family to live with all these years. Believe me I would like nothing more than to find your sister's killer. Let me see what the chief says."

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And if it's a go, if she wants me to put it ahead of some of the other things I'm working on, I promise you I'll give it my best shot."

"That means a great deal to me right now." As she rose to leave, her eyes were drawn to the open file and a picture attached to it – a picture of her dead sister lying in a ditch. Anger, her long-time companion, returned in a flash. She headed for the door. "And just so you're clear, I'm not giving up on this."

"I'm pretty sure there's nothing I could say to dissuade you. Just watch your step. The warning is probably from a crank. But you never know."



## Chapter 8

A cockroach scooted behind the steel commode of Harry's cell. Wes sat at the anchored table facing Harry who had an unopened copy of *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* on the bunk next to him.

Wes had prayed about this moment, but self-doubt still tortured him. How could he, a colossal failure as the spiritual leader of a church, ever succeed with somebody like Harry? Even now, with the execution only weeks away, the inmate showed no signs of genuine remorse. Wes didn't like the odds. But he knew he had to try. Nothing to do now but follow the plan – such as it was.

"You'll be happy to know, Harry, I finally reached your friend Mr. Kaminsky last night. We didn't talk long. He was working at the time. He said he was sorry about your situation, and that he would try to come if he could find the time.

Harry smacked the bedding with his hand. "That's it? Did you tell him I needed to see him as soon as possible?"

Wes eyed the partially open door and considered whether the guard in the control room would be able to hear a cry for help. "I did my best, Harry. Kaminski complained he was working a lot of double shifts."

The inmate glared back in steely silence.

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Best to move on. “I was wondering if you’ve had a chance to read any of the AA book.”

Harry’s eyes rolled. “Yeah, Pastor. I flipped through the pages and did some spot reading. Frankly, I’m not impressed. What a pain. Reading drunk stories is going to be about as much fun as listening to the daily complaints of the men on the row. You know, ‘My life’s been harder than yours.’ Only this book is about who’s the biggest lush. Tell me, Wes, with your experience and all, do you really think it’s a contest worth winning?”

“I understand your skepticism, Harry, but I’m asking you to withhold judgment and give this a try. Look. I kept my end of the deal. Now it’s your turn. I’ve marked the page in your book where the twelve steps are listed. I’d appreciate it if you would please turn to it and read Step One aloud.”

A smirk appeared on Harry’s face. “I don’t suppose we could consider a postponement.”

“Please, Harry, you promised. Just read it.”

The inmate hesitated, then picked up the book and ceremoniously flipped it open. “OK. You’re the boss. Here goes – We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable. Now what?”

Wes drew a deep breath, cleared his throat, and leaned forward. “Now we talk about it. You’re aware I’m an alcoholic. But I doubt you

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have any idea what it took for me to get sober. For a long time I refused to admit I was powerless. I still believed I could stop drinking any time I wanted to. When things went bad in my church, I finally had to face up to the fact I wanted to quit drinking, but was powerless to do so. And, because of my drinking, everything in my life was falling apart. My life, as the step says, became unmanageable.”

“Fascinating. You really had quite a problem there, pastor. But what does any of that have to do with me? I’ll admit after twenty years in here a shot of bourbon would taste real good about now. But I honestly don’t think drinking was my problem.”

Wes’s body flinched. The previous night’s powerful craving still lingered, and Harry’s belligerent attitude wasn’t helping. Roger’s words came rushing back – It’s not all about you. “I hear you, Harry. I do. But the step is not just about drinking. There are lots of different addictions – drugs, gambling, food, sex, unhealthy relationships, and so on. You told me last time I was here that your real loves were sex and money. Do you think maybe you’re addicted to them?”

“You do realize where I’ve been the last twenty years?”

The cockroach reappeared as if on cue, scurried across the floor, and under the bunk.

Wes tried to ignore it. “Look Harry, just because a man hasn’t had a drink for decades doesn’t mean he’s not an alcoholic. But let’s set that aside for the moment. The steps are a guide to spiritual change.

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The important thing is for you to look at your life right now, how it really is. How do you think your life's going?"

Harry's face turned crimson. "How do you think my life's going? Look at me. I've spent the last twenty years on death row, over half of it in this cell, and they'll soon strap me on a gurney, stick a needle in me and kill me."

Finally, a little crack in the armor. Something to work with. "I can't imagine what that's been like for you, Harry. But I bet you used to feel in control of your life. I know I did. That didn't work out too well though, did it? That's what step one is all about."

"Remind me again, why we're doing this?"

"I thought we agreed we're trying to prepare you to meet God."

The inmate left the bed and began to pace. "Oh, that's right, I forgot. Your job is to get me ready for judgment day. Harry Harrison's a tough nut to crack, the biggest sinner who ever lived, and Pastor Wes is going to be the one to do what no one else has ever done. I bet there'll be stars in your crown one day for this. So I guess we better get on with it. Times a wastin'."

Wes fought against the urge to leave. Harry was being a jerk. But no matter how unlikeable or unthinkable his crimes, God still loved the man. Wes had a job to do. He wasn't responsible for the results. His part was to give it his best shot, and to trust God to guide him. "Do you feel like a sinner, Harry?"

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“The baddest. But don’t you think everyone’s a sinner, Pastor”

I do. But, right now we’re talking about you, about Harry Harrison’s life.

Why don’t we look at Step One another way? Instead of saying you’re powerless over alcohol, try admitting you’re a self-centered sinful man, and your life is a mess because of it. Does that work for you? Just try it on and ask yourself if the shoe fits.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “I may have underestimated you, Pastor. Ever think about becoming a lawyer?”

Will these stupid games never end? Got to find a way to cut through them. “OK Harry, I guess I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’ Now ask yourself this, do you think you could stop being the kind of self-centered sinful person you are without any help from God or anybody, even if you really wanted to? Or do you think maybe you’re addicted to being the kind of person you are, and you’re powerless to change it?”

“Anybody ever tell you what a royal pain you are, Pastor? I bet you have a whole sermon on the subject. How’d your parishioners like it, back when you had a church?”

Anger rushed over Wes like a scalding shower. This was the final straw. He wasn’t about to waste any more time. He jumped up and stepped toward the door, but a voice in his head compelled him to stop. Was it Roger’s counsel from the night before? Was it God? He

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wasn't sure. He just knew he couldn't leave like this. He turned back toward Harry in time to witness the remaining color drain from the man's face.

Harry looked worried. Wes's anger eased. "Look Harry. I know you're used to controlling every situation. You've kept a shell around your heart for many years, and I understand you don't want to let anyone put a crack in it. But I'm not the one facing execution here. I need to know if you're serious about doing this or not. Otherwise we're just spinning our wheels."

Harry's bluster was now gone, his eyes pleading. "Don't give up on me so easy, Pastor. I don't mean to be argumentative. Old habits die hard."

Crackle... Screech... "Harry Harrison, come to the visitation area. Harry Harrison, come to the visitation area. You have a visitor."

Harry eyed the door and edged toward it. "I promise to do better, Pastor. I really do. But right now I need to go. Any chance we can pick this up another time?"

"I have to be honest with you, Harry. That depends on whether you're willing to lose the attitude and work with me. If so, I'll be happy to come back. If not, I see no point in continuing."

"I'm sorry, pastor. I really do want your help. If you come back, I promise I'll cooperate."

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“Then I’ll be back in a day or so. But you also need to promise me you’ll read the first four chapters in the AA book before then.” Wes pulled a slip of paper from his shirt pocket. “I’ve written down some Bible passages and I want you to read those too. Are you willing?”

Harry grabbed the list. “Of course. Of course. I promise. But I really do need to go, now.” As he exited the cell he blurted over his shoulder, “I’m hoping it’s Lou Kaminski. If it’s him, I owe you, because he didn’t let any grass grow after your call.”

Wes’s eyes fell on the AA book on Harry’s bed. This wasn’t how things were supposed to be going. God grant me serenity. Please God, grant me serenity.

By the time he exited death row, Harry had disappeared into the visitation room.

## Chapter 9

Harry arrived at the visitation area to find Lou Kaminski already seated in a booth on the other side of the security glass. The man had not changed much in twenty years, perhaps a few more pounds, a touch of grey around the ears, thicker glasses.

Harry's gut felt like it had been invaded by dancing butterflies. His entire plan depended on the next few minutes. "Hello, Lou. Long time, no see."

"You're right. It's been a while. You doing OK, Harry? The TV said they set your date."

Harry rested his arms on the counter and leaned toward the glass. "What can I say? I guess that's the way the cookie crumbles. But I'm not throwing in the towel yet. It's not over until the fat lady sings."

Kaminski snickered. "You always did love cliché's. As I remember you used them to good effect with juries back in your lawyering days. Seriously, Harry, I'm really sorry about all this. I wish there was something I could do. You did all right by me in the past."

"I appreciate that more than you know. Problem is, even if there was something you could do at this late date, it would probably be of a confidential nature, so we couldn't talk about it in here." Harry's gestured his eyes in the direction of a security camera. "The walls have



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eyes and ears you know. The only people I can talk to privately these days are my useless attorney and a chaplain who's green as grass."

"So how're you holding up, Harry?"

"It's sort of a day to day thing." Harry had no interest in talking about his personal situation. He was eager to get to the point, but warned himself to reel slowly. If Kaminski spooked it was all over. "How're things with you, Lou? What've you been up to?"

"I'm up at the psych hospital in Butner. It's working out good."

"I'd heard. I remember something about you going into psych nursing after that urologist got you blackballed at all the general hospitals."

Kaminski grimaced. "Let's just say Dr. O'Connell wasn't a very forgiving man."

"You've got that right. The man hates my guts. That's for sure. But I haven't forgotten what you did for me on that one, Lou. As soon as O'Connell learned you were about to testify against him, he tossed in his cards."

"That was a long time ago. It worked out OK for me too, Harry. And I wasn't all that enamored about watching him give prostate exams anyhow."

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Harry chuckled. "Let me just say, as much as I appreciate what you did then, I appreciate you ten times more for being here today. Ten times more."

"No problem." Kaminski said with an acknowledging nod. "I had planned a trip to Raleigh anyway. But I guess I don't quite understand why of all people you wanted to see me."

Harry glanced at the surveillance camera, relaxed, and leaned back. "I've been getting what you would call some spiritual guidance from the chaplain here. He seems to be a man who understands what it means to stray from the straight and narrow and find the way back. He has started me reading a book. I think it's going to help me a lot, if you get my drift. And when I was reading it, for some reason, I thought of you. I thought Lou Kaminski needs to read this book. I especially think he needs to read the chapter beginning on page 439. It's about a doctor who had some serious problems."

Kaminski appeared confused. "So... you want me to read this book..." Bit by bit, his mouth transformed into an acknowledging grin. "It sounds like it might be something I'd find interesting, being in the health field and all. Where do I get this book?"

"I think the chaplain has several of them. I'll ask if he will send you one."

"That would be great."

"And don't forget, page 439."

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“I got it.”

Harry relaxed his shoulders. “So do you know what ever happened to our urologist friend? Is he still around?”

“After he fired me, and tried to blackball me, he kept his practice going several years then suddenly closed it. Rumor has it the doc’s insurance company dumped him and he couldn’t afford what the other companies wanted to charge him. I think they must’ve figured out what a train wreck he was and cut their losses.”

“And after that?”

“I’m not sure. I know he opened a pain clinic on New Bern Avenue about three years ago.” Kaminsky glanced around and leaned in toward the glass. “Word on the street is he’s running a very profitable business these days. He has a couple of foreign-born physicians with questionable medical degrees working for him, so he doesn’t have to be involved directly with the really serious druggies who come to his clinic.”

Harry suddenly felt sick to his stomach. His old enemy O’Connell was still out there making money hand over fist. Disgusting. But enough about that. Right now he needed to seal the deal. “Tell me Lou, you ever think of retiring early? Maybe having a nice place at the beach and spend your time fishing, or golfing, or hanging out with the young things in the local watering holes?”

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“Oh, I’ve thought about it all right. I’ve been putting some away, but, even if everything goes according to plan, it’s going to be a lot of years.”

“Don’t be too sure. You never know.” Harry gave him a wink. “You can always hope to win the lottery.”

“That would be nice. Real nice.”

Harry stood. “You take care now, Lou. You take real good care.”

Kaminski eased out of his chair and turned to leave. “You know you can count on me, Harry.”

As Harry departed the visitation area he caught a glimpse of George Waters in the control room. “Curious George,” he muttered under his breath. “I might have known. I hope he enjoyed our little performance.”

The guard was searching hurriedly through a notebook. He stopped at a page, picked up the phone, and dialed. Suspicious timing. He was up to something. Harry slipped onto a dayroom bench to watch. The animated conversation lasted about a minute. When Waters hung up and turned, his eyes met Harry’s. They glared at one another for several seconds before Waters turned away.

## Chapter 10

Sharon followed the instructions of her GPS as it guided her through an older west Raleigh neighborhood. What better place to begin her new series than with the parents of the first babysitter to die that horrible winter. They were such nice people, too. Not only had Jacob and Anne Goldman happily agreed to the interview, they had insisted she join them for lunch.

The meal was served on a glassed porch overlooking a garden of not-yet-in-bloom green shrubs surrounded by a half dozen budding dogwoods. After Anne Goldman cleared the plates, and served coffee, Sharon took out her recorder, set it on the table and clicked it on. "I hope you don't mind. I like to make sure I don't misquote folks."

"Of course we don't mind," Jacob responded, "but we're not sure what you expect of us."

Sharon explained the "ripple effect" angle of the series. "Believe me when I say I understand how painful it is to remember, and to talk about your daughter's death. As you know, my sister was murdered the very next week. Even after all these years, it's such a bad memory for my parents I hesitate to bring it up with them."

"We don't have a problem talking with you," Anne said. "We know you and your family went through the same thing. How are your parents doing?"

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“I’m afraid not as well as you two seem to be.” Sharon shifted her gaze to the dogwood blossoms on the other side of the window. “Mom and Dad tried to cope in different ways. Mom went into a bad depression, cried all the time, and could think of little else. Dad worked hard at not thinking about it. He threw himself into his work. He traveled a lot and was hardly ever home. Holidays had too many painful associations to be enjoyed. My parents tried their best to shower me with gifts of love on Christmas and birthdays, but they could not give me what I really wanted – for us to be a happy family again. Mom and Dad drifted farther and farther apart.”

Anne reached over and patted Sharon’s hand. “We are so sorry.”

Sharon’s accustomed journalistic wall was starting to collapse. She felt no need to repair it. It had been a long time since she had spoken about these things with someone who truly understood them. “When I went away to college,” she continued, “Dad left Mom, and a year later they were divorced. I think he was just waiting until I left home. Dad is now married to a very nice woman who seems to make him happy. He still won’t talk about Becky. Mom lives alone and continues to struggle with depression. She sees a doctor and takes some kind of anti-depressant, but it doesn’t seem to make much difference. There’s no way of knowing, but I don’t think any of those things would have happened if Becky were still here.”

“Becky’s death was probably harder on you than anyone else.” Anne said.

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“I think what’s kept me going all these years is the promise I made to my sister at her grave the day we buried her. I told Becky I would do whatever it took to find her killer and to make sure he never did anything like that to anyone again. And that’s why I’m once again doing a story about what happened. I’m trying to keep the police interested, and I still hope someone out there knows something and will come forward.”

Jacob scooted his chair closer to Anne and slipped his arm around her. “We know Paula would want us to try to help catch her killer. We want to help in any way we can.”

“Well then, maybe we could begin with who Paula was. What was she like? What things did she like to do?”

Anne jumped up. “I’ll be right back,” She left the porch and returned in a few seconds with a photograph. “This is what Paula looked like. Wasn’t she a beauty? Jacob always called her his little princess. You remind me of her in a way, Sharon. Don’t you think so, Jacob?”

Jacob didn’t respond.

Sharon studied the dark-haired, dark-eyed girl with graceful symmetrical features. “She was gorgeous. I can see why you thought of her as your princess.” Sharon returned the photo. “So please continue. What was she like?”

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Anne pulled out the stand on the back of the frame and positioned the picture on the table so Sharon could see it. “Paula was a quiet sweet girl. She was an only child so we probably spoiled her. But she never seemed to act spoiled. I can only think of a couple of times she disobeyed us. I’m sure there were more, but there was nothing rebellious about her. She loved the violin. She never complained about practicing. She was hoping to get a scholarship to Julliard. She had a great work ethic, so I think she would’ve gone on to great things. As you can tell, we’re still very proud of her.” “And you have every reason to be. Any special friends in her life?”

Anne looked at Jacob. “Not really,” he responded. “Everybody seemed to like Paula. But she didn’t spend much time with people her own age. I think her real love was her violin.”

“Had she been a babysitter long?”

“She started babysitting when she was fifteen. Her dad used to take her to people’s homes and pick her up afterward. Most of them were personal friends of ours, or people we knew from Jacob’s work. After she was able to drive, she would take one of our cars and transport herself. She was always trying to get more customers so she could save money for college. She put up flyers in all the clubhouses. I don’t think it occurred to any of us that it could be dangerous.”

“My sister did the same thing. And the police believed the killer probably got her name and number either there, or from the *Northside Shopper*.”



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Jacob's eyes widened. "Paula advertised in the *Shopper* too? We thought everything would be fine if she always got people's names, addresses and phone numbers. Over the years we've beaten ourselves up about it. We should've known better. We did what we thought best at the time. It just wasn't good enough"

*Should've known better.* How many times had Sharon heard those words from her mother's lips? "But think about it. I doubt it would've crossed any parent's mind somebody would do what the killer did. He would check the girls out, find a house where the family was out of town for a few days, break into it, use their home phone and call the babysitter from there. Who would've suspected it? As parents, you had a name, a number, and a location. And it was all right there in the phone book where you could check it out. How were you supposed to know?"

"I know you're right," Anne said wearily. "But we still feel guilty. He did such awful things to our precious girl."

Sharon stared into the darkness of the remaining coffee in her cup. "Believe me, I understand. I still have recurring nightmares about what happened to Becky."

Anne again reached over and patted Sharon's hand. "That has to be hard for you."

The conversation soon shifted to stories about Paula's childhood and continued for almost an hour.

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When the recorder clicked off, Sharon slipped it back into her purse. "Thank you for everything. You have been so wonderful today. The lunch was delicious and the key lime pie was out of this world."

The couple accompanied Sharon to the door. Anne reached over to hug Sharon. "Please let us know if we can do anything. Anything at all."

Sharon hugged her back and promised to stay in touch.

"We would love to know if there's any progress in our daughter's case," Jacob called after her.

"I'll be sure to let you know. You never know when something new will turn up and change everything."

## Chapter 11

Sharon pulled away from the curb, made a few turns, and pointed the car in the direction of her apartment. A Chevy Malibu appeared in her rear view mirror. Was it her mom's? Of course not, this one was blue. If only her mother was doing as well as Ann Goldman. Instead, she was still stuck in the meltdown she had suffered the day Becky's body was found out by the lake.

The lake. Sharon tried to recall the last time she had visited the site where her sister's body was found. At least seven years. On impulse, she made a sharp right turn, then a left, and soon was driving north toward Falls Lake.

At the junction of Possum Track Road she took the left-hand fork and continued on the two lane blacktop until she crossed a bridge over a cove. Slowing, she pulled onto the narrow shoulder and parked. Getting out of the car, she made her way down the side of a ditch.

As she approached the bottom, visions of Becky's last moments assaulted her brain. This was crazy. Why had she come here? What was she looking for? She jumped over a strip of mud, wandered into the woods, and made her way down to the lake where she climbed onto a large rock that looked out over the cove. Taking a seat on its edge, she dangled her feet just above the water.

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On the far side, about fifty yards away, several families were camping. The playful sounds coming from people enjoying the afternoon brought back pleasant memories of innocent times.

Tears formed, a trickle at first, then a flood. Between sobs, she wiped her face with the sleeves of her sweater. After a while, when the crying finally subsided, she lifted her burning eyes to the clear blue sky, "Who did this to us, Becky? Oh how I wish you could tell me!"

Sharon remained on the rock, lost in thought, until the shadows grew long and a chill wind warned her it was time to leave. It had grown quiet now. The scent of burgers and hot dogs drifted from the campers' grills.

She made her way back through the woods and was about to climb the steep bank to her car when she spotted a dark blue Chevy Malibu parked on the other side of the bridge. Sharon's sixth sense antennae shot up. Was it the same one she had seen earlier? Had someone followed her here and waited all this time? Her gut was screaming danger. She was standing all alone in the same ditch where her sister had been killed. *Don't Panic. Think.*

She climbed the bank as quickly as her legs allowed, jumped in the car, cranked the engine, and pulled away. When she checked the rearview mirror, the Malibu was already proceeding on the bridge behind her. *Not good.* Sharon sped up in the hope of putting more distance between them. Unfortunately the city was behind her. The

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last thing she wanted to do right now was to go further into the boondocks.

A sign by the road pointed to the entrance of Blue Jay County Park. Sharon turned the steering wheel hard and entered a drive bordered by leafless trees and scattered picnic tables. Thankfully, a few people were still in the park. The Malibu hadn't turned. Whew! It must have kept going. The tightness in her shoulders eased. It was probably nothing. Just her imagination going bananas. She made a U-turn, proceeded back to the main road, and took a left toward Raleigh.

Within a mile she glanced in the rear view mirror and again saw the Malibu. It was hanging back about a hundred yards or so, but staying within sight. Every muscle in her body tensed. What if this was the person who sent the "Let Sleeping Dogs Lie" message? She hunched over the wheel. It was time to go into emergency mode.

*Don't Panic. Think!* She tried to recall some of the things she had been taught when she had taken a class in self-defense. That was a long time ago. One thing was for sure – it would be dark soon. She needed to get off the back roads and back into city traffic. She pushed her car over the speed limit. To be stopped by a cop at this point would be a good thing. She turned on her emergency flashers, picked up her iPhone, and punched it three times.

"911 what is your emergency," a female voice responded.

"My name is Sharon Noble, I'm driving alone and I'm being followed."

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“Do you know who is following you, ma’am?”

“No. But they’re driving a dark blue Chevy Malibu.”

“Where are you, ma’am?”

“I’m driving south on Six Forks Road. I left Falls Lake a few moments ago and am heading back to town. I’m asking for an officer to meet me as soon as possible. Please hurry. I think they’re closing in on me.”

“Please stay on the line, Ma’am. Don’t hang up. I’m dispatching a car in your direction now. Did you say *they*? How many are in the car chasing you?”

Sharon peered at the rearview mirror and strained to see past the menacing headlights and inside the Malibu. No chance. “I don’t know. It might be one person or a whole car full.”

“What kind of car are you driving?”

“I’m driving a silver Honda Civic and have my flashers on. There’s a red light up ahead. I’m a little north of where the road crosses the interstate.

Sharon pulled to the light, checked both ways, and, after a pickup truck entered from her right and turned left in front of her, she gunned the accelerator and ran the light. The driver of the Malibu also sped through the light, barely missing another vehicle. An angry horn blared.

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The road turned to a four-lane and Sharon began to speed in and out of traffic.

“What’s happening now, ma’am?”

“I’m crossing over the I-540 and they’re still behind me.”

“OK. Now stay with me. You should be seeing a police car soon.”

Sharon pulled into the left lane, sped past five cars, then darted back into the right one.

A flash of blue light ahead. Then more and brighter flashes. “There it is.” Sharon said. “I can see the police car. What should I do?”

“When I tell you to, find a safe place and pull over, preferably off the street.”

“There’s a convenience store up ahead.”

“OK the officer sees your car. If you can, go ahead and pull into the store’s lot. Keep your doors locked until the officer gets there.”

Sharon glanced in her rearview. There was no sign of the Malibu.

After identifying herself to the officer, and explaining what had happened, he offered to escort her home. When they arrived he checked out the apartment. Then he sat in the parking lot keeping an eye on the place for about an hour.

When she saw the blue and white pull away, Sharon checked the bolt on the door and turned out the lights. She pulled a comfortable

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chair by the window, wrapped her body in a blanket, and monitored the parking lot until she dozed off around three hours later. Not long after, trembling and sweaty, she was jolted awake by the dream, the recurring dream of Becky's murder.



## Chapter 12

Harry sat at the table in his cell carefully printing a message in small letters on a napkin made of a thin white porous paper. Folded, it measured six inches by six inches. When open, it was a one-foot square, front and back, providing ample space for everything he needed to say.

Earlier in the evening, while in the dining room, he had wrapped the napkin around a Styrofoam cup and carried it with him when he returned to his cell. Many prisoners on the row routinely brought cups of coffee back to the dayroom and sipped on them while they watched TV in the evening. Harry had participated in this ritual many times over the past twenty years. But this night Harry's cup did not contain coffee. It was half filled with skim milk.

The cup of milk was on his desk next to another cup obtained during dinner the previous night. It had not held coffee either. Harry had managed to pour into it a few ounces of vinegar from a container available to the prisoners for seasoning salads.

He formed his letters slowly with painstaking care using a three-inch pencil. It was of utmost importance that every letter be legible and the fragile writing surface undamaged. When he had finished the note, he picked up the napkin and proof read the text.

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*Lou*

*I will pay you a half million dollars when you have completed this agreement. Go to my attorney, Ralph Mitchell. Tell him you know I could not possibly have committed the murder of Brooke Smith because I was with you from 10:30 p.m. on February 11<sup>th</sup> until noon the following day. You did not come forward sooner because to do so would have implicated you in a criminal conspiracy to commit fraud. Now that the execution is scheduled, you do not want my death on your conscience.*

*On February 11<sup>th</sup>, the day of the murders, you saw me quite by accident around 10:30 p.m. as I was exiting Gabe's Steaks. I told you I was worried about my marriage and thought it might be about to come apart. I asked you if you would be willing to help me hide some of my assets that night so my wife could not locate them. I told you this had to be done immediately. I was tired and needed a driver. I offered you \$500 for your services. We went together to my house where you witnessed me removing from my safe a large amount of cash. I placed the money in a large duffle bag.*

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*You drove me out I-40 to the mountains. We took so many turns on winding roads you became completely disoriented and had no idea where you were. Finally, I had you pull into a drive that took us a few hundred yards down to a creek. You waited in the Mercedes while I took the duffle bag, crossed the creek and disappeared. When I came back empty-handed we drove back to Raleigh.*

*We arrived back at my house at 11:30 a.m. I paid you \$500 cash and you left. Tell Ralph Mitchell you are now willing to testify to all of this under oath. You must not vary from this account. Do not embellish. Memorize and practice your story. Then destroy this note. Ralph will do the rest.*

*Don't worry about being charged. After all these years, it's not going to happen. Do not contact me directly again. When Ralph informs me you have given your statement to the police, I will arrange for \$125,000 in cash to be delivered to you very soon. Assuming I get a new trial, when you have testified under oath in court to the above facts, I will send you the remaining \$375,000.*

*It is always a pleasure doing business with you.*

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*Harry*

Perfect. So far, so good. Harry carefully folded the napkin into a four by six inch rectangle. Next he poured the vinegar into the cup containing the skim milk. After waiting about a minute, he stretched a section of one of his knit briefs over the cup that had formerly contained the vinegar. He pushed it partly inside in order to make a concave strainer and poured the new mixture into the homemade sieve. The remaining solids could now be used as paste.

Picking up his AA book, he opened it to pages 440 and 441. Using his finger, he applied the glue he had just made to all the inside edges of both pages. He went to the sink, washed his hands and dried them. Then he carefully placed the napkin containing the note between the two pages, and sealed them together, making sure all the air was pushed out of the space containing the note and the seal was secure. Next he checked for paste residue on the exposed pages. Satisfied, he set the open book aside to give the pasted pages time to cure.

Harry walked out of his cell, leaned on the rail, and looked down on the inmates watching TV below. He couldn't imagine a single one of them being clever enough to pull off a plan like his. At the moment, he had a good feeling about it. There was every reason to believe Kaminski would come through.

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Of course something could always go wrong. The note might be discovered before it reached its destination. What if Kaminski decided to walk away? If so, it was all over. There wasn't time for a back-up plan, even if he could come up with one.

Then there was Chaplain Wes. Harry wanted to kick himself. Seeing the pastor squirm was the most fun he had enjoyed in a long time. But it was stupid. Without Wes the plan would fail. For this to work, he needed to mend fences, and fast. If not... The energy generated by his earlier cleverness drained away.

His eyes returned to the men in the dayroom below. Despite the fact he had virtually nothing in common with anybody else on the row, he had actually grown fond of some of the guys. What a waste to spend your life like this, locked up and waiting to die.

An image of himself strapped to a gurney with deadly IVs attached to his arms appeared again in his mind. Once more, he was consumed by dread.

## Chapter 13

Wes had put off going back to see Harry as long as he dared. The last session had been disastrous. He had promised to continue working with the man, only if Harry would lose the attitude and get serious about working the steps. Today would tell the tale.

Harry was at a table in the dayroom playing chess with another prisoner. Eight other inmates were crowded around.

Wes had no intention of spending the afternoon watching a chess match. He would just as soon watch paint dry, and besides he was due soon at a weekly meeting of the chaplains. "I'm sorry to interrupt. Should I come back later?"

Harry looked up and smiled. "How long you been there, Pastor? I'm afraid I got a little lost in the match."

"Only a couple of minutes." Harry appeared friendly. Almost warm. Wes wasn't buying it. At least, not yet. "I'm really OK to come back another time, if you need me to."

"No, no. Not necessary. Besides, we need to talk. The nice thing about chess is, you can take a break and get back to it later. All I'm doing here is showing a few of my buddies how the game is played. I can do that most any time, at least until they send me over to death watch."

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Wes followed Harry up the stairs and into his cell where the inmate plopped down on the edge of his bunk.

“I’m glad you came along today, Wes. Teaching those guys to play chess instead of playing at chess is about as effective as teaching rocket science to a bunch of kindergartners. Most of them don’t seem capable of anticipating anything other than the very next move.”

“Maybe I should let you teach me.” Wes again eased onto the steel chair. “I’ve always wanted to learn the game, but never have.”

“Maybe someday if I’m still in this world.” Harry lowered his head and appeared to be studying his knees. “Look, Wes. I know I was in a bad mood and got out of line last time we talked. I owe you an apology. I really need your help and would appreciate it if you’d give me another chance. You were right. I’m the one facing execution, and I know I’m not ready.”

Was this even the same man? He appeared vulnerable and sincere, more like evil Harry’s good twin. Wes wanted to believe him, but... “Thanks, Harry. If you really mean it, if you’re ready to go to work, then I promise I’m going to be here for you. But if not...” Instead of finishing the sentence, Wes opened his copy of the AA book. “Are you ready to get started?”

“Absolutely.”

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“Great. Last time we began with the first step and we talked about admitting your powerlessness over your selfish life-style. I was wondering if you had thought any more about it.”

Harry winced. “Sure. I’ve thought about it some.”

“And?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but, to be perfectly honest, I find the whole thing depressing.”

“That’s actually a good sign. We’ll need to talk more about the first step soon. But before we do, I’d like for us to spend some time trying to understand what’s involved in the next one. So if you don’t mind, Harry, turn to the page with the steps again, and read Step Two for me.”

Without any argument, Harry reached for the book, turned to the marked page, and read: “Step Two: Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”

“Do you believe in God, Harry?”

Harry squirmed into a new position on the bed. “How honest do you want me to be, pastor?”

“As honest as possible.”

“You sure you aren’t going to run out on me if you don’t like my answers?”



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Wes tried to imagine how Roger would handle this. “I promise you, the only answers unacceptable to me are phony ones. Some people in AA have a saying, ‘You can’t get clean until you come clean.’ If this is going to work, you’re going to have to be ruthlessly honest every step of the way. If you just say what you think I want to hear then the whole thing’s a sham.”

“OK then, to be perfectly honest, some days I do, and some days I don’t.”

“And on the days you don’t, why don’t you?”

“Probably for the same reason I don’t believe in Santa Claus, or the Tooth Fairy.”

Wes peered into Harry’s eyes. Dark pools emanating despair. “So you think it’s childish and naïve to believe in God. Maybe Harry, just maybe, you assume God is a fantasy because you’re stuck with an inadequate view of God. But before we go down that road, I’d like to know, on the days you do believe in God, why you do.”

Harry stood and began to slowly pace back and forth. “Well, for one thing, I sometimes ask myself why there’s something rather than nothing. But I think it’s mostly because, when I’m not thinking about how there might not be a God, I find myself assuming God is there.” He stopped, shrugged his shoulders, and turned toward Wes. “I don’t know why. Maybe it’s because of the way I was raised.”

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A possible opening. Maybe there was something in Harry's background to build on. "And how was that?"

"I grew up in Burnsville, up in the mountains, in Yancey County. My daddy was a crackerjack lawyer there, and a deacon in our church. Every Sunday my family went to Ebenezer Baptist." Harry returned to his seat on the edge of the bunk. "As a young child, my momma made me memorize a lot of quotes from the Bible. When I was eight, we had a revival at the church and one night I went forward and got saved. Right then and there I got saved from all the awful sins of an eight-year-old. So, I guess you don't need to worry about me, since I've already been saved."

Wes allowed the inmate's words to rest in the air for a moment. "Do you *feel* saved, Harry?"

Harry seemed to be searching the ceiling for an answer. "Do you really want to know why I have a hard time believing in God, pastor?" His voice cracked as he spoke. "I keep wondering, if there's a God, then he knows I didn't do those murders. And if God is great and God is good, like my momma taught me to pray, then why is he going to let them stick poison in me and kill me? Sure, I've done my share of bad things in my life, but nothing to deserve this."

Wes's arms were suddenly covered with goose bumps. Harry had touched a tender nerve. Was it because the man really might be innocent like that reporter had suggested? Or was it because he was asking the same questions Wes had asked himself, over and over, after

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Katlin was killed? “So your problem is not so much that you don’t believe in God, but that you think God is unjust. Is that it?”

Harry slowly shook his head. “To tell you the truth, I don’t know what I believe anymore,”

“If you give me a chance, Harry, I think I can help you with that. But I need you to work with me. Did you read the chapters in the book I asked you to read?”

“I started to. But to tell you the truth, after a few pages, I fell asleep. I didn’t mean to. It just happened.”

“It’s OK, Harry.” Wes peeked at his watch. It was almost time for the meeting with the other chaplains. “Before we talk again, I really need you to read the chapters, especially the one addressed to agnostics. I think you might find it especially helpful. And choose a time when you’re wide awake. Will you do that for me, Harry?” “I’ll try.”

Wes stood to leave. “I need you to do more than try. I need you to promise.”

Harry grabbed the AA book from its place on the bed. “I’ll promise on one condition. I need another favor from you. I need another AA book.”

Wes eyed the copy. “Is something wrong with the one you have?”

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“No, but you remember Lou Kaminski, the man who came to see me so I could make amends to him? He accepted my apology real well. But he shared with me he has an addiction problem, and I thought he might benefit from this book.”

Harry opened the cover, and handed it to Wes. “As you can see, I’ve already written a note to him in this one and signed it.”

Wes read the inscription aloud.

Dear Lou,

It was a pleasure to see you again. Please accept this gift as a token of my friendship. Always remember things are the darkest just before the dawn. I sincerely hope you will soon find the new life you are looking for.

Harry Harrison.

“It’s very nice, Harry.”

Harry handed him a slip of paper. “Here’s the address. I’d appreciate it if you would mail it to him for me.”

There was something about this that didn’t feel quite right. “I don’t know. Can’t you just mail it yourself?”

“I could. But nothing you send or receive around here is confidential. I don’t feel right about breaking Lou’s confidence about the addiction, especially since he is a nurse and works for the state and might lose his job. Of course, if you don’t feel comfortable mailing

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it, pastor, I understand, but then I am not sure what to do. I worry my trying to help him will get him in trouble.”

Wes nodded, stuck the address in his pocket, and tucked the book under his arm. “Don’t fret about it, Harry. It’s good you’re concerned about your friend. I’ll get it mailed today. I’ll also bring over another copy of the book for you. Now I need another favor from you.”

“You name it, pastor.”

“I want you not only to read the chapters, I want you to think seriously about what it would mean for you to take each of the first three steps. Deal?”

Harry held up his hand as if swearing an oath. “Deal.”

## Chapter 14

Sharon's Ripple Effect story on the Goldmans appeared in the feature section of the News and Observer on a Sunday. When she arrived at her office on Tuesday morning, her voicemail was full.

While half-listening to the string of audio messages she recognized the voice of cold case detective Craig Daniels. "Hi, Sharon. Your article did the trick. The chief said to move the cases to the top of my pile and report directly back to her in a few days."

A surge of excitement ran through her. Her first instinct was to pick up the phone and call the detective, but she decided she needed to get a few things done first.

Several more messages played before another one attracted her attention. A chaplain named Wes Barrett at Central Prison wanted her to call. He said it was about Harry Harrison. Interesting. She jotted the number on a sticky note before listening to the rest of her voicemails.

Next she turned to her emails. While she was still sorting through the online mailbox, her daily snail mail was delivered to her desk. She eyed the two-day pile of letters and junk mail in front of her. *Whoa!* Her gut tightened. Was that a manila envelope just like the other one? She reached toward it . . . but stopped her hand in mid-air. Best not to touch. She pulled out her iPhone, and dialed the direct number of the

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Raleigh Police Department, a number she had known by heart since her days as a cub reporter.

She explained things to Craig Daniels. He was in her office in less than twenty minutes. Accompanying him was a junior member of the crime lab, who, with gloved hands, carefully deposited the suspicious envelope in a plastic bag and sealed it. The detective dispatched the lab tech back to the station with instructions to take precautions for hazardous materials until all the contents of the envelope could be determined.

“Is there somewhere we can talk?” Daniels asked.

Sharon led him to a small conference room. The arrival of a second envelope had been more than a little unnerving, but, at the moment, all she could think about was the reopened investigation. “Have you been able to take a look at the cases yet?”

“I pulled the files and spent all day yesterday reviewing them.” Daniels pulled off his suit coat, hung it on the back of a chair, and sat across the table from her. “The bad news is the murders were twenty years ago. Memories fade and witnesses die. It’s always difficult to follow up on old leads after so much time has gone by. But the good news is we still have properly preserved DNA from semen samples found on the bodies of Paula Goldman and your sister Rebecca.”

The image of Becky being raped flashed through Sharon’s mind. She refused to let herself dwell on it. “But wasn’t the DNA already examined?”

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“Things were much less efficient twenty years ago,” Daniels’ said. His tone was much warmer than the last time they had talked. Almost fatherly. “It took a long time to get results back. The tests were a lot more expensive. And there was little or no point in doing a test unless you had the DNA of a person of interest to compare it with. But things have changed. As you know, Sharon, we’ve solved a number of cases in recent years using old DNA because the technology has improved and the national database has since grown exponentially. At any rate, it’s now possible to test the twenty-year old samples and to run them through the database to see if there’s a match.”

The level of her excitement continued to climb. “And how long will it take?”

“I think we can have the results back in a week or so. Once we have them, we can search for a match, and, if we’re lucky, we could know who the killer is in less than a day.”

A week to get the DNA results. She had hoped for sooner. But what was a few days? She had already waited years. Finding a match was the important thing. “And if we’re not so lucky?”

“Then we’re back to zero.”

Zero. Every cell in Sharon’s body rebelled against the possibility. All her efforts to get the case reopened could still end in nothing. She refused to entertain the thought.



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Daniels handed Sharon his card. "My cell is on there. If you receive any more threats, call any time of the day or night."

She slipped it into a skirt pocket. "Thanks, Detective. I would be lying if I said I wasn't concerned"

Daniels reclaimed his coat, slung it over his arm, and headed toward the hallway. "Remember, anytime of the day or night."

After he left, Sharon returned to her desk. She glanced at the sticky note containing Wes Barrett's number. Later. Too much going on right now.

## Chapter 15

Wes sat slumped in the desk chair of his cramped windowless office reflecting on his most recent sessions with Harry. During the past two weeks he had spent considerable time with the man. The inmate was maddening, to say the least. As soon as Wes thought they were making a little progress, Harry would make a cynical comment and throw everything into doubt. Precious time was fleeing.

Harry, as promised, had been studying the Big Book of AA, and he claimed he'd made an effort to take the first three of the twelve steps. But was he sincere, or just playing more games? With Harry it was impossible to know. The plan at this point was to get him to do a Fourth Step, the one where he would make a list of all the wrongs he had done, but was the man ready to be thorough and honest? It was a critical step. If he pushed Harry into taking it before he was ready, it might derail the whole process.

His sponsor said he should trust that God had chosen the right man for the job. Easier said than done. Nothing in his years as a pastor had prepared him for the likes of Harry Harrison. He was over his head and he knew it. And then there were Harry's passionate claims of innocence. Of course that's what they all say. But in this case...

The phone's ringing jarred him out of his musings.

"This is Wes."

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“And this is Sharon Noble. I’m returning your call.”

Wes sat straight up. He had phoned her two days ago on impulse. But since she hadn’t returned the call at the time, he seriously doubted he would ever hear from her. “Ms. Noble, how are you?”

“I’m fine, and please call me Sharon. What can I do for you?”

He took a deep breath and reminded himself of the thought process that had led to the call. “I’ve been spending quite a bit of time with Harry Harrison. The reason I hoped we could talk, Sharon, is because you’ve raised some interesting points in your articles about the babysitter murders. I’ve also looked at old news reports about Harrison’s original trial, and I can’t help but wonder if the jury got it wrong.

“Based on what?”

Wes wondered for an instant if he was going to regret what he was about to say. After all, she was a reporter. But he had read her stories about the murders, and something told him to plow ahead. “It’s mostly a feeling. I don’t have any real evidence, just impressions from talking with him, and reading about the case. As you could guess, the man’s not easy to figure out. He’s very cynical, and he’s done a lot of things in his life which are less than admirable, to say the least. But he vehemently denies the murders. And though that’s not exactly uncommon for an inmate, I’m having a very hard time believing he could have done anything so terrible.”

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“So he still denies the murders, even to you. And you believe him?”

Wes stared at a stack of Bibles on his bookcase. A church had recently donated them for the inmates. If only being a chaplain was as simple as distributing the good book. “It’s not so much that I believe him. It’s just that he’s scheduled to die by lethal injection. Time’s running out. And I keep asking myself – what if he’s innocent of those crimes? Anyhow, you seem to have some of the same questions, and I was hoping we could get together, when you have time, and talk about all of this.”

“Actually, our getting together might be timely, especially in light of the press conference tomorrow.”

“A...a...press conference? What kind of press conference?”

“You haven’t heard? It could be very explosive. Harrison’s attorney has promised a major turn of events in the case. I’ve a source in the police department who tells me the lawyer is going to produce a witness who was with Harrison the night the murders were committed.”

“A witness?” Harry never said anything about a witness. “You’re kidding me. Do you think it’s for real?”

“Maybe. Of course the police and DA think it’s total baloney. My source wouldn’t tell me more, but I plan to be there to see where this is going. At the very least I’ll get a good story out of it. Since you have

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some doubts about Harrison's guilt, you might want to come too. It'll be at eleven tomorrow, on a corner of the old mental hospital campus across from the prison. Harrison's lawyer no doubt selected the place because it's where protestors gather on execution nights. I'm a little surprised you haven't gotten wind of it yet."

She wasn't the only one surprised. Why hadn't he been told? "I'm embarrassed to say I'm a little blown away. I haven't heard a word."

"I'm not sure anyone knew about it until today."

OK. That explained it. No need to spaz. "I'm glad we talked, then, Sharon. Otherwise I might have missed it. I'll definitely be there. Any chance we can get together afterwards somewhere?"

"Sure, we can touch base at the press conference, and, when it's over, we can go somewhere and talk, maybe over lunch."

## Chapter 16

At ten fifty-five a.m. Wes left through the front gates of the prison. Rain was forecast for the afternoon, but so far the bright morning skies were cooperating with the outdoor press conference.

He crossed over Western Boulevard to a small open area on the south side of a jogging trail that wound through the old Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Hospital campus. A dozen vehicles, some crowned with satellite dishes from local TV stations, were parked along the side street. Anti-death penalty signs wagged above the heads of about fifty people gathered in front of a portable stage.

As he worked his way into the middle of the crowd, two men stepped to the podium. The first approached a microphone and introduced himself as Ralph Mitchell, attorney for death row inmate Harry Harrison. Mitchell then identified the other man as Louis Kaminski, a nurse at Central Psychiatric Hospital.

*Kaminski!* A chill danced across the back of Wes's neck. *Louis Kaminski!* No way was this a coincidence. It had to have something to do with Harry's amends.

"Mr. Kaminski will be reading a brief statement but will not answer questions," Mitchell began. "He's a new witness whose testimony will exonerate Eldridge Harrison Harrison III, a man now on death row awaiting execution."

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Unbelievable! This was going to be huge news, and he was right square in the middle of it. Obviously, Kaminski knew something. Something that could help Harry. But what could it be? And why hadn't he come forward earlier?

As Kaminski began reading a prepared statement, Wes strained forward. It was impossible to hear every word, but the message was unmistakable. Kaminski said Harry could not have killed Brooke Smith because the two men were at the other end of the state at the time of the murder. He said Harry had removed a large amount of money from a safe and the two of them had made a trip to the mountains where Harry had hidden the cash.

Several reporters near the stage held up their hands and shouted questions to Kaminski. Wes strained to see if he could identify Sharon from the description she had given him. No luck. Too many signs in the way.

Mitchell reminded the press to address their questions to him.

"Why has it taken so long for this witness to come forward?" A reporter holding a TV camera shouted.

Mitchell glanced at his notes. "The nature of the events of the evening in question could be construed by law enforcement to be a crime, thereby placing the witness at risk of being charged with conspiracy to commit fraud. Because of this jeopardy, Mr. Kaminski had hoped it would not be necessary to come forward at all. He did so

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as a matter of conscience only after all of Mr. Harrison's appeals for a new trial was denied and an execution date set."

Plausible. Sort of. Still... Wes wormed himself closer.

"Mr. Mitchell," another reporter yelled. "Can you explain why the events of the night might be construed as a crime?"

Mitchell glanced at Kaminski whose face had turned to stone. "The alleged purpose of the trip was to hide a substantial amount of money from Harrison's then estranged wife."

A grey haired journalist raised his hand. "Is the D.A. aware of this new witness?"

Mitchell scowled. "Let me say that I'm very disappointed in the District Attorney's office. The prosecutors are only interested in defending the win record of their office at the expense of justice, even when a man's life is at stake."

The crowd of anti-death-penalty advocates broke into clapping and cheering.

As they quieted, a female voice rang out above several shouts of other members of the press. "Sharon Noble here, from the News and Observer."

Wes craned his neck in an attempt to see her. His view was still blocked.



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“I understand how the testimony of Mr. Kaminski, providing it’s true, is an alibi for the murder of his babysitter, Brooke Smith. I have two questions. First, do you have a theory as to who might have killed Smith? And second, how does this witness help your client with regard to his conviction for killing his mistress Kim Gingotta?”

“As for your first question, Ms. Noble, it could have been anyone. All we know at this point is my client has been wrongfully convicted of her murder.”

“Do you think it could have been done by the same perpetrator who murdered Rebecca Noble and Paula Goldman?”

Mitchell adjusted the microphone. “It’s a distinct possibility. If the so-called babysitter killer is ever caught, I would not be surprised to learn he was the one who murdered Brooke Smith. But that’s not our concern today. As Mr. Harrison’s attorney I am here today to present clear and convincing evidence that he could not have killed Ms. Smith. We all know he got her pregnant. It was a moral failure and tragedy for the girl.”

As he spoke, Mitchell’s voice began to rise, and his southern drawl became more pronounced. “Mr. Harrison has long expressed sorrow for his behavior. But the defense has maintained Mr. Harrison did not murder Miss Smith throughout the years of this case. We are gratified to be able to bring forth a reliable witness to confirm his innocence.”

Wes had to admit that the guy was good – the kind of lawyer who could convince a jury that snow was hot.

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Mitchell looked in Sharon's direction. "Now, I'm afraid I've forgotten your second question?"

"I asked, 'How does this witness help your client with regard to his conviction for killing his mistress Kim Gingotta?'"

"O yes. Thank you. I believe if Mr. Harrison had obtained better counsel for his original trial, he would have been acquitted in the case of Ms. Gingotta. Mr. Harrison's whereabouts after 8:36 p.m. when he was video recorded leaving the Holiday Inn lobby that evening are clearly accounted for. He could not have killed her after that."

A woman holding the sign blocking Wes's view must have grown tired. As the poster descended, he caught a glimpse of a female's back. She had dark shiny hair and wore a red jacket. That had to be Sharon.

She raised her hand, "But what about *before* eight thirty-six p.m.? Didn't the medical examiner say Gingotta might have been killed as early as eight? That still leaves a thirty five minute window."

She was impressive – her questions intelligent and tough. Not somebody you want poking around if you've something to hide, but a good person to have on your side. Lunch was going to be interesting to say the least – if she could still make it.

Mitchell again glanced down at his notes. "Time of death is not an exact science. Even if one assumes the coroner's estimate of death between eight and eleven thirty is true, the most likely time of death would have been around the midpoint of those hours or closer to ten

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that night. Both the first half hour and the last half hour, though possible, are statistically much less likely to be accurate. Not only that...

“Mr. Mitchell,” a male TV reporter interrupted. “Didn’t the defense argue this in the original trial?”

“They did. But the prosecution contended, if members of the jury were not convinced she could have been killed between eight and eight-thirty, they could still conclude Mr. Harrison returned later in the evening. Remember, the defense’s own expert thought she might have been killed as late as midnight. The prosecution wanted it both ways, early or late it didn’t matter to them. But not only has there never been evidence that Mr. Harrison returned to the hotel that night, we now know he couldn’t have, as he and Mr. Kaminski were elsewhere.”

Several reporters shouted Mitchell’s name hoping he would recognize them for a question. The attorney ignored them and gathered up his notes. “Let me say this as clearly as I can, Mr. Harrison is an innocent man who is scheduled to be put to death by lethal injection. He did not murder Kim Giggotta or Brooke Smith. He is the unfortunate victim of judicial prejudice due to his sexual indiscretions. I can assure you, come Monday morning, we are going to be filing a brief with the court requesting a stay of execution. And we’re going to fight this thing all the way.”

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The crowd of advocates again clapped, cheered and waved their signs.

Mitchell tugged at Kaminski's arm and the two men made their way off of the stage and into a waiting black Mercedes that immediately sped away.

As the reporters packed up their equipment, Wes approached Sharon and called out to her. When she turned in his direction, he found it difficult to comprehend what his eyes were telling him. She was gorgeous. He smoothed in place his slightly windblown hair and introduced himself.

The two agreed to meet twenty minutes later at a sandwich shop in a nearby shopping center.

## Chapter 17

When Wes arrived at the deli, he spotted Sharon waiting near the door. “Sorry it took me so long.” he apologized. “I had to retrieve my car from the prison parking lot and I had a little trouble finding the place.”

“No problem. I had an advantage. This is one of my favorite spots. They make the best chicken salad in town.”

“I’ll have to try it then.” He held the door then followed her inside. After ordering at the counter and picking up food, they found seats at a booth by the window.

Wes studied her face. Sharon’s dark chocolate eyes were mesmerizing, the symmetry of her features captivating. He instructed himself not to stare. Instead, he examined his sandwich.

She picked at her salad and took a small sip from her drink. “So, tell me Wes, how long have you worked at Central Prison?”

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He raised his eyes – then diverted them. “I’ve been there less than a month.”

His cheeks felt warm. Why did her good looks make him so uncomfortable?”

“So were you a chaplain somewhere before?”

“No, I was a pastor of a congregation out near the airport.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what made you decide to become a chaplain?”

This was just small talk for her, but uncomfortable territory for him. “To be honest, it wasn’t exactly my decision. It’s all public knowledge, so I’ll give you the Reader’s Digest version of it.” He forced a smile, “But you have to promise I won’t read about it in the paper tomorrow.”

She laughed and mockingly shook her head. “Darn! And I left my recorder in the car. I guess you’re safe this time.”

Between bites of his sandwich, Wes shared the main points of his personal journey over the past two years. Sharon’s countenance

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was warm and accepting. Still, the more he talked, the more difficult it became to make eye contact.

At a pause during his description of rehab, she said, “I hope you don’t think I’m shocked by any of this. Let me assure you, we journalists don’t shock easily. And I know a thing or two about addiction. I’ve seen what crystal meth can do to people’s lives. I wish someone I used to know had been able to find recovery from his addiction, as you’ve done, before the meth killed him.”

The sincerity on Sharon’s face prompted him to reconsider his first impressions. Yes, she was a smart tough reporter, but there was nothing cynical about her. She was pretty, stunningly so, but she would never allow anyone to reduce her to eye candy. Here was a kind and sensitive human being. “I must confess I read up on you, Sharon, before I called you the other day. I know about your journalism awards and have managed to read on the internet quite a bit of your work. I have to tell you I’m quite impressed.”

A charming grin unfolded from her lips. “Thank you. I won’t pretend I’m not pleased to have received some recognition for my

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work. Who wouldn't be? But a plaque on the wall and a dollar might buy you a good cup of coffee. Since you've been so up front with me, I don't mind telling you I don't do this for the recognition, and certainly not for the paltry pay. I don't even do it because I love being a journalist, although I can't think of anything I would like better. I do it because my sister was murdered. I grew up inspired by her life, and enraged by her death."

Sharon pushed her half eaten salad to the side. "I'm not the most religious person you'll ever meet, and I wouldn't say this to many people, but I think you'll understand. I believe God put me on this earth for a reason. And, as best I understand it right now, I'm supposed to try to bring the man who killed my sister to justice, and hopefully to right some other wrongs along the way. I know that sounds like a line out of a Spiderman movie, or something, but that's the way I feel."

"I know what you're saying. I can identify with it. I've thought since I was back in college and God called me to the ministry I was supposed to be a pastor. It was my purpose in life. I still think it is.



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But I'm getting a fairly clear message these days I'm supposed to be at Central Prison right now. I'm even starting to wonder if I'm there because of Harry Harrison."

Wes had surprised himself with the admission. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "Speaking of Harrison, if you don't mind me asking, what was the question you were trying to ask the attorney right when he ended the press conference?"

"It was about his mistress. I think Harrison could be telling the truth about his babysitter. There's a very good chance she could have been murdered by the same man who killed my sister, although the verdict is still out on whether Kaminski is for real. If he is, then Harrison could not have killed Brooke Smith. Whether or not he killed Kim Gingotta is more problematic. As you heard, the facts of the case are in dispute concerning the time of death. So, let's say for the sake of argument there's reasonable doubt she was killed between 8:00 and 8:36 that evening, the time we know Harrison was in the hotel."

Wes nodded.

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“There’s still something about the scenario that bothers me. Gingotta had no reason to stay in her hotel room after Harrison left. Presumably, she met Harrison to confront him about the babysitter. If I remember right, she was still married and her husband was probably expecting her. Why didn’t she leave when Harrison did? Or at least as soon as she composed herself?”

“It’s a good question. But couldn’t she have been in shock? Think about it. If Kim Gingotta had just learned Harrison was carrying on with his babysitter and got the girl pregnant, all during the same time when she was having a passionate affair with him, that must have seriously played with her mind.”

“And we know from the coroner’s report she couldn’t have committed suicide.” Sharon’s face grew intense. “So if she was alive when Harrison left, did she cry herself to sleep? Did she go to the hotel bar and pick up some guy and bring him back to her room? I think if it had happened to me, I would have called a friend. But there’s nothing in the record to indicate she did.”

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Wes took a moment to consider the possibilities. “It’s an interesting theory about her picking some guy up in the bar. She wouldn’t be the first distraught woman upset about being betrayed who went looking for affection somewhere else.”

“Maybe. But it’s a little hard for me to believe. If she did come back to the room with some stranger who murdered her, he strangled her with the same type of cord as the one used on the baby sitters.”

“Quite a coincidence. Unless he happened to *be* the babysitter killer.”

For the next hour Wes and Sharon remained at the booth in the deli, sharing information. She informed him about the Ripple Effect Project and her conversations with cold case detective Craig Daniels. In turn, he told her about Kaminski’s recent visit to Harry.

Sharon’s eyes narrowed. “Do you think Harrison might have engineered this whole alibi thing when he was there?”

Wes had asked himself the same question on the drive over. “I don’t see how. Every visit is video recorded. Whatever else you

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might say about Harry, he's not stupid. No, my theory is Kaminski was bothered when he saw Harry on death row, and, knowing the execution was soon, his conscience got the better of him. Things like that happen a lot in my world."

"I'm sure they do. Still, I'm not quite convinced. I keep feeling something's not right here." Sharon checked her watch. "Listen, Wes, I don't mean to cut this short, but I have a story to write, and I need to get back to my office."

"I hope I didn't hold you up. Maybe we could get together again and talk about this some more."

She headed for the exit. "I'd like that. I'll give you a call next week."

## Chapter 18

The morning after the press conference an exhausted Wes paid Harry an unexpected visit. He had tossed and turned all night. Too many questions about Kaminski. If he was going to keep working with Harry, he needed answers, and he needed them now.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this before?” Wes demanded.

Harry frowned. “You’ve got to believe me, pastor. I was as surprised about his coming forth as anyone. I didn’t learn about it myself until night before last when Mitchell came to see me.”

“No, no, Harry. I mean, why didn’t you tell me he was with you the night of the murders? In fact, why didn’t you tell anyone? An alibi witness could’ve exonerated you, and you’ve been sitting on this for 20 years? Can you see the problem here?”

“You’ve got to understand. I never told anyone about it for very good reasons. Of course, I hoped all these years that he would come forward. Evidently, it took the scheduling of my execution to finally

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do the trick. He was with me that night for real, but we were doing something illegal, and I always believed if I told, he would deny it. Then his disavowal would've made me look like a liar and undermined all my appeals. Not only that, if he'd committed perjury back then, there was zero chance he'd ever say what really happened. The only thing I could do was to sit on it and hope he would one day do the right thing."

"So the reason you had me ask him to come see you was so you could appeal to his conscience to act before it was too late?"

A sheepish grin formed on Harry's mouth. "Something like that. But Kaminski and I didn't talk about it directly. We just kind of got reacquainted. If he was going to do the right thing, it needed to come from him."

All of the tension that had built overnight began to drain from Wes's body. His biggest fear had been addressed. Harry had used him, but not for anything illegal. He didn't like it that Harry hadn't been entirely straight about things. But he could live with it, because

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Harry now owed him, and he was going to use that fact to make sure he stayed serious about working the AA steps.

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Wes returned to Death Row a few days later to help with Harry on his Fourth Step, the one about doing a fearless and searching moral inventory. The cell's usual foul odor had been replaced by the sinus irritating scent of Clorox. The inmate was sitting on the edge of his bunk holding a piece of paper containing scribbling. Similar pieces were scattered beside him.

Wes wiped his burning eyes and looked at his watch. "Anytime now would be good."

"I'm warning you, pastor, some of this is going to be hard to hear."

"It's called a fearless and searching moral inventory, Harry. It's supposed to be about hard stuff. I've been in the program long enough that I doubt anything you could tell me at this point would shock me.

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“Don’t be too sure, pastor. I have to admit, when I first started working on this I was just going through the motions, but the more I thought about it... It was sort of like being back in my prosecutor days when I was preparing a case. Only this time I was the perp. I think I may have gotten a little carried away.”

“I’m sure you did fine.”

Harry began to read aloud a catalogue of his sexual transgressions. The list of conquests was long.

Wes listened patiently until he could no longer resist the impulse to interrupt. “This sounds a bit too much like bragging to me, Harry. It’s not my place to judge you. But I need to point out that there’s a big difference between boasting and an honest self-examination. I don’t need to hear all the explicit details. We’re looking for patterns of character defects, such as the selfishness and lack of empathy that have characterized your relationships with women over the years?”



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Harry looked up with a smirk. “Sorry, Pastor. I know you’re right. But, as a man, you’ve got to admit they’re pretty good memories, and memories are about all I have left in this world.”

Wes sighed, prayed for patience, and held his tongue. “What else is on your list, Harry?”

“You said to write down some things about money.” Harry searched through the papers on the bed and selected one. “So, I bet you find this fascinating. This involves our friend Lou Kaminski. Back before I was charged, when my law practice was still thriving, there was a man here in town that died because a local urologist failed to read his test results. Because of the doctor’s negligence, the man didn’t receive treatment for his cancer until it had metastasized all over his body. He left behind a wife and three young girls. I represented the family in the lawsuit. In order to force a healthy settlement with the insurance company we needed a witness to testify the doctor was personally at fault, not just some health tech. Lou Kaminski was the office nurse at the time. I approached him, and he agreed to testify against the physician. That eventually led to

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Kaminski getting canned by the doctor. Just so you'll know, his getting fired was the main reason I felt I needed to make amends to him.”

“And because you hoped he would get a conscience and come forth about the night of the murders.”

“What can I say? But let me finish. This is when it really gets interesting. It seems the doctor, a sorry excuse for a urologist named O’Connell, was already about to lose his malpractice insurance because of past problems. So he approached me with a sweet deal to settle out of court using his own money. It was a private thing between the two of us. The insurance company would probably have settled the case for a pretty good chunk of change. But the doc offered to put in my pocket about a quarter million more than I could have gotten with my usual forty percent of the insurance payout if I agreed to a ridiculously small settlement for the family. It was a win/win for the doc and me. Of course the family came out on the short end of the stick. As best I can figure it now, our deal cost my

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client close to a million dollars. If it had ever come to light I would have lost my license.”

Wes’s eyes were still smarting. He rubbed them again with his fingertips. Harry’s story still sounded suspiciously more like locker room boasting than a confession of sin. Still, there was a lot of stuff here to work with. “Are you seeing a pattern, Harry? What character defects were at play here?”

“Selfishness?”

“You think? And how about dishonesty?”

Harry shrugged. “If you say so.”

Wes was perplexed. Was Harry making an honest effort, or not? Was he even capable of change? He knew what Roger would say, “The results are not up to you.” Nothing to do but plow ahead. “What else you got, Harry?”

Harry gathered several more slips of paper and related a number of additional events involving his behaviors as a lawyer, a husband and a father.

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Wes highlighted once again the underlying themes demonstrated by Harry's wrongs.

Harry stared at the floor. "You know, preacher, if there's no God, and when you die there's no afterlife, and you're just dead, then all of this is a pile of horse manure. I'm just wasting my time."

Harry's doubts were obviously real, but Wes was determined not to reinforce them. "Do you have something better to do with your time, Harry?"

Harry stretched out on the bed. "Maybe. I could lay here and remember all those good times I had with women and money."

"You could. And you would be thinking about all the jollies you've had at others' expense." Wes got up to leave. He took a couple of steps toward the door, stopped, turned back, and stared down into Harry's eyes. "But what if there is a God, and an afterlife, and a final accounting for your life? Think about it, Harry. What if?"

## Chapter 19

Sharon zipped in and out of morning traffic only to find herself stuck at a long light. When Craig Daniels had called, he told her just enough to cause her to drop everything and head for his office. Now her anticipation had risen to the point she felt she was going to pop out of her skin.

As promised, Daniels said he had run DNA samples found on the remains of Rebecca Noble and Paula Goldman through a database called the Combined DNA Index System. The search had produced a single hit out of more than nine million records.

This could be it, Becky. This could be it.

The light finally changed and a few moments later she pulled into the police station parking lot.

Daniels met her in the hall, led her back to his office, and took his customary chair behind the desk. “Before I share anything about our suspect, Sharon, I need for you to understand I’m talking to you

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in your role as a member of a victim's family who might be able to help with the case, not as a reporter for the N & O. I don't want to see any of this in the paper until I give you the OK. Does that work for you?"

It was a no brainer. She wasn't about to pass up a chance to find out who killed Becky. "Of course. I've waited a long time for this."

Good. I think you're going to find this more than a little interesting." He pointed to a box on the floor next to his chair. "These are files from the Sherriff's office in Orange County Florida concerning the investigation, arrest, and conviction of a felon in a sexual battery case down there. The subject's name is William Carl Reddy. I've confirmed he lived in the Raleigh area at the time of the murders. He was 26 then, and was employed at Freedom Mortgage Company."

A chill danced along the back of her neck. "And you're sure he's a match, that he's Becky's Killer?"

Daniels nodded. "I'm sure."

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A name! Finally a name. “Do you have a mug shot?”

Daniels retrieved the top file from the box, opened it, unclipped a picture, and passed it to her.

Her shaking hand made it difficult at first to focus on his features. She finally managed to steady it on Daniel’s desk. So this was his face, the one that eluded her in those nightmares all these years. He looked nothing like the monsters she’d imagined. Nothing remarkable. Except for the eyes. Cold and dark. Full of secrets. Terrible secrets. Can you see him, Becky? That’s him isn’t it!

“Are you OK, Sharon?”

She handed him back the mug shot, pulled out a tissue and wiped her eyes. “I’m fine. It’s just that I’ve waited a long time for this. What else can you tell me about him?”

Daniels briefly skimmed through the paperwork in the folder. “He’s originally from Northern Virginia, the only son of well-to-do parents. He met and married his wife here in Raleigh. Reddy quit his job rather suddenly in early March, right after the babysitter bodies

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were found, and moved to Orlando. After a couple of weeks of job hunting down there he was hired by one of the Disney parks as a ticket seller. Mrs. Reddy, who worked as an administrative secretary for the CEO of a construction equipment company during their time here, also went to Orlando. Five years later Mr. Reddy was arrested for sexual battery.

“The crime defined as rape in most states is included in what is called sexual battery in Florida.”

Daniels leaned back and folded his hands behind his head. “It seems Mr. Reddy was up to his old tricks. He lured a sixteen year-old babysitter to a house in Orlando where the family was thought to be away on vacation. When the owners of the home returned unexpectedly from their trip, they got a good look at him before he could run out the back door. The couple later picked Reddy out of a line-up, and the rape kit confirmed him to be the perp.”

The excitement building inside her suddenly transformed into anger. Another victim. How many more were out there? She wasn't sure she wanted to know.



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Daniels nodded – then cocked a brow. “Now for the bad news. I’m afraid getting him to trial is going to be a problem.”

Of course there had to be a catch. “I might have known. Let me guess. He’s still serving his sentence in Florida?”

“No. The news is much worse. Reddy knew he was in deep trouble. The girl was only sixteen. He was caught in the act, and multiple witnesses were able to identify him at the scene. I’m not sure why the state agreed to a deal, probably budget pressures, though maybe I’m projecting. Anyway, he pleaded guilty to felony sexual battery, and he was sentenced to fifteen years. He was released on parole over five years ago, after serving twelve.”

“So what’s the problem? Can’t you just go get him and bring him to Raleigh to face trial?”

Weariness overtook Daniel’s face. “There’s nothing I’d rather do. But we’ve got to find him first. For a while, Reddy adhered strictly to the conditions of his parole. He lived in a rundown apartment in a building housing several other sexual predators. He followed the rules for almost a year, then he up and disappeared.”

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“Disappeared?” Sharon’s heart dropped like a piece of lead. “This is crazy. How is it possible in this day and time? Didn’t he have an ankle bracelet with a GPS or something? Couldn’t they track his credit cards or social security number? He had to support himself somehow.”

“I’m sorry, Sharon. I wish I had better news. But he was a parolee, not under house arrest. He was not being monitored, and could come and go as he pleased. According to the files, Reddy’s parents died while he was still in prison. Their wills stipulated he would receive a large inheritance once he was released. The authorities down there think, once he got his hands on the money, it was possible for him to purchase a new identity. The detective I spoke with speculates, based on information received from someone who served time with Reddy, the fugitive went to Miami, flew out of the country, and is living the good life on some island somewhere.”

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“But can’t you track his money? He surely wouldn’t carry large sums of cash around with him. That would draw too much attention.”

“The folks down in Florida were unable to. But we can try again. I’m not very confident. This guy had a background in finance and probably knew how to transfer funds to an offshore account without leaving a paper trail.”

Sharon slumped in her chair. “So what do we do now? Just sit on our thumbs?”

The detective turned to another page in the file and studied it. “There are a couple of things we can try. It’s rare for a fugitive to have the discipline not to contact family or close friends. His wife was pregnant at the time of his arrest, and after Reddy went to prison, she and their baby girl moved back to this area. She divorced him soon after. According to the public records database she remarried about three years ago. Her name is now Donna Perkins. The daughter goes to college in Wilmington. It’s a long shot, but I

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think we need to see if either the ex or the daughter has heard from Mr. Reddy.”

Sharon jolted to attention. “Was the ‘we’ you just used rhetorical, or is there a chance I can join you in interviewing them?”

“Actually, I was thinking if either of them has heard from him, they’re not likely to tell anyone from law enforcement about it. But you, Sharon, might be able to generate enough sympathy as a family member of one of his victims, they might tell you something they wouldn’t tell me. Does it interest you?”

Goose bumps sprouted on Sharon’s arms. “You better believe it does. But won’t they be as reluctant to speak with a member of the press as to a police officer?”

“Perhaps. But better you than me. You’re a female and a family member. My conjecture is the wife has long ago gotten over any loyalty to a man who betrayed her by raping a sixteen-year-old girl. I would also guess if Reddy has contacted anybody it would be the daughter. But you’ll probably need to go through the mother to get to her. Anyhow, I think you’re the right one to try. And with the

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fiscal situation around here I don't have another choice, except to send a uniformed officer, and that would be a total waste of time."

"You have an address?"

Daniels copied the address listed on one of the documents to a notepad, tore off the page, and handed it to Sharon. "I appreciate this," he said. "With all the budget hits we've taken in this office, I've had to be creative."

Sharon got up to leave. "Oh. Before I forget. Did you by any chance compare the partial you found on one of the envelopes with Mr. Reddy's prints?"

"Not yet. Don't get your hopes up, though. My money says he's long gone, hasn't read your paper in years, and has no idea who you are. It's not likely those threats were sent you by Mr. Reddy. They probably came from some weirdo. There are a lot of them out there, you know."

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She started for the door. “I know you may be right. But somebody’s been threatening and chasing me, and I would rest a lot better at night if we knew where Reddy is.”

## Chapter 20

On his most recent visit, Wes had worked with Harry on completing steps four through seven of the 12 step program. In addition to selfishness and dishonesty, he had prompted Harry to identify deeply entrenched patterns of anger, fear and pride. Afterwards, Wes asked Harry to kneel beside him, and coached him in a prayer for forgiveness and the removal of his character defects.

As Wes returned to Harry's death row cell for another early morning session, he felt encouraged. Despite occasional lapses into skepticism, the man finally appeared to be getting serious about his spiritual work.

Now it was time to talk about Steps 8 and 9 and to go over a list of everyone Harry had harmed. Wes believed each of the steps was essential for a genuine spiritual transformation. Roger had made sure of that. But he couldn't help but feel that eight and nine were especially so. Making amends to the people in the church who had kicked him out had been about the hardest thing he had ever done. Yet these steps had been a turning point in his recovery. After he had completed them, he was able to grasp for the first time the inward serenity he had heard so much about from other recovering alcoholics.

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He shook Harry's hand warmly and took his usual seat. Despite the inmate's flaws, Wes was rapidly growing fond of the man. "So, how're you doing, Harry? Were you able to get your homework done?"

"Still having some trouble sleeping, but I'm OK, pastor, under the circumstances. Harry gathered up several pieces of paper and handed them to Wes.

Wes took a moment to skim over the names on the list and the descriptions of how Harry had harmed them. The first person on it was Harry's daughter Megan. Megan, according to Harry, had decided at an early age that she wanted nothing to do with her infamous father. The next two listed were Harry's exes. Beside each of the three names was a notation which indicated he had caused them great emotional stress and pain, due to his unfaithfulness, unkindness, and inconsiderate behavior.

Others on the list included Lou Kaminski, Kim Gingotta's parents and her husband, Anthony, Brooke Smith's parents, and Melanie Wright. Next to several of the names, Harry had written the words, "serious financial harm".

As he read, Wes nodded approval. "You've done a good job, Harry."

"I'm really trying, pastor. I hope you can see that. But what do I do now? I know the book says to make amends wherever possible, but, outside a couple of guys on the row, it's not going to be easy. I don't think it's likely the people on the list are going to come visit me.



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Most of them hate my guts, and, at this point, I don't really blame them. Anyhow, I've written letters to my daughter and ex-wives telling them I know I treated them badly, and apologizing for my actions."

"That's a good solution, especially for those who're still angry with you after all these years. They don't have to read it if they don't want to, but at least you'll have made a good faith effort to make your amends. Your attitudes and actions are your responsibility. You can't control the outcome with regard to theirs."

Harry pulled three envelopes from under his pillow and looked at Wes with imploring eyes. "I was wondering if you could mail the letters for me. I hate to keep imposing on you, but I don't think any of this should be the business of corrections personnel."

"You do know I'm corrections personnel too."

"Yeah, but I know you actually work for a different boss. You're not one of them. I don't care if you know what's in the letters."

It was a simple request, but did he dare breach protocol one more time?

"That's not all, pastor," Harry continued. "I have a much bigger favor to ask, and you might as well hear the rest of it."

Alarms went off in Wes's head. What now? "I'm listening."

"As you can see by the list, some of the harm I've done involved money. I've studied the chapters you told me to read and I think I

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know what I need to do. Within the limits of what's possible, I feel I need to make amends to certain people for the financial harm I've done. It so happens I have some money tucked away for a rainy day. I hope Kaminski coming forward will result in a stay of execution. But I know in my heart that's a long shot. The odds are I will never live to spend the money. Even if I were released tomorrow, the money rightfully belongs to those people, and not to me. The problem is it's very well hidden, and I can't very well go get it myself."

Harry lowered his voice. "So I need your help. I know this is a really big favor, but you're the only one I can think of that I can count on to do this. And frankly, pastor, I'm not completely sure I can trust you with the cash. But if a man can't trust his spiritual advisor, there isn't much point to anything, now is there."

"Am I hearing you right? You want me to retrieve money you've hidden for two decades and use it to make amends to the people on your list?"

Harry nodded.

"Can I ask how much money we're talking about?"

Harry glanced at the cell door. "It's the money I hid in the mountains," he whispered. "There's more than 2.5 million in cash up there. It's been sitting where I stashed it for a very long time, but I'm confident it's still there. Believe me, it's well hidden. Until Kaminski decided to share our little secret with the world, nobody else knew it existed."

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A voice within Wes was yelling “No.” But, there was another one telling him that this could be an opportunity to do something good, a way for Harry’s miserable life to make a positive difference. “So, let’s say, hypothetically, I decide to go along with this. What happens then?”

I’ll need to draw you a map and write down some directions. You’ll need to go alone. I don’t want to take a chance on someone else knowing about this and getting greedy. A lot of people know the money exists now, and folks have been killed for a lot less.”

A knot had once again found a home in Wes’s gut. “I’m not quite sure this falls within my job description. But, let’s say hypothetically I was willing to do it. How would you want me to distribute the money?”

“The largest piece of the pie should go to Melanie Wright, because, with the help of Kaminski and Dr. O’Connell, I cheated her and her family out of about a million bucks. I want to think some more about how much to give the others. There really isn’t enough money to pay for all the harm I’ve done.”

“Look, Harry. I want to help you. I really do. But, to be perfectly honest, I keep asking myself if all these favors you want from me are what they appear to be.”

Harry’s face turned pale. “I understand, pastor. But you’re the one who got me started on working these steps, trying to get me ready to meet God. I hope you can see I’m really trying here.”

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On the face of it, Harry's request was absurd. But, on the other hand, maybe he owed it to Harry's victims. If only there was some way to make sure it was the right thing to do. "What would you think of this, Harry? I'll mail your letters. And if I can, I'll talk with the woman you cheated in the lawsuit. I'd like to hear her side of things before making a decision. What was her name? Melody something?"

"Melanie Wright."

"Melanie. Got it. What if I go see her and express your apology? That way I get to hear her side of the story. If, afterwards, I'm satisfied this is the right thing... Anyhow, I'll let you know my decision."

Harry's shoulders slumped. "If that's the way it has to be, Pastor. But I hope you don't waste a lot of time. I want to know this has been taken care of before I face the executioner. I want to feel I've done everything I can before I go to meet my Maker."

A ripple of guilt brushed over Wes. Why did everything have to be so complicated?

## Chapter 21

As soon as he was back in his office, Wes pulled up the internet and searched for Melanie Wright. Within minutes he found the number and made the call. When he explained the purpose of his visit, she agreed to a 3:00 p.m. meeting at her home the following afternoon.

After hanging up, he replayed in his mind the latest death row conversation. He had to admit Harry had done a surprisingly good job with steps eight and nine. The man appeared to be sincere about making his amends. But Harry's latest 'favor' was unsettling. It involved an awful lot of money. The trip could be dangerous. Was it the right thing to do? How could he be sure?

He stared for a long time at a picture on the wall. It was a photograph he had taken three years earlier. In the foreground were grassy dunes. Through a broad opening in the mounds one could see a tan sandy beach and the white foam of the surf with two pelicans gliding a few feet above the sea. A grey ocean and towering storm clouds were in the distance. Ominous. Maybe even depressing. Yet awe inspiring at the same time. The picture made him feel close to God. And he needed to feel close to God right now.

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Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz. A vibration on the side of his thigh startled him out of his musings. It took a moment to dig the phone out of his pocket and read the caller ID.

*Sharon!* She *had* called after all. She'd promised to, but he'd seriously doubted she would. His somber mood instantly took a one eighty. "This is Wes."

"I hope I didn't interrupt anything," she began.

"No. No. This is a good time."

"Are you ready for this, Wes? I learned something that could change everything." Her voice was pitched higher and she was speaking faster than at the Deli. "We know who my sister's killer is. His name is Carl Reddy. Detective Daniels identified him through DNA."

"Really! That's great news."

"I think I'm in shock, Wes. I'm still trying to absorb it. I needed to share the news with someone who'd appreciate it, and I thought you might want to know for sure the murderer was not your guy."

Wes's heart was now doing a little dance in his chest. Sharon hardly knew him. But she'd chosen to share this news *with him*. It felt good. "I'm really happy for you, Sharon. You've probably been looking forward to this day for the past twenty years. That's amazing. What do you know about this Reddy guy?"

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“I can fill you in on the details later. The short version is – he definitely killed Becky, but the creep disappeared from the radar and hasn’t been seen since. As you can imagine, it’s not going to be easy to find him.”

“Whoa! That’s not good. So what now?”

“We do have one lead. His ex-wife moved back to this area after he was imprisoned. She divorced him and remarried. She now lives in one of those new upscale subdivisions off of 64 West going toward Jordan Lake. That’s one of the reasons I’m calling you. I was wondering if I can interest you in going with me to see the ex. It would be good to have another set of eyes and ears when I do the interview, especially someone with a good knowledge of the cases. And given some things that’ve happened since my latest stories, my gut tells me I shouldn’t do this alone. So, what do you think?”

Wes was ready to jump on it, but he told himself to stay cool. “It sounds interesting,” he said flatly. Then her last statement hit him. “Did you say some things have happened? What kind of things?”

“I’m talking about the threats I’ve received since my articles on the murders. There’s someone who doesn’t want me to keep digging. It’s possible it could be the real killer, although the police think he’s probably out of the country.”

“I’m so sorry. That sounds serious.” Wes’s ego felt like it had just sprung a leak. She hadn’t exactly called him because she thought she’d enjoy his company. She needed someone to go with her for protection.

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Still she had asked *him*. Not someone else. No way was he going to say no. If she really was in danger, he wanted to be there. “Of course I’ll go with you, Sharon. But you need to know I’d be pretty useless as a bodyguard.”

Sharon laughed. “No, no. I don’t expect anything like that to be necessary. My guess is the fact there will be two of us should be enough to discourage any problems.”

“So, when do you want to do this?”

“My appointment with the ex-wife is for 10:00 a.m. tomorrow. How does that work with your schedule?”

“I have something in the afternoon, but the morning’s free. Tell me where you’ll be around 9:30 and I’ll swing by and pick you up.”

“You sure? I could come by for you.”

“Not a problem. I’m one of those people who enjoys driving. How about I pick up a couple of coffees for us on the way?”

Sharon gave him her apartment address.

When his cell phone was back in his pocket, he glanced once more at the picture on the wall. This time he focused on the pelicans. For a moment he was one of them, floating happily just above the waves of life.



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## Chapter 22

As Wes drove his Toyota Highlander toward Sharon's apartment in North Raleigh he mentally calculated the time before the scheduled execution. Two weeks and two days. He was stunned. They were running out of time. He was looking forward to the day's adventure with Sharon, but shouldn't he be spending more time assisting Harry with his amends?

On the other hand, wasn't it more important to try to prove Harry's innocence, especially now that it was clear he didn't kill Sharon's sister? It was a longshot, but this Reddy guy might be the key to finding out the truth about Harry's case. When it came to convincing the courts of a man's innocence, an alibi witness was one thing. Catching the real killer was something else altogether.

He picked Sharon up shortly after nine. As they sipped their morning coffees and wound their way through neighborhood streets, Sharon shared with Wes what she knew about Reddy and his ex-wife, Donna Perkins. They turned south on a main road.

"Uh oh!" Sharon muttered.

Wes gave her a quick glance. "Something wrong?"

"It's probably nothing. I just spotted a blue Malibu in the side mirror. It's the same make and color of one I'm sure was following me

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a couple of weeks ago after I visited the site where my sister's body was found."

"You said you had received threats. Didn't know you were followed. Any idea who?"

"Not a clue. But I'd feel better if we could somehow make sure the car behind us is not the same one."

Wes located the Malibu in his rearview. "Not a problem. Hold on." He sped up, worked his way into the right lane, and took a quick right turn.

"What are you doing?" Sharon yelled as she gripped the arm rests and braced her feet against the floorboard.

The Blue Malibu made the same turn. With the SUV tires squealing, Wes took another right and put his foot down hard on the accelerator.

"Whoa! You do know an SUV is not designed for sharp corners don't you," Sharon shouted.

He heard her, but he was too busy to answer. Every ounce of his attention needed to be focused on his next moves. When they were half way down the block, the Malibu again appeared in the rearview mirror. Seconds later, Wes negotiated another right and raced toward the intersection. Cross traffic ahead. Brakes. Tires screeched as the SUV jerked to a stop.

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By the time the traffic cleared, and Wes was pulling out, the Malibu was closing in. He watched as it forced itself back into a lane two cars behind his SUV.

Wes turned to her with a grin. "I guess that settles it. My money says it's the same car that followed you last time."

"Who are you?" Sharon shrieked. "I don't know whether to be more scared of whoever is chasing us, or of your driving. I wasn't exactly expecting such a wild ride from a...a...man of God."

Wes laughed, "Never underestimate a man with a mission. Now that we know he's following us, the big question is what to do about it."

Sharon's looked at him with eyes as round as DVDs. "Last time I called 911, and when he saw the cops coming to my rescue, he vamoosed."

Wes slowed his speed and moved into the right lane. "Were they able to track him down afterward?"

"There wasn't enough information. There are a lot of blue Malibus around here."

Wes checked the mirror. This one was still back there. "We need to know who's driving that car. Is it someone connected to the case or some stalker with a thing for pretty reporters?"

"And how are we going to do that?"

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“Just hold on.” Wes sped up again and turned right.

“Oh, no! Not this again.”

“Just trust me. I’ve got a plan.”

“What kind of plan?”

“Just hang on. I’ve got this.”

Once again the Malibu rounded the corner behind them. Wes turned at the next block, floored the accelerator, and was a full block ahead of the car when he turned right again. Spotting a driveway on the right lined by a large row of azaleas protruding and blocking about half of the sidewalk, Wes slammed on his brakes and came to a stop. He put the gear in reverse, backed skillfully into the driveway and parked. No way the Malibu driver would see them here.

“Now what,” Sharon gulped.

“Now we wait.”

A few seconds later, the Malibu raced past, heading toward the corner. Wes pulled out and sped to close the gap. As the Malibu came to a halt at the busy intersection, he caught up.

He threw the gear into park, unhooked his seatbelt, and jumped out of the car. “You get the license plate. I’ll try to see who’s in the car.”

He ran down the middle of the street toward the driver’s side of the Malibu attempting to look through the darkly tinted window glass.

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If only he could see his face. The man stepped on the gas and forced his car into heavy traffic. Horns blared. Cars screeched to a stop as the Malibu successfully merged. The clang and crunch of a rear-end collision followed. As the Malibu sped away, the two cars involved in the accident came to rest in the middle of the intersection.

Wes raced, panting and gasping, back to his SUV and jumped back into his seat. "Did you get the plate number?"

"Yes. Did you see who was in the car?"

He sucked air into his lungs and refastened his seat belt. "Not really. I think I must have spooked him. I just needed a couple of more seconds to get closer. I'm sure he's long gone for now. The driver appeared to be a white male, maybe middle aged, maybe older. He was wearing a baseball cap and shades. That's about all I can tell you, except he was the only one I could see in the car. Any chance you can get your detective friend to run the number and see who it belongs to?"

She took out her phone. "I'll try to call him now."

Wes cautiously pulled past the accident and back into traffic. He was soon driving west on the I-440 Outer Loop. Sharon reached detective Daniels and filled him in. Daniels promised to call back as soon as he could identify the owner of the plate. After she hung up the two of them rode without speaking for several minutes.

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Wes was growing more uncomfortable by the moment. What was she thinking?

Sharon finally ended the silence. "Did it ever occur to you, you could be killed doing what you did back there? Whoever it is, he probably was armed. It's a wonder he didn't shoot you."

Her tone reminded him of his mother's voice. He knew she was right. Whatever possessed him to do it? Was he trying to impress her? Was he more depressed than he had realized and manifesting some kind of death wish? He struggled to control the trembling in his hands by firmly gripping the steering wheel. "I guess I hadn't considered all the possibilities."

"You think?"

They took the beltline expressway around the city, traveled south a few miles, and headed west toward Jordan Lake. As they proceeded in the direction of Donna Perkins' home, Craig Daniels called back.

Sharon put him on speaker. "I'm afraid I have bad news about the license plate. It belongs to an eighty-three-year-old woman who reported it stolen two days ago. She wasn't sure how long she'd been driving without it. In the meantime we're looking for the Malibu, but it's a pretty good bet he's already swapped the plate out, especially since he knows you got a good look at it."

"Thanks," Sharon said. "Maybe we'll get lucky."

"Maybe, but I'm not holding my breath." Daniels responded.

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After the call – silence. Several minutes elapsed before Wes broke the ice. “Now I’m feeling bad about what happened back there. I hope I haven’t made your situation more precarious by acting like a cowboy.”

“I’m just glad you didn’t get hurt. By the way, where did you learn those driving moves?”

Her voice conveyed concern, not anger. He breathed a sigh of relief. “My dad and I were big NASCAR fans when I was growing up. I dreamed of being the next Dale Earnhardt. After I got a license and car of my own, let’s just say I used to practice some racing maneuvers. It got me ticketed for reckless driving when I was eighteen, and I lost my license for a year. It was soon afterwards God called me to the ministry. You might say God put an end to my NASCAR career.”

“Why Reverend Barrett,” Sharon teased in her best southern belle impersonation, “I do declare. A NASCAR driver. My, my, you do surprise me.”

They looked at each other and broke into laughter.

Wes turned off of US 64 into a subdivision. “So how do you want to work this?”

“Let me take the lead. Otherwise, be yourself. You have a kind manner and it puts people at ease. Remember, she may not know anything herself, but her daughter might. The daughter is away at college, so I don’t expect her to be here today, but we’ll want to talk



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with her next if we can. Reddy may be a fugitive, but he's a father, and there's a fairly good chance he's made contact with his daughter at some point. So we need the mother to like us and trust us if we are going to get access to her. In addition, while I'm talking with Mrs. Perkins, I need for you to use your powers of observation. Make sure I don't miss anything. Remember, if she does know something about her ex-husband's whereabouts she'll probably be too afraid to tell us. So help me assess when she might be lying, and look for any details which might help us locate Reddy."

"Anything else?"

"Only one. After our visit can I drive us home?"

"Not a chance."

## Chapter 23

Sharon had barely been able to sleep the night before just thinking about the interview with Mrs. Perkins. This was the wife of the monster who had murdered Becky. Had the woman been suspicious of him back then? Or did she not have a clue? When she found out about the girl down in Florida, was she angry? Or afraid? Or both? And then there were the truly important questions. Had she heard from him? Did she know where he was?

By the time Wes had driven her through the gate of a community of upscale homes located on spacious yards sheltered by tall pines, Sharon had safely stored, on a shelf in her mind, her anxieties about the morning's adventure with the Malibu. It was time to focus. This might turn out to be nothing. Or it could change everything.

An immaculately groomed Donna Perkins answered the door. After brief introductions, she led them through a cathedral style entranceway and into a parlor.

The room reminded Sharon of a featured scene in Southern Living magazine. Everything about the place smelled of money. "You have a beautiful home, Mrs. Perkins."

"Back when I was a single mom I never dreamed I would ever have a place this nice. Even when Richard and I first looked at it I

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didn't think there was any way we could afford it, but he assured me it wasn't a problem."

"Will your husband be joining us this morning?" Sharon asked.

"No. This is one of his days to play golf." Despite her pleasant smile, the woman's eyes appeared troubled.

"So what does your husband do when he's not playing golf?"

"He's an investor, and a good one. We're fortunate. He's done well in the stock market. He hasn't been quite as lucky with his venture capital business, but he hasn't done badly. He's one of the smartest men you'll ever meet."

"I'm sorry we missed him." Wes responded.

Mrs. Perkins glanced toward Wes, then back at Sharon. "Actually, I sort of planned it this way. If I had thought he would be here today I would never have agreed to meet with you. You said you had information about my ex-husband, Carl Reddy. Richard and I never talk about him. I would rather he didn't hear what you had to say. It's better that way."

Sharon nodded. "I understand. I can see how it could make everyone uncomfortable."

The smile suddenly evaporated from Mrs. Perkins face. "I don't know what this is about, Ms. Noble, but I hope you aren't going to put anything in your paper about it. I know Richard would be very upset

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if you said anything about us. Richard's very worried about appearances. He says a good reputation can make you money, and a bad one can make you poor. So what's this information about my ex that's so important you had to talk about it with me in person?"

Sharon saw no reason to beat around the bush. "Were you aware Carl Reddy disappeared while he was still on parole and the Florida authorities don't have any idea where he went?"

Mrs. Perkins adjusted her glasses with a shaky hand. "I got a call from them shortly after they lost track of him asking me if I knew where he was."

"And did you?"

"Of course not. I divorced him years ago and moved back to Raleigh. How would I know what happened to him?"

Her pupils were darting back and forth. Was she lying? Or was it just nerves? "In all the time since, have you heard anything at all from him?"

"Not a word."

"Do you think your daughter has heard from him?" Wes asked. "I would think he would have at least gotten in touch with her?"

"You have to understand she was only an infant when he went to prison. She has no memory of him. She doesn't even remember what he looked like. After the divorce I got rid of all the pictures I had of

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him. If she ran into him on the street today she wouldn't have any idea who he was. And I would like to keep it that way." Mrs. Perkins seemed agitated. The daughter was obviously a sensitive subject. "I think it would be difficult for everyone if Carl Reddy came back into our lives at this point. As far as he's concerned, he chose not to have any contact with her while he was in prison, so it's no surprise to me he hasn't been in touch since."

Sharon decided to push a little harder. "You seem to still have a lot of anger toward Mr. Reddy. It must've hurt you terribly to find out he'd raped that girl down in Orlando."

Mrs. Perkins stiffened. "Actually, I've never been angry with him. I don't think he did any of those terrible things. He told me he was framed and I believed him. The police questioned him until he broke. He only agreed to a plea because he was afraid to go to trial and face the likelihood he would spend the rest of his life in prison. He said fifteen years wasn't a bad deal since he had no way to prove his innocence and the police had manufactured a lot of evidence against him."

"And you believed him?" Wes asked.

A tear trickled down her cheek. "It may sound naïve to you, chaplain, but I knew him. I was in love with him. He was the father of my child and I knew in my heart he could never have done something like that. If I seem angry, it's not because I blame him for what happened. I'm angry at a justice system that ruined what we had."

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“But if you believed him,” Sharon interrupted, “and you thought he was innocent, why didn’t you wait for him instead of divorcing him.”

“I wanted to. I waited for four years. But he could have been in prison for fifteen.” Mrs. Perkins’s make-up could not hide the deep flush on her cheeks. “Besides, the divorce wasn’t my idea. It was his. In fact he insisted. It was also at his encouragement I left Orlando and came back here. He told me to leave, not look back, and to make a good life for our daughter. I told him I would stand by him. But he was very insistent. He didn’t want her growing up under the cloud of people thinking her father was guilty of terrible things. So that’s what I’ve tried to do. I try not to look back and think about what might have been. And now I’m happily married to Richard. Things have a way of working out.”

The woman was no longer making eye contact. She was hiding something. Sharon was sure of it. “I hope you’re right about things working out, although I’ve learned they don’t always work out the way we expect. Were you aware they found Carl Reddy’s DNA in the semen found on the girl in Orlando?”

Mrs. Perkins stared at the floor with unmistakable displeasure. “Sure, I heard about it. It was phony evidence. I’ll admit it concerned me at first, so I asked Carl how it got there. He said DNA was not reliable, and if somehow it did belong to him, the police must have planted it. It does happen you know. It’s been proven a lot of police decide someone’s guilty and then doctor the evidence.” With each

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statement her voice edged upward. “I don’t mean to be impolite, but can we stop talking about what happened back then? I would appreciate it if you would come right out and tell me why you’re here.”

“I promise I will in a moment. Are you aware DNA analysis has come a long way in recent years and has been used to solve many older crimes?”

“Of course, Ms. Noble,” she responded with obvious irritation. “I watch CSI. I also know DNA is now responsible for showing some people convicted of crimes to have been innocent.”

“You’re right. But I’m afraid in the case of your ex-husband that’s not going to be the case. Mrs. Perkins, what I have to tell you today is going to be difficult to hear. Since you have believed in your ex-husband’s innocence all these years, I’m sorry to be the bearer of troubling news.”

Blood appeared to drain from the woman’s face.

“I’m afraid your first husband, Michael Carl Reddy, was not only guilty of the crime for which he was convicted, he is also guilty of raping and murdering at least two seventeen-year-old girls in Raleigh more than twenty years ago. Mr. Reddy’s DNA was entered into a national database while he was incarcerated. It matches DNA taken from the bodies of the two girls. One of them was my sister, Rebecca. The Raleigh police got the results back last week. I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but the police really do need to find him before he

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hurts someone else. So if you know anything that will help in finding him, please tell us.”

Donna Perkins began to tremble. “I don’t believe you. This is like Florida all over again. I need you to leave now. You are not welcome in my home anymore.”

“Mrs. Perkins,” Wes said, “Sharon means no harm to you or your family. She’s waited a long time to find out who killed her sister, and she needs justice for her sister’s death. I know you don’t want to believe a man you used to love could do such a thing, but everyone is capable of doing evil things. Right now there’s a man on death row about to be executed for killing two females. There’s strong reason to believe he didn’t kill either of them, and it’s entirely possible Mr. Reddy killed one or both of them. Please help us find him before an innocent man dies.”

She shook her head angrily and stood. “Enough! Get out now. I’m not going to ask you again.”

“Of course,” Sharon conceded, as she and Wes arose and allowed the woman to lead them to the front door. “We didn’t mean to upset you.” Sharon took out her business card. “Take this and call me if you think of anything that would help us.”

Mrs. Perkins refused. “The only thing that’ll help me right now is for you to leave and not come back.” She herded them through the door and slammed it.



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When they were back in the car and pulling out of the drive, Wes turned and teased, "I thought that went well, didn't you?"

"Actually, it may have gone better than it seemed. She knows something. I'm pretty sure she's had contact with him and doesn't want her husband to know. And it's pretty obvious she still has a thing for her ex."

Wes steered his SUV in the direction of the community's exit. "I don't know whether this means anything or not, I did notice one thing while the two of you were talking. There was a large portrait over the fireplace in the next room. I'm fairly sure it was Mr. and Mrs. Perkins and her daughter. They were standing on a wooden deck at the beach. It probably doesn't mean anything. But they might have a beach home. I was thinking a vacant house would make a nice place to hide."

"Nothing very unusual around here about rich people owning a place at the beach, but we don't have much else at the moment, so it's worth checking.

## Chapter 24

At five minutes after 3:00 p.m. Wes pulled into Melanie Anderson's fractured driveway in the Raleigh working class suburb of Garner. The contrast between the Perkins' home and this one was immediately striking. This small brick sixties ranch house was crowded onto a tiny lot of weed infested Bermuda grass. Scraggly shrubs were on either side of a three-step-high uncovered concrete porch.

The door opened before Wes could knock. A woman in a faded checkered house dress identified herself as Melanie and greeted him with a warm friendly smile, then invited him into a small, musty living room. Coupons, neatly organized into small stacks, covered the coffee table. She pointed to a faded couch, invited Wes to be seated, and settled herself into a rocking chair.

"Please excuse my mess. I tried to pick up this morning, but you can't really tell. I'd offer you a drink, but all I have in the house right now is water. Would you like a glass?"

"I'm fine." Wes noticed three photographs on a plant holder near the window and pointed to them. "Is that your family?"

"Those are my babies. I've got three daughters. My oldest and her children are on the left. They live in Kentucky. My second oldest lives about five miles from here. She's a single mom and works as a

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waitress. I keep her three-year-old boy when she works. That's them in the middle. My youngest is twenty-six going on fifteen. That's her on the right before she got her tattoos. I tell folks she's the reason I've got all these gray hairs. She lives with me. Lord knows I can't afford for her to. I can't even afford to live here myself. All I have is my first husband's eight-hundred-dollar-a-month railroad pension to live on. If it weren't for the coupons in the papers my neighbors give me, I don't think I'd ever have food in the house.

"You must be a mighty good manager to get by the way you do."

Her face brightened. "I guess I never thought of it that way."

On the wall near the planter stand Wes spied another picture, a black and white photo of a man standing on a fishing pier. "And is that...?"

"That's Ernie. I guess Mr. Harrison told you what happened. I often think about how my life would've been if that Doctor O'Connell had found the cancer when he was 'posed to. Ernie was my high school sweetheart, my best friend, and the daddy of my children. A day don't go by I don't think about him and miss him. It's been twenty-two years since he passed, and it's still just like yesterday.

Wes wasn't sure where the conversation was going, but he was in no hurry. He was more than willing to listen as long as it took. He just needed to figure out what he was supposed to do about Harry's latest request. And he believed in his heart this was the place to do it.

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“You’ve had a tough life. I’m sure it was not easy to raise those kids on your own.”

“I did the best I could. Sometimes, it’s not enough.”

For almost an hour Wes listened to Melanie’s accounts of the struggles she had faced over the years. Once her self-story pump was primed the words just poured out. There was something about this woman he liked. In many ways her life was a profile in courage. She was poor, she knew loss and pain, but she was no victim. And she showed no self-pity. She was a survivor.

Wes finally decided to interrupt her personal stories. “If it’s OK with you, I want to talk to you about something.”

“Sure. Lord knows I’ve talked long enough.”

“Do you remember when you decided to sue Dr. O’Connell?”

“Uh huh. It was while Ernie was still alive, maybe three months before he died. The cancer doctor told us he might have been able to save him if we’d gotten the results from Dr. O’Connell when we were supposed to. We had a lot of medical bills piling up at the time, and one day we saw Mr. Harrison’s ad on TV. Ernie urged me to go see him, and I did. Mr. Harrison got hold of some medical records from Dr. O’Connell’s office and from the laboratory where they tested Ernie’s biopsy. Mr. Harrison told us we had a good case. He also said Dr. O’Connell was a bad doctor and somebody needed to stop him from practicing medicine.”

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“If you don’t mind me asking, how much did Mr. Harrison get for you when he sued Dr. O’Connell?”

“It’s all long gone now,” she answered matter-of-factly. “As best I remember it was \$105,000. When I deposited the check, it was the most money our account had ever seen, before or after. It were a lot of money. But it didn’t last long. We had a pile of doctor and hospital bills, especially from the last month of Ernie’s life. We lived on some of it for a while, but it didn’t last much more than a year. Still, it were a lot of money and I was grateful for it.”

Widowed and broke. How different her life might have been. She lived hand to mouth all these years, had nothing, and suspected nothing. “Did you ever think it should have been a lot more?”

“I guess I hoped so. You never seem to have enough money. I could have used more, but Mr. Harrison told me it was the best I could do.”

Feelings of anger and gratitude warred within Wes. How could Harry have been so heartless? Talk about predator behavior. At least the man wanted to try to right the wrong. “Mrs. Wright, I hate to tell you this, but I’m afraid Mr. Harrison wasn’t truthful with you. Now that he’s facing execution for his crimes he’s trying to set his house in order. He asked me to come here today to apologize because he should have gotten you more money and he didn’t.”

She appeared stunned. “How much more?”

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“I don’t know exactly, but a lot more. What I need for you to understand is, he and Dr. O’Connell cheated you out of the rest of what you were supposed to get. They made a private deal. Mr. Harrison got a lot more money than you did, and the doc saved himself from losing his malpractice insurance. Now Mr. Harrison deeply regrets causing you this harm, and apologizes for what he’s done. He happens to have considerable savings tucked away, and he wants to make things right.”

Melanie’s eyes grew large. “You mean I could have had a lot more money to live on all these years?”

“I don’t know how long it would have lasted you.” Wes cautioned himself to proceed carefully. Best not to estimate an amount. “That would have depended on how you managed it. But you’re a good manager. It could have lasted a long time.”

“I just can’t believe that nice Mr. Harrison would do such a thing. But then, I had a hard time believing he was a murderer too.”

“Mr. Harrison can’t undo the harm he’s done to you. But he’s working on a plan to try to make it up to you somehow. I can’t tell you more about it now, but, if all goes well, I’ll be back in touch. Soon.”

## Chapter 25

Wes showed up at Harry's cell shortly after the prisoners returned from breakfast.

“So where is this place your money's been hiding all these years?”

Harry responded with a big toothy grin and pulled what looked like a napkin from the pages of his AA book and handed it to Wes. “I've drawn you a map.”

Wes spread it on the table and Harry proceeded to walk him through the directions.

After getting answers to a couple of questions about the roads, Wes put his finger on the “x” where Harry said the money was hidden. “What kind of place is this?”

“It's a small abandoned farm on the side of a mountain in Yancey County. I'm sure by now the forest and undergrowth have mostly taken over. The house was falling down two decades ago, so,

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I doubt there's anything other than vine-covered rubble now. The barn was a much newer building. It should still be in fairly good shape.”

All morning long, Wes had been feeling good about the decision to go. Suddenly he wasn't so sure. “So who owns this place? I hope it's you, because I'm not exactly fond of the idea of trespassing on someone else's property, especially in the mountains of North Carolina.”

Another oversized grin spread across Harry's face. “Not to worry, pastor. Back when I was a prosecutor in Asheville, the land was confiscated by the state when the owner was arrested for growing a major marijuana crop. I learned about it through a friend. I thought the farm might be a good investment or a nice spot for a vacation home someday, but, because of its history and my position, I didn't want anyone to know I was buying it. My first wife and I weren't getting along too well at the time, so I didn't tell her about it. My daddy helped me set up a private corporation for the purpose of purchasing the property from the state. The corporation was set



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up to pay taxes on it all these years. It was all very legal. I'm sure, with a little detective work, a person who knew what he was doing could trace it back to me. But nobody has, as far as I know, not even my ex-wives. Anyhow, when I needed to stash my cash in a safe place the farm turned out to be a perfect choice. Of course, a couple of the locals knew the farm belonged to me. They sort of kept an eye on it for me."

Satisfied, Wes folded the map and carefully tucked it into his shirt pocket. "It looks straightforward enough. I don't think I'll have any problem finding the farm. But what do I do after I get there?"

Harry picked up his Bible this time and pulled out a second map. "This one is of the property." He showed Wes where the money was hidden, and explained how to get to it. "There are two duffle bags of cash. They'll be heavy and you won't be able to park very close, so it won't be easy."

Wes put the napkin in the pocket with the other one. "Anything else I need to know?"

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Harry shook his head. “Not about the trip. I know you’re doing a lot for me, pastor, but I’ve been thinking about a couple of the other amends I want to make before.... I’m hoping you’ll go see Kim Gingotta’s husband for me. I think he still lives in Raleigh and teaches engineering at State. I’ve never met the guy. All I know is what Kim told me about him. Don’t be surprised if you don’t get a friendly reception.”

Really? Another favor? Wes lowered his head into his hands. Helping Harry was turning into a full time job. He had other inmates to attend to. Of course they weren’t about to be put to death. So how could he not do it? These were probably the most important amends on Harry’s list, and time was running out. “OK, Harry. Go on.”

“If you’re able to talk with him, I want you to make it clear I’m not apologizing for killing his wife. I’m not going to ask forgiveness for something I didn’t do. But, if I’m to do these amends right, I do need to apologize to him for having the affair. I also want you to go see Brooke’s parents. Again, I don’t want them to think I’m apologizing for Brooke’s murder. But I want you to tell them

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I'm very sorry for the way I took advantage of their daughter. I know, when they found I was having sex with her, it must have hurt them really bad. If some older guy had seduced my daughter..."

Wes took a moment to think. "I'm trying to figure how I'm going to work all of this into my already busy schedule. I don't see how I can go to the mountains before Saturday. But maybe I can try to get an appointment with either Gingotta or Brooke's parents in the next couple of days."

"Not a good idea to go get the money on a Saturday, pastor. What're you going to do with it when you get back? You have no safe place to put it until the banks open on Monday morning."

Wes hadn't thought of that. It was way too much money to sit on for an extra twenty four hours. "I suppose I could wait and go up Sunday afternoon. I'd have the money in my possession a day less that way. About how long do you think the trip will take?"

"If you drive around six miles over the speed limit it'll take you a good five hours one way. So the round trip should take about ten hours. If you go up on Sunday afternoon, you'll only have to

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keep it safe from late Sunday night until the banks open on Monday.”

“You know all of this is making me nervous, Harry.”

“Nervous? How would you like being faced with the journey planned for me?”

“Sorry, Harry. I know time is running short. If I can get appointments with Gingotta or Brooke’s parents this week I will.”

“While we’re on it, pastor, why don’t you invite that reporter friend of yours to go along with you on all the amends? It could help my chances with the governor on execution night if the public knows I’m trying to make things right with people.”

It had already occurred to Wes to do just that, but he’d dismissed it. He assumed Harry would want his amends to be kept confidential. But Harry had a good point about the governor. One thing was for certain. Having her along would alleviate a whole heap of his own discomfort when it came to making amends to people

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who despised Harry. “And you’re OK with her knowing about the money?”

“Why not? Just don’t let her know about it until it’s safely in your bank.”

“I’ll see what she says. As for the trip to the mountains, I’ll plan to go on Sunday, and maybe we can make those monetary amends next week.”

“I really appreciate what you’re doing, pastor. It’ll give me some peace of mind if you can get things done sooner rather than later, especially since I might not be around later.”

As Wes left the cell he brushed against George Waters standing at the rail looking down at the death row day room. “Hello Mr. Waters, I hope you’re having a blessed day.”

The guard turned in Wes’s direction. “You think you’re pretty clever, don’t you chaplain? But, I’m not buying what you’re selling.”

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Wes was temporarily speechless. “Sorry to hear you feel that way. I’m not sure where you’re coming from, but maybe we can talk about it some time.”

“That’ll be a cold day in hell.” Waters responded. Wes shrugged his shoulders, bounded down the stairs, crossed the day room and exited the cellblock.

What in the world was stuck in his craw? Somebody was in a bad mood.

## Chapter 26

On Wednesday morning, one week and five days before Harry's scheduled execution, Wes was sitting at his computer, exploring maps of the North Carolina Mountains when Sharon called.

"I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

What she didn't know was that for the last hour he had been trying to work up the nerve to call her. "This is actually a happy coincidence. I wanted to ask you about something, but why don't you go first?"

"OK! I'll make this short and sweet. I was hoping you might be willing to make a little trip with me.

The image of a blue Malibu popped into his head. He still couldn't believe how stupid he had been the last time. "What kind of trip?"

"To see Reddy's daughter."

"Really? You've talked with her?"

"I have. I tracked her down last night, and she agreed to see me later today. At this point she has no idea why. I told her who I am, and that I'm working on a story, and I thought she could help me. She didn't even ask what kind of story, just seemed excited someone from

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a newspaper called little old her. Aren't naïve youth refreshing? So what do you say?"

"That's great, Sharon, but what time are we talking about?" He clicked on his online calendar and began to mentally try to rearrange some things. It wasn't going to be easy, unless he put off the amends he was planning to make for Harry. And that didn't feel right.

"Actually we can't see her until she gets out of class around five. She said to meet her at her place about five-thirty. We will need a little over two hours to get to Wilmington. And guess where she's living?"

"At the family beach house?"

"Bingo! She and a roommate."

A two hour trip. That made it even more complicated. Still, there had to be a way. He studied his schedule again. "It means I'll have to cancel a meeting with the head chaplain, but that's doable. I guess I can put off a couple of inmate visits until tomorrow. I also agreed to run an errand for Harry, but I think there's time to do that before the trip." Wes hesitated; then decided to take the plunge. "I had actually thought about asking you to join me for that. That's why I was planning to call you. What would you say to grabbing some lunch at the Farmer's Market Restaurant today, and then make a quick run up Centennial Boulevard to see Kim Gingotta's husband in the Engineering Department at State. There should be plenty of time for that before we have to leave for Wilmington. I thought maybe an



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interview with him would fit right in with your “ripple effect” feature, and you get to be present to see me make apologies on behalf of Harrison.”

“You don’t mean Harrison wants you to apologize to the man for killing his wife, do you?”

“No. No. Harry still says he didn’t do it. But he wants to make amends for the affair and what it did to their marriage. Even though Harry says he didn’t kill her, I think he still feels some responsibility for her death. After all, if they had not been meeting secretly at the hotel that night, Kim Gingotta might still be married to her husband and working at the hospital taking care of newborn babies.”

“What time is your appointment?”

“Well, he hasn’t exactly agreed. I doubt if I asked that he’d say yes. I was tempted to reach him just to get a “no” answer, because I’m not looking forward to the conversation. Awkward, if you know what I mean. But then I remembered how important this is to Harry and did a little research. Dr. Anthony Gingotta is a full professor in the school of Mechanical Engineering. His office is in one of the newer buildings on the NC State Centennial Campus. Every professor is required to have open hours when students can drop by and discuss questions and problems. His times are from at 1:30 till 3:30 Wednesdays. So I thought we would drop in on him today. What do you think?” Wes held his breath.

“I’m in. I can be at the restaurant by 12:15.”

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“Perfect.”

## Chapter 27

Wes was waiting outside the restaurant when Sharon arrived. He loved this place. The Farmer's Market was noted for traditional home cooking made from fresh vegetables and meats from local area farms. The atmosphere was pure country. The servers were noted for interspersing the words "honey" and "sugar" in their interactions with customers. The place had served as a favorite lunch hangout for politicians, lobbyists, and bureaucrats for decades. By the looks of things, today was no exception.

Sharon ordered a vegetable plate and Wes a pulled pork sandwich. While they were eating, Sharon briefed him on what she'd found out so far about Reddy's daughter.

"Her name is Melissa Janice Reddy. Everyone calls her Jan. She's nearing the end of her freshman year at UNC Wilmington, and intends to major in marine biology. She and her housemate live at the Perkins' oceanfront home at Wrightsville Beach. The other girl pays rent to Jan's stepfather. I understand Jan's a bit of a party girl, but most freshmen girls are. You should've known me when I was a freshman in Chapel Hill. On second thought, since you're a minister, maybe not."

"I can't imagine you being very wild. You're so, what shall I call it.... goal oriented." Wes suddenly realized Sharon was staring at something over his shoulder.

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“Don’t look now,” she leaned forward and whispered. “But the Governor and the Speaker of the House just walked in with a couple of state troopers.”

Wes turned slowly around and watched as the two officials were led to a reserved table while the patrolmen took seats a few feet away. The Governor thanked the hostess, but neither of the VIPs sat down. As if they had done it a thousand times before, each of the politicians set out in different directions to work the dining room. Wes and Sharon’s table happened to be the first one the Governor approached. She smiled and reached out her hand to Sharon.

“I’m Debby Sanders. Have we had the pleasure of meeting before?”

“I’m Sharon Noble of the News and Observer. I don’t usually cover politics, but I’ve been to a couple of your press conferences before.”

“Of course. Of course. I’ve read many of your stories. It’s an honor to see you again.” She turned to Wes and stuck out her hand. “And who might this young man be?”

Wes wiped some barbeque sauce off of his fingers and returned the handshake. Not exactly the first impression he would like to have made. “I’m Wesley Barrett, a chaplain with the Department of Corrections.”

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“Oh, yes. Rev. Barrett, you came highly recommended from your bishop. I hope things are going well for you at Central so far.”

Wes chose his next words carefully. “As the bishop warned me, it’s a challenging ministry. But it has its rewards.”

“Well it’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person. I wish you well. If there’s anything I can do for you, let me know.” Governor Sanders began to move toward a group of eight sitting at a nearby table.

“There might be something,” Wes said. The moment it popped out of his mouth, he wondered if he would live to regret his boldness.

The Governor hesitated and returned. “And what might that be, Rev. Barrett?” Her tone was slightly less friendly now.

“I’ve spent a lot of time with Mr. Harry Harrison who’s scheduled to be executed a week from next Monday. You may know there is some new evidence which indicates he may be innocent. A new witness has come forward in his case, and there’s also new evidence in the babysitter murders that happened about the same time. I hope you’ll consider staying the execution, at least until we can be sure the state is not executing an innocent man.”

The governor rotated in Sharon’s direction. “And what do you think, Ms. Noble? Do you think Mr. Harrison is innocent?”

“I don’t know. I can tell you this – I know how the victims feel. My sister was one of the babysitters who were murdered twenty years

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ago. Her killer is still out there. I want justice for my sister, and I'm sure the families of the women Harrison murdered want the same thing for them. But, I agree with Rev. Barrett. The state needs to be sure it's executing the right man."

Governor Sanders edged away from the table. "No one would want an innocent man to die, least of all, me. But he was convicted by a jury of his peers. We have a good court system. I'm sure the higher courts will consider all the new evidence. It's been my policy, in cases like this, not to second guess their decisions. But I'll ask one of my staff to look into it." She waved a hand. "I hope you both have a pleasant day."

The Governor turned and walked toward the next table, smiled, and said, "Hi, I'm Debby Sanders."

Sharon looked at Wes, leaned toward him, and spoke softly. "Let me translate that into non-political speak. What she was trying to say was, 'In your dreams.' If Harrison didn't do it, only the courts can save him now."

"I don't know. Harry's lawyer thinks she might be Harry's best bet. He says she's a good woman at heart, though he also said she's one who knows how to play the political game with the best of them."

"Maybe. But what else is he going to say at this point? I've observed this town a lot of years now. When a governor says she's going to assign a staff person to look into something, it usually means

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she wants to make it go away so she never again has to get close enough to be tainted by it.”

Wes looked at his watch. “We probably need to get going. We’ve got a full afternoon ahead of us. You ready to go surprise Dr. Gingotta?”

“It should be interesting.

## Chapter 28

Professor Anthony Gingotta's office was on the third floor. Wes was a bit winded after climbing three flights of stairs, but pretended to breathe normally, since the climb appeared not to have bothered Sharon. They proceeded down a hall to an open door on the left that had Gingotta's name listed next to it. The professor, his head buried in a scholarly journal, was sitting behind a desk containing a messy array of folders and papers.

Anthony Gingotta appeared to be in his mid-fifties. The shiny bald crown of his head was framed with gray hair falling below his ears. Wes knocked twice. "Professor Gingotta, could we have a moment of your time?"

Gingotta appeared startled, but quickly recovered. "Please come in and have a seat."

They parked themselves in two metal folding chairs facing the professor. "We're sorry to bother you," Wes said. "I'm Chaplain Wes Barrett from Central Prison, and this is Sharon Noble who's a writer with the News and Observer. We just need a few minutes of your time."

Gingotta shifted his position in his chair and grimaced. His eyes were on Sharon. "I didn't think I recognized either of you from any of my classes. So to what do I owe the pleasure? Surely you are



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not here to stir up painful memories of my dead wife. I'm familiar with your articles, Miss Noble, though I must confess I haven't read much more than the headlines. I much prefer reading academic journals."

"I can certainly understand if my articles hit a little close to home, Dr. Gingotta. And, in a sense, that's why I'm here. I'm putting together a story about how the murders have touched people's lives. I want my readers to understand the ripple effect of such tragic violence, not only on those directly affected, but also on others around them. I know it's still painful to talk about, but I was hoping you would be willing to tell me about how your wife's death changed your life."

Gingotta's face changed from pink to crimson. "You're wasting your time, Miss Noble. I've no intention of parading my feelings about Kim's death before the world. I'd appreciate it if you would let her rest in peace, and leave me out of your story."

"I understand where you're coming from, Dr. Gingotta. I do. You may know my sister was one of the murdered girls. Believe me I know what you're feeling."

"Really?" Gingotta's expression brimmed with disdain. "You think you know what I'm feeling? Nobody knows what another person feels. Every circumstance is different." His tone was now that of a stern teacher correcting a student. "How could you possibly understand how someone else feels? How could you begin to know, for example, what it's like to be a husband who learned his wife was having an affair with a sleaze-ball lawyer? Frankly, Ms. Noble, I don't

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think you're capable of understanding anything from my point of view."

"Of course. You're right. I shouldn't have presumed." Sharon's tone was gentle and sympathetic. "But I would like very much to understand. I promise not to identify you in the article if you don't want me to, but I really would like to be able to explain from your perspective how the murder of your wife affected you."

Gingotta's eyes fired back arrows. "I don't need you to understand, and the last thing I want you to do is put something in your paper about me, whether you use my name or not. I just want to be left alone."

Wes decided it was time to take the heat off of Sharon. "It's not unusual," he interjected, "for a person experiencing the loss of a loved one to still be grieving many years later, especially when it was due to some horrible event. It's perfectly understandable that you would have a difficult time talking about what happened, even after all this time?"

Gingotta glared at Wes. "The only problem I have is Harry Harrison turned my wife into a whore, and then killed her. And I hope my problem is about to be solved and old Harry gets what's coming to him."

"It sounds like you still have a lot of anger toward Harrison."

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“Let me ask you something, Chaplain. Doesn’t the Bible say, ‘Thou shalt not covet another man’s wife, and thou shalt not commit adultery?’”

“Yes, it does.” Wes was determined to answer as agreeably as he could under the circumstances. “Those are commandments number ten and seven if I remember correctly.” He sucked in a breath of air. It was now or never. “And your question speaks to why I’m here today. Mr. Harrison knows what he did was wrong and that it caused you great harm. He asked me to come here today to apologize for the injury he caused you because of his selfish and wrongful affair with your wife. He asked me to tell you how very sorry he is.”

“No offense, Chaplain, but I don’t buy for one minute he’s sorry for what he did to me. I know Harrison, and he’s incapable of caring about anybody but himself. He’s jerking you around, Chaplain; he’s using you.”

“You said just now you know Harrison. That’s funny. He told me he had never met you.”

“I didn’t say he knows me. I said I know him. I met him once quite by accident. It was shortly after my wife started doing legal consulting work for him. I was having a drink at a local restaurant bar on Hillsboro Street one evening when he sat down next to me and struck up a conversation. He introduced himself and immediately began to tell me what a great lawyer he was, how much money he’d made off of other people’s misery, and how he wouldn’t touch a case

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unless he could make several million off of it. He was so narcissistic he never asked my name or anything about me. I started to tell him I was married to one of his consultants, but he never gave me a chance. He interrupted every time I started to say something.”

Gingotta leaned forward. “After a couple of drinks he told me his whole life history of female conquests. Believe me, the man loves to brag. There was zero remorse for what he’d done. Finally, I was so disgusted I just got up and left. I’ve kicked myself a lot of times over the years for not forbidding my wife from doing any more consulting for him. I did try to warn her. But we needed the money at the time and I mistakenly thought I could trust her, and that she was smart enough to see through all his bull. It just goes to show you how wrong you can be. For all I know, she had already slept with him by then. Anyhow, I know the kind of man he is, no matter how much he might fool a prison chaplain into thinking otherwise.”

“Mr. Harrison admits he used to be that way. But I believe he’s not the man he once was. Facing death forces a lot of people to examine their lives, and I think when he says he’s sorry for what he did to you, he really means it.”

“If you believe him, Chaplain, then I have some oceanfront property in Tennessee I’d love to sell you. I could give you a real break on it.”

“You may be right about Harry. Like you say, none of us knows what goes on in someone else’s mind. But I think he’s genuinely

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repentant. He was the one who asked me to come and try to make amends to you for the affair. He told me what to say. I'm just the messenger. In fact, I would be remiss if I didn't tell you he said he did not kill your wife, so the apology is only for the affair. But he's truly sorry for the harm he has done to you."

Gingotta rolled his chair backwards. "Well, you can go back and tell him I reject his so-called apology. And while you're there, tell him he's a liar and a thief. He took from me the most important thing that's ever been mine, and no words will ever change that. Tell him I hope he burns in hell, forever."

"If that's what you want me to say, I'll give him the message."

"Let me tell you what I think. He can deny all he wants to. His new alibi witness is nothing but another one of Harrison's scams. We can only hope the court will see through it. The man's been supported by our tax money long enough. It's time to get this over with."

Wes resisted the temptation to argue the point. It was better to quench a fire than pour gas on it. "Let me say, on my own behalf, I'm sorry for your loss, Dr. Gingotta. I can't imagine how horrible it must have been for you. But I hope someday you can let go of all your anger. They say anger takes its toll on our bodies, and our mental and spiritual health. It often spills over into other relationships and breeds unhappiness all around. I hope for your sake you can let it go, at least at some point."

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“Oh, I doubt if I’ll ever want to let it go. It’s far too satisfying to turn it loose. Sometimes it’s the only way I get through a day.”

“I was wondering,” Sharon interrupted, “it’s been a long time now since you lost your wife. Did you ever remarry and start a family again?”

“Still trying, are you, Ms. Noble? You probably already know I live alone these days. I prefer it that way. Now I would appreciate it if you would both leave. I’m sure we all have better things to do with our time.”

Wes’s and Sharon’s eyes met in silent agreement. As they moved toward the door, Gingotta fired a parting shot. “If you’re with Harry Harrison when they strap him in for the needle, tell him I’m grinning from ear to ear.”

## Chapter 29

A few minutes after leaving Gingotta's office, Wes and Sharon were on I-40 heading toward Wilmington, North Carolina. As usual, Wes was driving with a heavy foot. As he maneuvered around a string of eighteen wheelers, he replayed in his head the visit with Gingotta. Was there anything he could have done to have made it go better? He doubted it.

The man had been downright rude, especially to Sharon. "The professor is one miserable man." Wes said. "I must confess I don't know what it's like when a loved one is murdered. But I do know about losing someone you love more than life itself. And I find it really sad after all these years for a man to be carrying around so much anger and hate. It's eating him up." He hesitated before continuing. "If you don't mind me asking, Sharon, were you ever angry about your sister's murder?"

Her gaze shifted from the road toward the farmland on the right. "During the first couple of years, I was mostly sad. Then I got pretty mad at the world. I think my anger later changed into a passion to find her killer. But when I was in my teens, I don't think I knew what to do with my feelings. When I look back on it, it's kind of hard to separate things from my bout with adolescent rebellion. All I know is – they were not pleasant years."

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“Adolescence is tough even without all that pain you were dealing with.”

“I’m sure you know something about pain too, Wes.”

Wes silently focused on the highway ahead. He wasn’t ready to talk about Katlin. Not yet. “Have you ever been married, Sharon?”

“No, but almost. I used to be in a relationship with a member of the Hurricanes hockey team.”

“A professional hockey player? You’re kidding me.” There was something about this revelation that didn’t exactly please Wes. He searched for an appropriate response. “That must have been exciting.”

“It was at the time. Maybe you remember him. His name is Eric Reynolds.”

“It doesn’t ring a bell. But that doesn’t mean much. I follow college basketball and NASCAR. I’m not really into hockey.”

“I wasn’t either until I met Eric. He got me a great season seat and I became quite a fan. After we’d dated for over a year he asked me to marry him, and I said yes. But we never got around to setting a date. Another year-and-a-half went by before we both realized we didn’t have enough in common to spend the rest of our lives together. After the season he was traded to Chicago, and that was that.”

“So how long’s it been?”

“Two years.”



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“Anyone since?”

“I’ve had a few dates that didn’t go anywhere. I was on an internet dating site for a while but removed myself from it. I know some people have found love on the web, but I decided it wasn’t my style. What about you, Wes? Are you seeing anyone?”

The answer was simple, but still complicated. And he didn’t want to have to explain. Until very recently he wouldn’t have even thought about dating. He felt like he was still married to Katlin, and to see someone else was out of the question. But now he had to confess he had begun to consider it. He didn’t think he was ready yet, but the idea of remaining in gloomy loneliness the rest of his life was something Katlin would never have wanted. And he had to admit he was noticing women again, including Sharon. It felt strange, and still too soon. “No. I’m not seeing anybody. Right now I have my hands full with my new job. Not to change the subject, but we probably need to talk about our next interview.”

They discussed how they hoped to handle the Jan Reddy conversation and then moved on to small talk. Wes followed GPS instructions as they made their way through Wilmington and proceeded another dozen miles to Carolina Beach. They arrived at the ocean front home belonging to Jan Reddy’s mother and stepfather a few minutes before five. Wes’s heavy foot had gotten them there sooner than expected. Jan was not scheduled to be home for at least another half hour.

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Sharon and Wes climbed the steps to the side deck on the main floor of the house, and knocked on the door. No response. Evidently the roommate was not home either. They proceeded around the corner of the house to the spacious front deck. Before them was a panoramic post card view of a greyish sandy beach, with four to five foot waves breaking, and spreading foam in undulating patterns along the shoreline. The partly cloudy sky caused shadows to prance and glide across the seascape. In the distance to the right was a darkening cloud bank, below which were shower rays returning millions of tiny droplets to their home in the sea.

“What do we do now?” Wes wondered aloud.

“We take a walk on the beach.” Motioning Wes to follow, she descended the front stairs, slipped off her shoes and ventured onto the soft uneven sand in front of her. Wes quickly removed his loafers and hurried to catch up with her. They crossed over the dry section of the beach until they reached the wet packed sand left by a retreating tide, then turned left and proceeded at a leisurely pace. Sharon paused from time to time to stick her toes in the cold water of a dying wave.

“I love the beach.” Sharon squealed with obvious delight. “My favorite memories are of weekends and vacations my family spent at the ocean when Becky and I were young children. How about you? Are you a beach person?”

“My dad used to take me surf and pier fishing a lot when I was a kid. I grew up in Darlington, South Carolina. He was a truck driver.

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He was gone a lot, but he was a good dad. He spent as much time with me as he could. He took me to races all over the south. But I think my favorite times were when we went fishing. It was good alone time with him. We would sometimes go to the beach late in the day, fish until after midnight, sleep under the stars until near dawn, then get up and fish some more before driving back home.”

“My father took me pier fishing a few times. I enjoyed it. But my favorite thing to do at the ocean is what we are doing now. There’s something spiritual about it for me. The ocean is healing to my soul. Tell me, Wes, how is it you came to be a pastor?”

“I grew up going to the Methodist Church in Darlington every Sunday. My mom saw to that. But I never imagined I would end up in the ministry. Like I told you, I dreamed of being a NASCAR driver. Considering where I grew up, it was the natural thing to do. The Darlington track was the granddaddy of them all. Anyhow, neither of my parents went to college, though mom got some kind of business school degree and worked as a bookkeeper. They were both determined I’d be the first person in our family to graduate. They sent me to a small church-related school my freshman year. My roommate talked me into going to a big youth assembly with contemporary Christian music, and young, dynamic speakers. To make a long story short, while there, I surrendered my heart to the Lord. I had joined the church when I was twelve, but I think of my experience at the youth assembly as the one which set the course of my life. Afterwards, when I was back at college, I spent a lot of time reading the Bible and praying about my future life. I asked God to help me understand why He

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created me, and why I was put here on earth. One night I had the clearest sense I've ever had that God was speaking directly to me, and telling me my purpose. It was a clear calling. I've never doubted it, even in my darkest moments."

"Can I tell you something Wes? I know you say you're not in a very good place these days, but I think you're in a better place than you think. I sense a spiritual presence about you, sort of like the ocean."

They walked in silence for a while and turned back. The sky was now overcast and the rain clouds were moving in their direction. Instinctively they picked up their pace. When they were less than fifty yards from the house, it began to sprinkle. They sprinted to the steps as the rain turned into a downpour. Picking up their already soaked shoes, they hurried up the steps and almost ran into a laughing Jan Reddy.

### **Chapter 30**

"Thanks for seeing me, Jan," Sharon began. "And for sharing this gorgeous view." They were sitting on beige leather furniture surrounded by sea shell art, in a living room highlighted by a dramatic wall of windows showcasing the ocean, and, at the moment, a rapidly passing shower.

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“You’re the first reporter I’ve ever talked to,” Jan Reddy gushed. “It has to be exciting to be a famous writer and have all those people read your stories. When I was in high school I worked on the school paper. I thought about a career in journalism, but I love the beach and the ocean. That’s why I came here to UNC-W. I want to major in marine biology. They have a really good program. Of course this is my freshman year, and so far I’ve been sort of majoring in parties, if you know what I mean.” She giggled as she made the admission.

*Patience!* Sharon reminded herself. It takes time to build trust. “So, I take it you like Wilmington,”

“I love it. I mean, you get to live here on the beach and still go to a good school. I’ve made a bunch of new friends. There are a lot of cute boys. I know my grades could be better, but I’m passing everything. I should study more, but I figure you’re only young once. I’m not like some of my friends, though, I make sure I do enough work to keep my mom from freaking out.”

Sharon visually surveyed the room. “It’s a big place, do you have a roommate?”

Jan nodded. “Her name is Ashley Roberts. Ashley and I went to high school together. She pays my stepdad rent, but she’s got a good deal. She doesn’t pay any more than if she lived in a dorm, and she gets to live right on the ocean. A lot of my friends are jealous of Ashley’s

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arrangement. But one thing's for sure, they don't complain when we invite them to party here."

"It's a very nice house." It was important at this point to keep her talking about familiar stuff. The tough questions would come later. "Has it been in your family long?" "A little over three years. My stepfather, Richard, bought it for my mom as a wedding present. He's got a lot of money. Mom and I didn't have much when I was growing up. It was just the two of us, and mom didn't have all that good a paying job. We lived in an older two bedroom townhouse in Raleigh until he came along. Not long after she and Richard married, they sold the townhouse, bought this place, and another really nice home near Jordan Lake."

"I take it you get along OK with your stepfather?"

"Most of the time. It was hard at first. He bought me a car and paid for my shopping sprees. Who wouldn't like that? But I didn't think he was right for my mom. He didn't seem to make her very happy. It seems to have worked out pretty well for her, though. She has two nice houses, and lots of cool stuff. To be honest, I think it helps he isn't around much. He's really into his work. He goes out of town on business a lot, and plays a lot of golf." Jan turned her head. "Oh look, here comes Ashley."

Sharon glimpsed Jan's roommate through a window as she took the last couple of stairs at a fast clip. The black haired, dark eyed,

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beauty opened the door, jumped inside and shook the rain out of her hair.

*Is that you Becky?* A shiver began in Sharon's neck and travelled the length of her body.

As Jan introduced Ashley, who greeted the visitors with a big smile, Sharon could not take her eyes off of the girl. She continued to stare in her direction long after Ashley excused herself and disappeared from view.

"Are you OK, Sharon?" Wes asked.

"I'm fine. It's just that Ashley reminds me so much of my sister, it threw me for a moment."

Glancing toward the bathroom, Wes said, "Why don't we give Ashley some privacy, and go somewhere else to talk. I'm getting hungry. I was wondering if the three of us might continue this over dinner. My treat."

"There's a wonderful waterfront seafood place just down the beach," Jan responded energetically. "They make the best crab cake sandwiches you'll ever want to eat."

"Sounds perfect."

They rode to the restaurant in Wes's Highlander making small talk along the way and continued the light conversation all through dinner at a quiet corner table. As they were consuming deserts,

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Sharon softly asked, "What can you tell me, Jan, about your biological father?"

"All I know is what my mom told me, which wasn't much," she answered without emotion. "I was only about five when I last saw him, and I don't even remember what he looked like. I learned early on not to ask my mom certain questions, especially about him. It was like he was some big secret I wasn't supposed to know about. She would get mad whenever I brought him up, so I left it alone. She did tell me one time he'd been in prison for something he didn't do. She seemed very upset about it. I think she still loved him, but for some reason she didn't wait for him to get out and ended up divorcing him anyhow."

Sharon was watching Jan's expressions with honed observation skills. No signs of deception. At least not yet. "Did she tell you what happened to him after he was released from prison?"

"Only that he died in a car accident. When I was young, she told me he died in Georgia on I-95 on his way to see me. But then, when I was older, she said something about him being killed by a drunk driver while he was still down in Florida. So, I'm not really sure where it happened."

"And you haven't seen or heard from him since you were a young child?"

"Like I said, he's been dead a long time now."



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Sharon took a deep breath. "I don't quite know how to say this, Jan, but I'm pretty sure your father is still alive. I think your mother has been trying to protect you all these years from some very unpleasant things."

Jan frowned and looked skeptical.

Wes reached over and touched the girl's arm. "This is not going to be an easy thing to hear, Jan, but Sharon is telling you the truth. There's more. Your father's imprisonment wasn't a mistake. While he was still married to your mother, he was caught in the act of sexually assaulting a teenager down in Orlando. He confessed to the crime in return for a reduced sentence."

Horror appeared on Jan's face.

"I'm afraid it gets worse," Sharon said. "There is conclusive DNA evidence your biological father, Carl Reddy, assaulted and killed my sister and another girl in Raleigh two decades ago."

Jan was speechless. She put down her fork, put her hand over her mouth, stood up and raced toward the ladies restroom. Sharon sped after her. Just inside the swinging door Jan fell to her knees, gagged, and vomited on the tile floor. Sharon rushed to the sink, moistened some paper towels, went to where Jan was kneeling and helped her clean her face and blouse. Jan was making sobbing noises, gasping for air, but still not speaking. Sharon stooped down, put her arms around the girl, and said, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

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A grey haired lady in her sixties opened the door, saw Sharon holding Jan and said, "Oh! Excuse me!" The woman backed away and the door closed. The two females remained there for several minutes. Then Jan said between sniffles, "It can't be true. It just can't be true."

As Sharon was helping the girl to her feet, Jan staggered into a stall, knelt in front of a toilet, and vomited some more. Afterward, Sharon led her to the sink, and aided her cleanup.

"We better get you home," Sharon said. Jan nodded weakly.

As they were driving back to the apartment, Jan was sitting in the front passenger seat. She turned to Sharon in back and said weakly, "I'm sorry about your sister."

"Thank you. And I'm sorry to be the one to tell you about your father."

Wes looked over at Jan. "I need you to listen carefully to what I'm about to tell you. None of this was your fault. Nor does it mean anything is wrong with you. We don't get to pick our parents. Your father did some evil things. They were choices he made and he caused a lot of suffering to Sharon's family and to a lot of other people. But you cannot own any of that. What we have shared with you tonight is going to change your life. It will never be the same again. It may feel at the moment as if your life can't be anything but worse from this point forward. But whether it is worse or better is up to you. It's your choice. You are not responsible for anything he did with his life. You are responsible for what you do with yours. All of us have turning

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points in our lives when we can go one way or the other. Tonight is one of those times for you.”

She wiped her eyes. “Why did you have to come here tonight?”

“We came because we need your help,” Wes said. “Carl Reddy is out there somewhere, and he has probably already hurt some other people. He needs to be stopped before someone else dies.”

“I don’t know how I can help. I didn’t even know he was alive until a few minutes ago. I have no idea where he is.”

“And we believe you,” Sharon said. “But we are asking you to be on the alert. He might try to get in touch with you at some point, perhaps by mail, or phone, or over the computer. If he ever does, I need you to call me and tell me. Or your mom may know more than she is telling you, and if you learn anything from her, I need you to call me. Do you think you can do that?”

They were now parked outside the beach house. Jan was staring at the floorboard of the car. “Can I go now? I’m really tired.”

“Of course. This was a lot to lay on you. Would you like for us to come in and stay with you a while, until you feel better?”

“No. I’m OK. Ashley’s home. I just want to go in and lie down for a while.”

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“Well remember, if you ever need to talk, anytime of the day or night, give me a call. If you don’t reach me for some reason, you can call Wes.”

At Sharon’s suggestion Jan programmed the numbers into her cellphone before getting out of the SUV. As the car door closed, Sharon checked a new text message.

“Anything important,” Wes asked.

“Important is an understatement. Craig Daniels thinks he found some DNA in one of the Harrison cases.”

Wes and Sharon watched Jan shakily climb the steps of the house. The rain had stopped, and moonlight glistened on the droplets remaining on everything but the sandy ground.

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When Jan entered the living room, she darted past Ashley, who was watching TV in the living room, went straight to the bathroom, locked the door, took out her cellphone, and keyed in her home number.

“Mom,” she said in a trembling voice. “Something terrible has happened. We need to . . . No, Mom, not over the phone. I need to come home. I’m going to leave in a few minutes, as soon as I can get myself together.” Jan listened to her mother’s response. “I know Mom. I know

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my classes are important, but I don't care about that right now..... No, Mom, I told you, not over the phone." She swiped tears from her cheeks. "OK, Mom, OK. I'll try. I'll go to my classes and come home Saturday. And Mom, I need to talk with you...alone."

## Chapter 31

Sharon arrived at Daniels' office a few minutes after noon. A brown bag occupied a small clearing on the detective's desk. He took a bite out of an apple and pointed to a chair occupied by folders and documents.

Sharon moved the stack and pulled the chair forward.

"I'd offer you some lunch but I'm afraid nothing's left."

"I'm good. I believe you said you had some new DNA."

"It's an intriguing development. I can't be sure it'll go anywhere at this point. It could be nothing. It's too soon to know. So I need this to be off the record right now. You OK with that?"

"Sure, if that's what you need."

"It probably doesn't have any direct bearing on your sister's case. Like I say, it may be nothing, but it does have to do with Brooke Smith, Harrison's babysitter. After we last talked, and you questioned whether Reddy could have killed her too, I pulled the evidence box and went through it. Brooke's diary was there containing daily entries for the time she was carrying on with Harrison. The diary was a key piece of evidence at Harry's first trial. The defense tried to exclude it as hearsay, but the judge allowed it based on the testimony of a handwriting expert. In it were a lot of graphic entries about her affair

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with Harrison. The last few pages made it clear she planned to confront him about the pregnancy. When you read the diary you understand why a jury would want to convict him. He's a despicable piece of work. Anyhow, the clothes she wore the night she was murdered were also in the box. She had on jeans, a pair of sneakers, a sweater and a heavy jacket. None of this was new or surprising. It was the dead of winter when she was killed."

Sharon squirmed in her seat. Daniels sure could take his time getting to the point. "And the DNA?"

He stood, stretched, and then sat back down. "The doctor says I have to get up at least once an hour, since what I do is mostly sit in this chair. He says I'm already having some problems with circulation in my legs. Anyhow, where was I?" He stared at the ceiling as if his last thoughts were recorded on it.

This was getting old fast. If only some people would learn how to lead with a headline.

"Oh, yes. In the box containing the Brooke Smith evidence was an envelope. It was sealed, and the contents list on the back of it recorded a single item, a cigarette butt. The medical examiner found it in the victim's jeans pocket. I checked the case file notes and discovered only one other brief mention of it in a list of the possessions found on her at the time of death. It played no part in the trial."

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Finally. Something she *didn't* know. "And I take it there was DNA on it. But didn't they check it at the time?"

"You have to remember DNA was still fairly new then and the detectives probably assumed a ciggy butt in the pocket of a teenager was not worth the effort. I'm sure they presumed she had put it in her pants to hide it after sneaking a smoke. But after I found it last week, I decided to run it against the DNA of Reddy, Harrison, and, of course, Brooke Smith herself. We didn't have any of the girl's DNA, but her mother was kind enough to give me a sample to use for comparison. You know a mother passes on to her children mitochondrial DNA found in the nucleus of a cell. So it was possible to compare the sample from the cigarette to Brooke's DNA by way of her mother. The report was faxed to me this morning. The DNA on the cigarette filter was in excellent condition, but it didn't match any of the three. So it belongs to a fourth person. The thing is, we ran it through the system and didn't find any match there either."

Sharon didn't try to disguise her disappointment. "So basically, what you're saying is, you have this intriguing piece of new evidence and it's a dead end."

"Maybe. If it had been the Smith girl's DNA on the cigarette filter, no surprise. It wouldn't have been the first time a teenage girl had tried to hide smoking evidence in her pocket. But I'm finding it hard to understand why she would use her pocket for someone else's ashtray. It's just possible she knew she was going to die and managed to put the killer's ciggy butt in her pocket before he killed her."



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Sharon quickly reviewed in her mind the key facts of the Brook Smith murder. If the butt did belong to her killer, then she died hoping it would help the police identify him. Brave girl. "So if we had a match, then it might prove significant, especially in the light of Harrison's new witness. But with no match in the system how can it be of any use?"

"As a cold case detective I shouldn't even be working on the Harrison case." He pointed to the box beside his desk. "It's still officially a closed file, and I have more than a plateful without it. But I thought I might go through it again with a fine tooth comb this afternoon to see if I can find something the guys missed. It's a long shot but maybe we can come up with someone else to try to tie the cigarette to. I was hoping you might be willing to look at it with me. I've got no help around here and, with your knowledge of these cases, I was thinking maybe you might see something I wouldn't."

"I'm guessing you didn't consider I might refuse."

"I take that as a yes." Daniels grabbed the box and led her to a nearby small interview room with a table and two chairs.

"Any ideas about what we're looking for?" Sharon asked.

"Not a clue. But you might be surprised how often I find a new lead in a file, one that was missed during the original investigation. Of course, a lot of times a lead goes nowhere. But when it does develop into new evidence, it can get the old adrenalin pumping. I take a fresh look at everything and ask myself what did they miss, or what doesn't

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fit the old theory of the crime. Sometimes it's just a little thing that jumps out for no apparent reason. Call it cop's intuition, or whatever you want. I'm guessing a good reporter has to have a sixth sense about things too."

They divided up the case files and began the tedious task of examining them.

Two hours later, as Sharon was reading through the transcript of the Harrison trial she found something.

"Does the name, Dr. Patrick O'Connell sound familiar to you?"

"Not off the top of my head. Whatcha got?"

"It seems during the defense phase of the trial, Harrison's lawyer asked a Raleigh PD detective whether he had investigated a tip O'Connell had a motive to murder the two women. The source suggested O'Connell had a grudge against Harrison and could have framed him. The detective responded to the question by saying he imagined there were a lot of people who didn't care for Harrison, but all the evidence pointed to the accused. The defense counsel berated the detective for not being thorough in his investigation and then moved on to another topic."

"Sounds like a pretty lame reasonable doubt effort on the part of the defense. Any particular reason it jumped out at you?"

"As a matter of fact, I was doing some background research on Harrison's new witness, Kaminski, and I saw where he once worked

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for a urologist named Patrick O’Connell. I know it can sometimes be a small world, but my journalist instincts tell me when I stumble on an unlikely coincidence to keep looking.” Sharon took out her iPhone. “Let’s see what we can find out about the good doctor.” She connected to the internet, held the mike near her mouth, and spoke with deliberate clarity, “Dr. Patrick O’Connell, Raleigh NC.”

The Google search worked its magic and Sharon was soon able to check out several sites containing information about the physician. Setting the iPhone on the table, she summarized her findings. “O’Connell was a urologist until about ten years ago. By then he had lost three malpractice suits and could no longer get insurance for his urology practice. He closed his office. I’m not sure what he did after that, but around four years ago he opened a clinic out on New Bern Avenue as a pain management doc.”

“You say he lost some malpractice cases?” Daniels reached for his laptop. “Wasn’t Harrison suing doctors back then? Maybe that’s the connection. We can check the court records to see.” He pulled up a screen and began to search the public archives for civil actions against O’Connell.

Sharon leaned over his shoulder to watch. The database instantly spit out five malpractice cases. The earliest had gone to trial and had resulted in a four hundred and fifty thousand dollar award to a plaintiff who’d become impotent and incontinent as the result of O’Connell’s butchering of a TURP, a surgical transurethral resection of

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the prostate. Three other suits had been settled out of court for undisclosed amounts.

“Bingo!” Daniels exclaimed. “The last suit involves a patient whose test results showed advanced prostate cancer. It was filed by Harrison. The suit alleged O’Connell had failed to inform the patient in a timely manner of a test result, and by the time the patient knew he had cancer the malignancy had spread through his body. The man died soon afterward. The suit was withdrawn without explanation three weeks after it was filed.

“If that’s our connection,” Sharon responded. “It doesn’t make much sense. If the suit was dropped, you would think O’Connell would have no cause to be angry with Harrison. And if he had no reason to be angry, then why would Harrison’s lawyer suggest he had a motive to frame his client? Unless there’s another angle. When did he file suit?”

“It looks like about two years before the murders.”

“Maybe Kaminski’s the connection here.” Sharon tried in vain to come up with a theory. “Maybe he was going to testify against O’Connell and O’Connell fired him. I’m not sure how that fits, but I’d like to know why Harrison dropped the suit when he did. And Kaminski, who is Harrison’s new alibi, is right in the middle of it all. We’re missing something here.”

“I can think of a way we might be able to get some answers. What would you think about our paying the good doctor a visit?”

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“You name the day and time.”

“How about now?”

## Chapter 32

Sharon and Daniels were sitting in the detective's brown Crown Vic in the parking lot of O'Connell's pain clinic on New Bern Avenue. On the drive over, Daniels indicated he planned to observe the comings and goings at the building before attempting to interview the doctor. By late afternoon they had counted twenty-eight patients entering and exiting the office. The clientele represented a wide range of males and females, from teens to seniors, from the scruffy poor to the rich and pretentious. None were inside more than twenty minutes. Most were out in five.

"So much for thorough medical examinations," Sharon commented.

"As I suspected, this is a pill mill," Daniels said in a disgusted tone. "The patients tell O'Connell they have some kind of pain, and he gives them a prescription. He has an in-house pharmacy, with registered pharmacists and all. But unlike your local Walgreens, they probably don't stock much other than pain meds and anxiety pills. Some of the people we've seen go in and out today were probably getting refills at the pharmacy window. I bet most of those little white bags you've seen people carrying out contained pill bottles with names on their labels like Xanax, Percocet, Lortab and especially OxyContin. Oxy is terribly addictive. Lots of nice regular folks take it after surgery for severe

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pain, get hooked on it, and then go doctor shopping with made up pain stories to feed their habit.”

Sharon made a few notes on a pad. Maybe one day she’d do a story on pain clinics. “So O’Connell is some kind of legalized drug pusher.”

“Probably. These pill mills are popping up everywhere and there’s a lot of money to be made. But it’s complicated. When people are in a lot of pain they need to take something powerful in order to endure it. I hate to think what my mother would have gone through after she broke her hip if she hadn’t been able to get some strong meds. There are a goodly number of legitimate physicians who are ethical pain specialists. And they are often the best resource for a person who has become addicted and wants to shake the habit. The good guys know how to wean people off the potent stuff and help them get their lives back. But I suspect from the traffic I’ve seen today, O’Connell is not one of ‘em. He’s working the system and bending the rules while making a lot of profit, mostly off of people he is helping keep addicted. As terrible as all of it is, it’s not why we’re here. What we need this afternoon is to get him to talk about the suit Harrison filed against him and then mysteriously dropped.”

Sharon scribbled a few more notes. “So what’s our plan?”

“I’ve been thinking about it while we’ve been sitting here. Given the likelihood an audit by the state substance abuse enforcement people or the SBI would turn up some serious problems in his

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operation, I think he's going to be nervous about talking with a cop, and will likely make some excuse why he can't see me. But I have an idea."

Daniels told Sharon what to do. She exited the car, walked to the front door and entered the office as the detective drove to the back of the building.

She stood in the waiting room until the receptionist slid back the window.

"And how can I help you today?"

"My name is Sharon Noble and I'm a reporter from the News and Observer." Sharon handed the receptionist her business card. "It's urgent I speak with Dr. O'Connell today about a story I'm working on."

The receptionist examined the card. "I'm sorry. The doctor is busy with patients this afternoon. You'll need to come back another time. If he wants to talk with you, I'll give you a call and arrange an appointment for a time mutually agreeable." The woman smiled, and said, "That's the best I can do."

"Oh, I think you can do better," Sharon asserted firmly. "First of all, he's not with a patient now. Every patient who has come in here in the last hour and a half has already left. There's obviously no one in the waiting room at the moment. So why don't you tell the doctor I'm here and see if he will give me a few minutes of his time now."



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The receptionist's forced smile turned into a grimace. "The doctor doesn't like to be disturbed unless it's for a patient with an appointment."

"I don't want to be rude, but have you stopped to consider he might not be pleased you didn't give him the opportunity to tell his side of the story before it's spread all over the country?" She gave the woman a moment to think about it. "Do you really believe he'd rather be surprised by what I write about his operation than to have a chance to respond? Please, just pick up the phone and tell him why I'm here, and let him be the one to decide. And, by the way, if he's busy, let him know I'm willing to wait as long as necessary. I'll be right here when he gets ready to leave."

The woman's eyes flashed with a mix of fear and anger. She picked up the phone, punched in three numbers and waited. "Doctor, there's a reporter out here named Sharon Noble who says she is writing a story about the clinic and she needs to talk with you. What do you want me to tell her? Doctor, are you there?"

The receptionist turned her back to Sharon, concealed her mouth with her hand and whispered something. She listened a moment and then responded, "All right, Dr. O'Connell, I'll tell her, but she says she's going to wait for you until you're finished." She paused as the physician said something else. "I understand, Doctor." She placed the phone on the receiver, turned toward Sharon, and attempted to reproduce her smile. "He said if you could wait fifteen minutes he would be willing to see you."

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Sharon found a chair where she had a clear view of the door leading to the treatment rooms. She kept one eye on her watch.

### Chapter 33

Craig Daniels held a cellphone in his hand as he sat in his Crown Vic observing the rear door of the clinic. He had checked, and, other than the main front entrance, it was the only way out of the building. He didn't have to wait long. A man in his late fifties slipped out the door and moved toward a white BMW parked in a far back corner of the lot. Daniels checked the motor vehicle license picture on the computer beside him. No doubt about it. It was Patrick O'Connell.

Daniels pressed the call button on his phone and jumped from his Crown Vic. "Dr. O'Connell," the detective yelled while waving and flashing his badge. "I'm Detective Daniels with the Raleigh PD and I need to ask you a few questions."

O'Connell stepped up his pace toward the BMW, hesitated, and turned around. "What can I do for you, detective?"

"Is there somewhere we can talk? Perhaps we could go to your office, or, if you would rather we can use my car."

O'Connell ignored the question. "What's this about?"

Before Daniels could answer, Sharon came around the corner of the building and joined them.

"This is Sharon Noble from the Raleigh News and Observer." Daniels said. "We just want to ask you a few questions."

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“What’s going on here? She shows up in my office and says she’s working on a story about the clinic and wants to question me. Then you come along, flash your badge, and say you have some questions. I find it more than a little strange to have a reporter and a detective teaming up against a law abiding citizen. What’s this about?”

Sharon stepped directly in front of the doctor. “I’d like to know why you tried to give me the slip after you told me to wait for you in the front lobby. If the detective here hadn’t texted me you were leaving I might have sat there for hours. Do you have something to hide, doctor?”

O’Connell took two steps back. “Are you kidding? I know who you are. Why would I want to talk to you about my business? All you reporters are the same. You’ll make anyone look bad as long as it gets you a front page byline. I have no desire to talk with you or anyone else from the “News and *Disturber*.” He looked over Sharon’s shoulder into Daniels’ eyes. “As for you, detective, unless you plan to arrest me, I don’t have to answer any of your questions. I’ve worked a long hard day and, if you would step aside, I would like to go home now.”

Neither Sharon nor Daniels moved. O’Connell started to go around them. Daniels blocked his way.

“Look, Doctor O’Connell,” Daniels said firmly. “Ms. Noble and I aren’t really here about your clinic. We only have a few questions about a two-decade-old matter. If you’ll just give us a few minutes of your time and answer a few questions we’ll be on our way. Or, if you

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prefer, we *can* make it about the clinic. I'll just call a buddy of mine in the SBI and tell him they need to do a thorough investigation of this place. If I do, I'm quite confident Ms. Noble here will get a good story for her paper. But if you talk to us and tell us what you know, I see no reason to make the call. It's your choice."

O'Connell hesitated. "Questions about what?"

"About a lawsuit Harry Harrison filed against you a little over twenty years ago and then dropped," Daniels answered.

"It was a long time ago and there's nothing to say. Harrison filed the suit before he had all the facts. It was a typical frivolous tort. When he couldn't make his case he dropped it. End of story."

Daniels wasn't buying it. "Were you aware the defense attorney suggested during the trial you had a grudge against Harry, you were the real killer, and you had slain the two women in order to frame the accused?"

"I knew. I heard about it from a patient. We laughed about it. It was so ridiculous nobody in their right mind was going to take it seriously. Don't get me wrong, it didn't make me happy at the time, but what could I do?"

"Did the police ever question you about it?"

"No."

"Are you sure?" Daniels asked. "I could check the files."

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“Go ahead. I think I’d remember it if they had.”

The detective inched closer to O’Connell, until they were almost nose to nose. “Do you know where you were the night the two women were murdered?”

“Whoa! What’s going on here? Are you serious? I had nothing to do with it. Everyone knows Harry made up the story because there was so much evidence against him.”

“Just answer the question. Do you know where you were that night?”

“That was more than twenty years ago. Now, I’ve answered you as best I can. Please move out of my way. I’d like to leave now.”

Daniel’s didn’t budge. “Patience, doctor. Just a couple more questions. Was Louis Kaminski employed by you at the time of the lawsuit?”

“He worked for me a couple of years. I’m not sure whether he was with me then or not. Again, it was a long time ago.”

“Records show he was working for you at the time, but went to work for the state shortly afterward. Did you fire him?”

“As I remember, I let him go because he was insubordinate. He argued with me about things in front of my patients. I’ve never tolerated that kind of behavior in my employees.” O’Connell glanced at his BMW. “What difference does all this make?”

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“Do you know anything about Kaminski’s relationship with Harrison back then? Did they already know each other? Or did they meet because of the suit?”

O’Connell appeared visibly relieved. “Oh, I see where this is going. You’re looking into the connection between Kaminski and Harrison because you aren’t buying the story about the night of the murders. Well, I don’t buy it either. I wouldn’t trust either one of them as far as I could throw them.”

“Did they know each other before the lawsuit, or not?”

“I don’t think so, but I suspected at the time they were working together.”

“So your memory’s clearing up?” Daniels silently gave himself an ‘attaboy’. It was satisfying to know he hadn’t lost his touch. “A moment ago you weren’t sure Kaminski was working for you at the time. Now you remember suspecting Harrison and Kaminski of plotting together in the lawsuit. Tell me doc, what are you not telling us? Something doesn’t smell right about all this.”

“Look, I’ve told you everything I know.” O’Connell attempted once more to step around Daniels. “Now I really have to be getting home.”

Just one more question, Doc. “When did you quit smoking?”

“What does my smoking have to do with anything?”

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“Please answer the question. I promise we’ll leave after I get a truthful answer, and you won’t need to worry about me calling anyone to check out your clinic.”

“All right. If it will get this over with. I quit smoking seventeen years ago. It was probably the only New Year’s resolution I ever kept. Did it cold turkey. Not that it’s any of your business. Now can I go?”

Daniels moved aside. “Thank you for your time, Doc. Sorry if we got off on the wrong foot. By the way, I’ve got a sister who has terrible back pain. She’s been to three doctors and none of them can help her. Do you think you might be able to succeed where they failed?”

The tension in O’Connell’s face eased. “I help people like her every day. Have her call my receptionist for an appointment.”

“Could I have a business card to give her?” Daniels asked. “And here is one of mine in case you think of something else to tell me about the thing we were discussing.”

The two men exchanged cards. O’Connell walked to his BMW. As Daniels and Sharon returned to the Crown Vic, the detective, who was carefully holding O’Connell’s card by the edges, slipped it into a small paper bag which he placed in the pocket of his jacket.



## Chapter 34

On Friday morning, 10 days from the scheduled execution, Wes met Sharon for coffee at a Starbucks. She filled him in on the cigarette butt found in Brooke Smith's pocket, and the trip to Dr. O'Connell's clinic. Afterward, they left in Wes's car in order to keep an appointment with Brooke's parents.

The Smiths lived in an older ranch style home on a quiet street in west Raleigh. Ginger Smith, Brooke's mother, was standing in the doorway when Wes and Sharon climbed the steps to the front porch. She greeted them and led them into a small formal parlor, where Randall Smith, Brooke's father was waiting. It was a musty depressing room. The front drapes were closed, and the dim light added to the gloomy atmosphere.

Everyone chatted awkwardly about the weather and a story on the morning news about a fire in an apartment complex. The Smiths' countenances conveyed weariness with life. It was obvious they were tense, and hoping the visit would be over quickly.

Wes was feeling edgy too. The last amends hadn't exactly gone well. And delivering one to the parents of his murdered babysitter wasn't going to be fun either. On the way over he had asked Sharon to go first.

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“I know our coming here is probably stirring up painful memories.” Sharon said. “As I told you on the phone, my sister was murdered just days before Brooke. Wes and I are here today for somewhat different purposes. She told them about the Ripple Effect series, then said, “I would like to ask you a few questions about how the death of your daughter changed your lives and the lives of other people who cared about her. I’ll let Chaplain Barrett tell you why he’s here.”

This wasn’t going to be easy. This morning’s visit was already causing the Smiths to relive the worst day of their lives. He decided not to beat around the bush. “I think Sharon mentioned, when she set up the appointment, I’m a chaplain at the prison, and I’m Harry Harrison’s spiritual advisor. While Mr. Harrison continues to deny he actually killed your daughter, he admits he callously seduced her and robbed her of her innocence, and he believes his relationship with her may have put your daughter in danger. For obvious reasons he couldn’t come in person, so he sent me here to say how very sorry he is for all the pain he has caused you.”

“Are you kidding us?” Mrs. Smith erupted. “He still says he didn’t kill her, but he wants us to forgive him for molesting our seventeen-year-old child. I know you’re just the messenger, Chaplain Barrett, but you can give him this message for me – tell him I hope he rots in hell.”

“I’m sorry, Reverend,” the husband interrupted. “We appreciate your time in coming here to deliver the message. But my wife still gets really angry whenever she thinks about what he did to our sweet girl.

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It's not like we aren't Christian people. We go to church. We raised Brooke in the church. We try to live a Christian life. We know we're supposed to forgive him. But we just can't. Whenever we think about what he did, we get these terrible pictures in our minds. It makes us sick to our stomachs, and we don't see how we can ever forgive him. It feels like if we did we would be betraying her."

Wes struggled to formulate the right response. "The way you feel is how most people feel under similar circumstances. Don't you agree, Sharon?"

"I know where you're coming from." Sharon said with soft sympathy. "We've recently been able to identify my sister's killer and all I can think about is catching him and bringing him to justice. I can truly understand how forgiving the murderer of your daughter would seem like a betrayal. Unless someone has walked in shoes like yours, I'm not sure they can understand. One of the hopes I have for the series I am working on is that people will better understand the ripple effects of losing someone to a vicious murderer. I know it's not easy for you, but would you mind talking some about how things changed for your family after Brooke was killed?"

"It changed everything," Mrs. Smith said passionately. "She was our life, the bright star of all our dreams. And when she died, our dreams died too. Since then a dark cloud has hung over us. We used to be such a happy family. But I gave up on ever being happy again a long time ago."

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“Can you talk a little about how it has affected your relationship with each other?”

Ginger Smith blotted her eyes with a tissue. “It put a big strain on it at first. I think everybody deals with these things differently. Randall and I weren’t exactly on the same wave length. But it also made us realize, with Brooke gone, we needed each other even more. I don’t know how we would have survived it without each other to lean on. When I think about it, it’s hard to believe it happened more than twenty years ago. It seems like it was yesterday. Then I think of how old she would be now, how she would probably be married, and there would be grandchildren, and we would all get together on weekends and holidays. And thinking these things makes me so sad I can hardly stand it.”

Both mother and father continued to share about the loss of their child while Sharon took extensive notes. When the conversation had run its course, she nodded to Wes.

He had been listening attentively as the Smiths shared their story. He too knew about loss, and hoped against hope that Harry’s amends would ease their pain, not add to it. “Mr. Harrison wanted me to say something else to you while I’m here. He wants to do more than say he’s sorry. He knows nothing he can do will change what happened, but he would like to try to make amends to you in some way for his part in things. You said you were Christians, so you are probably familiar with the story of Zacchaeus in the Bible. He was a dishonest chief tax-collector who decided to become a follower of Jesus. To show

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his sincerity he promised to give away his considerable wealth to the poor and everyone he had ever cheated. I don't yet know how much it will be, but Mr. Harrison has told me he wants to give you what he can of his financial resources for you to use in any way you wish to. If you accept, there will be no conditions on it. You are free to put it in the bank for a rainy day, or use it to buy something you need, like a new car, or to replace the roof on the house. Or you might like to use it for some kind of fitting memorial to your daughter. What you do with it is entirely up to you."

Ginger Smith was trembling. "We don't want ...."

"Let us think about it," her husband interrupted. "We'll let you know."

She gave him a harsh look, but he responded immediately. "It won't hurt to sleep on it, honey."

The wife gritted her teeth and fell silent.

"Yes. You think on it, talk it over and let me know what you decide."

"We'll try," Mrs. Smith said with irritation. "But you know what really upsets me right now? That murderer says he's sorry and wants us to forgive him. But he won't even admit he did it. I think if he would just tell the truth about that night, and tell us why he felt like he had to kill her, then I might be more willing to take his apology seriously."

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Wes silently praying for the right words. "I understand. I really do," he finally said. "But what if Harrison is really innocent? What if this new witness, Kaminski, who came forward, is telling the truth and Harry Harrison was miles from Raleigh the night your daughter was killed? If that were true, would you still expect him to confess to something he didn't do?"

"I suppose not," she answered. "But I know he did it. He killed our Brooke. And I just wouldn't be doing right by her if I forgave him. I know I'm *supposed* to forgive him. But I can't. Not now. Not until he has paid for what he's done."

"I know you mean well, Reverend," Randall Smith chimed in, "and I don't mean to be rude, but I think it's time for you to leave. You can see this conversation has upset her. As we said a while ago, we will think about Mr. Harrison's offer about the money. If I had to say right now, I would tell you we're not interested. It doesn't seem right. Why should we let him salve his conscience after he took away from us something far more valuable than any amount of money? But we will think about it, and if we change our minds we'll let you know."

As Wes was driving toward downtown Raleigh, Sharon, who seemed annoyed, turned to him. "Even if we're supposed to forgive most of the time, don't you think there are exceptions?"

"All I know is, Jesus taught us we should forgive those who have done us harm, not just once in a while, but all the time. That's not the same thing as the state letting all the murderers go free. That would

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be silly. But I think Jesus knew resentments aren't good for us as God's children. They are harmful to our spiritual health and our everyday relationships with others."

"But what if Carl Reddy doesn't want my forgiveness?" Sharon said sharply. "Wouldn't that mean I don't need to forgive him?"

"I know where you are coming from, Sharon, I really do," He warned himself to tread lightly. "Reddy will probably never ask for your forgiveness, and if you offered it to him, I doubt he would accept it. But that doesn't mean it would not be a good thing to do for your own peace of mind. You see, I think a lot of victims' families think they'll get closure, a new peace of mind, when a death sentence is carried out. Then, afterwards, they are disappointed with the outcome. I've seen it happen more than once. I think peace of mind only comes when we can forgive."

"But it doesn't seem natural to forgive someone like Reddy who doesn't want forgiveness," Sharon said sharply. "Wes, I'm not sure you appreciate how hard it is to forgive when an unspeakable evil has been committed against someone you love."

"Of course it's hard, maybe even humanly impossible. I know it's not quite the same, but I've certainly had a hard time forgiving the driver who killed Katlin. And I won't say I'm fully there yet. But, I believe, with God's help, it can be done."

A chime from Sharon's iPhone interrupted the conversation. She checked the message. "Looks like we already have a decision from the

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North Carolina Supreme Court on the Kaminski matter. That didn't take long. Seems they convened a special session this morning in order to hear the Harrison petition and decided against your man before the media even knew they were meeting. The next stop for attorney Mitchell is federal court. It's what I expected, but it came much more quickly than I thought possible. I need to get back to the office and write this up."

A few moments later Wes pulled to the curb in front of the building where Sharon worked.

"Listen," Wes said. "I hope our discussion just now hasn't upset you."

"Don't worry about it." Her response seemed cold. Without another word, she opened the door and exited the car.

On the drive to the prison he couldn't shake the suspicion he had offended her.



## Chapter 35

Jan Reddy was tired. The two hour trip home seemed longer than usual. She had not been able to sleep well after learning the truth about her father and had spent her late night hours searching the web for information. There was not much there, but what she did find was consistent with what her visitors had told her.

Even so, she might not have believed them had she not suspected for as long as she could remember that there was more to the story about her father than she was being told. When the reporter described the murders it was like something inside her died. She had always been such a happy person. Everyone said so. Now she was not sure she could ever know joy again.

Her emotions were all over the place. She was angry at her mother for lying. She was upset and depressed because her father was a ghastly man who had done terrible things. And, every time she thought about what he had done, an unsettling idea kept crossing her mind. Had she been tainted by the evil inside him?

During her morning drive, she struggled periodically to control the trembling throughout her body. She had never been this scared before.

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As she lifted her overnight bag out of the car, her mother came out to give her a hug. Worry was written all over her face. As soon as they were inside, the questions began.

“What’s wrong, Jan? You’re scaring me. What’s happened?”

“It can wait until I’ve used the bathroom, Mom. Could you make us some coffee first? I haven’t been sleeping well and I almost dozed off on I-40. We can talk while I try to get the cobwebs out of my head.”

The mother fixed and poured two coffees. Afterward, they sat in the kitchenette at a table in front of a large window looking out on a generous view of a spacious backyard bordered at the rear by thick woods.

“Where’s Richard?”

“At the club. You know he always goes golfing on Saturdays. He won’t be home until dinner. Why?”

“Mom, I know.”

“Know what dear?”

“I know about my real dad.” Jan could no longer hold back the tears. She grabbed a napkin, wiped her face, and blew her nose. “You lied to me about him. I feel so stupid. What else haven’t you told me?”

“Let me guess.” Mrs. Perkins responded with obvious anger. “You’ve been talking to a reporter from the Raleigh paper, and you swallowed everything she said, hook, line and sinker.”

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“Look Mom. You can pretend it’s not true if you want to, but they have DNA proving he attacked and killed two girls right here in Raleigh. I believe them. Unlike you, they had no reason to lie to me. I know you’ve been lying to me my whole life, and I need you to stop. I want the truth, all of it.”

Her mother stared at her coffee in silence for several seconds. “You have to believe me. Everything I’ve done has been because I loved you and wanted to protect you.”

Jan tried to suppress the tears welling in her eyes. “If you love me so much, you need to tell me the truth. I need the truth, Mom. I need it now.”

Her mother placed her coffee spoon next to the cup, reached over, and put her hand on Jan’s. “One day, when you’re older, and you look back on this conversation, maybe you’ll realize it’s sometimes better not to know the truth about some things. You’ve got to believe me, you’re the most important thing in the world to me and I’m sorry I had to deceive you. I only did it for your protection. No child needs to carry the burden of what your father was accused of doing. And I need you to know I never thought your father was guilty of all the bad things they said about him until...”

Jan pulled her hand away. “Until when?”

“Until that reporter and chaplain from Central Prison came to see me. I wouldn’t let myself believe it. I’ve always loved your father. God help me, but I still do. I’ve been trying for days now to get back to a

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place where I could again believe he didn't do those things. I've really tried, but I can't do it anymore. Maybe I've watched too much television, but, if they have DNA linking him to the murders of those two Raleigh girls, and he really did assault the girl in Orlando, the one he did time for, then you aren't the only one I've been lying to. I've been lying to myself all these years. I'm so sorry."

Jan had never seen her mother this way. She looked old. Her eyes heavy. Her skin grey. "Mom, this thing really has me scared. You've got to tell me if you know what has happened to him. Is he still alive? If he is, where is he? He may be my biological father, but I don't care who he is, anyone who could do the things he did might come back and kill us both. It scares me he might be out there somewhere and decide to come find us. We've got to do something."

"When you called and said we needed to talk, I was actually hoping you had done something like get yourself pregnant, anything other than this." Donna Perkins paused for a long moment before continuing. "There's something else you need to know. You asked if your father is dead or alive. He's sort of both."

"I don't understand."

"He's no longer Carl Reddy. Carl Reddy doesn't exist anymore. He changed his appearance, his name, even scarred his fingerprints with acid. He created an entirely new identity."

"Then you do know what's happened to him."

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“I’m afraid I do. But I don’t know what to do about it.”

Jan jumped up from the table. “We’ve got to call the police and tell them. They need to arrest him before he does something else terrible. For all we know he already has.”

Donna Perkins grabbed Jan’s arm. “I don’t think he could have. I no longer believe he’s innocent of the things he did a long time ago, but I do believe he’s changed. He threw himself so completely into his new identity I think he became the man he pretended to be, and that man is a good man. At least I want to believe he is. Besides, it’s complicated. I can’t tell the police about him without getting in a lot of trouble myself.”

Jan jerked her arm away. “You mean because you’ve known all along and you haven’t told anyone?”

Her mother stood, walked unsteadily to the window, and stared at the woods behind the house. “I guess you’re going to find out sooner or later anyhow. It’s worse than that. I don’t know how to make this any easier so I will just come right out and say it. Michael Carl Reddy lives here, only you know him as Richard Perkins. Your step-father is really your father.”

It took a brief instant for it to register. A split second later fear gripped Jan’s insides like an octopus squeezing its prey. A curtain deep within her mind had opened revealing a horrifying abyss. “How could you, Mom? What were you thinking?” Jan began to pace back and forth. “Richard? Are you serious? My father, the one who killed those

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girls, was gone from our lives and you let him back in? Mom, we have to go. We have to get out of here before he comes back. If he knows we know, he'll kill us both. There's no way I can hide my fear from him. He's going to know you told me, and then he's going to kill us. We need to go while we can."

Her mother was shaking her head as tears streaked down her face. "I don't think he would ever harm you or me. I know he loves us. Richard has never done anything to hurt us and I don't think he would. So, what if you do call the police? Then what, Jan? They arrest him, but they also haul me off to jail for aiding a fugitive all these years. Look around you. You want me to give all this up in exchange for a cell at Women's Prison. There has to be another way. I really think he's changed. He doesn't need to know we know. It can be our secret, don't you see?"

Jan's fear suddenly morphed into anger. "Enough with the secrets, Mom. You're unbelievable. How can you be so concerned about all your stuff at a time like this? It's over, Mom. You have money in the bank. Get yourself a good lawyer. If we do the right thing now, you'll be OK."

"I don't know if I can."

"Well I know I can. Hand me the phone."

Donna Perkins sat motionless.

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Jan walked to the phone on the kitchen wall. Before she could pick up the receiver it began to ring. The voice on the other end of the call sent a cold chill down her back. "I'm glad you're the one who answered, Jan. I wanted to talk with you."

*Stay calm. Act natural.* "I thought you were playing golf today, Richard. Are you between rounds or on your way here?"

"When I left the house this morning I had every intention of going to the club, but something came up. I'm on my way out of town and won't be back until tomorrow. When I heard you were coming home for the weekend I was glad. I don't know what's been going on with your mother the past few days, but something seems to be bothering her. Maybe you can find out what it is and help her deal with it. If anyone can, you can. I worry about her when she gets moody and clams up around me. So do me a favor, sweetheart, find out what's going on and let me know if there is anything I need to do."

"I'll do my best."

"Are you OK, Jan? You sound a little distant. Your mom didn't say why you came home. Is there anything wrong?"

She instructed herself to sweeten her voice. "Nothing's wrong, Richard. I was just missing you guys. When can we expect you?"

"That's the thing. It'll be sometime tomorrow, but I'm not sure I'll be home before you need to go back."

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“I’m sorry I’m going to miss seeing you,” she lied. “Maybe next time. So where will you be?”

“I’m just doing a little business. Tell your mom I love her and I’ll be back tomorrow. And I love you too.”

“That’s always good to hear, Richard,” she responded with pretended affection. “Have a good business trip, wherever you’re going.”

Jan hung up the phone and stared at her mother. A terrifying suspicion had entered her consciousness. “Mom, does Richard go out of town on business a lot?”

“I wouldn’t say a lot. He does sometimes.”

“And when he goes, do you always know where?”

“Sometimes, but not always.”

“Doesn’t that make you suspicious? What if he isn’t going out of town on business? What if he’s still doing it?”

“What? Murdering young girls?” The mother was now trembling. She leaned forward, put her head in her hands on the table and began to wail uncontrollably. Between sobs and gasps she pleaded, “I don’t know what to believe anymore. What are we going to do?”

Jan went to her mother and hugged her. “He called to tell us he would be out of town tonight on business. The good news is we have



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until tomorrow afternoon before he gets back. We need to focus. Now that we have a little more time, we need to come up with a plan, one that will keep us safe until he's caught."

"What are you thinking?"

"I think we need to pack only what we'll need for a few days, get out of here today, and go where no one can find us. I'm going to hold off on calling the police until we are somewhere safe. Then I'll call them, tell them what we know, and, if they want to catch him they can stake out our house tomorrow. If we are lucky, he'll be in jail tomorrow night, you can come back here, and I can get back to the beach and be ready for school on Monday."

"And if we aren't lucky?"

"Then we need to be able to hide out as long as it takes for them to arrest him."

Mrs. Perkins wiped her face with a napkin, looked at her daughter, and a faint smile emerged. "I've never seen you like this before, so clear thinking, in charge and all. Where did my sweet little naïve girl go? I have never been more proud of you."

"Good to know, Mom. Now let's go pack."

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## Chapter 36

Jan and her mother were in the kitchen gathering some food for their trip when the phone startled them again. Jan checked the caller-ID and saw it was Ashley Roberts, Jan's roommate. She was tempted to let it go to voicemail, but decided to answer before it did.

"Hi Ashley, I don't have much time right now. My mom and I need to go somewhere. What's up?"

"I promise not to take long. But could you go get on your mom's computer and bring up Skype? There's something I want to show you."

"Can't I call you back?"

"It won't take but a minute. I promise."

After Jan had booted the computer and turned on Skype she clicked on an icon with her own picture on it, and Ashley's face appeared on the screen.

"I went for a walk on the beach this morning and I found this conch." Ashley held it in front of the webcam. "Isn't it beautiful? It's the biggest one I've ever found and it isn't cracked or broken anywhere. Where do you think we should put it?"

Ordinarily Jan would have been thrilled with Ashley's treasure, but not today. As the roommate was mentioning possible places to

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display the conch, Jan saw a figure move past the window in the background. “Hey Ashley, It looks like you’re about to have company and I really need to go.”

Ashley turned around to see who was at the door, and exclaimed, “Oh, it’s your stepdad. You didn’t tell me he was coming. I’ll be right back.”

Terror seized every fiber of Jan’s being. “Wait, Ashley. Don’t answer the door. Wait.”

But Ashley didn’t seem to hear the warning.

Jan watched the monitor in horror as Ashley bounced over to the door and opened it. Should she call the police? She reached into her pocket for her cellphone. But something told her to turn on the phone’s video camera instead. She began recording what was playing out on the screen.

“This is a pleasant surprise,” Ashley said cheerily as she invited her visitor in. “If you’re looking for Jan, you missed her by a few hours. Didn’t she tell you she was going to your house for the weekend?”

“I’m not here for Jan. I was in the area and I like to check on the place now and then.”

Ashley backed out of his way. “I think everything’s in good shape right now. I don’t think we’ve had any problems since you got the air conditioner fixed.”

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“I’m glad to know you haven’t had any trouble. If you don’t mind, I’ll look around and make sure. Are you alone?”

“There’s nobody else here, make yourself at home.”

He drew close to Ashley. “I need to check something out in the bedroom and I need you to come with me.”

She hesitated. He grabbed her by the hand. She tried to take it back but he held on tight. “I’ve been watching you for a long time. I think we both know there’s something between us. It’s time we did something about it.”

Ashley struggled to pull away, but he began to drag her toward the bedroom.

The sound of Jan’s voice suddenly filled the room. “Stop Richard. “You stop NOW,” she screamed. “Run Ashley! Run!” Reddy whirled around, his wide eyes wildly searching the room. When they finally came to rest on the computer positioned on the kitchen counter and Jan’s face on the screen, he released his grip on Ashley’s arm. She broke toward the door as he rushed to the computer. Jan watched in horror as her father peered menacingly into the camera. The image blurred, the screen rotated rapidly between the floor and the ceiling, followed by a clunk, and then darkness.

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## Chapter 37

Sharon was in her office typing up her notes on the interview with the Smith couple when Jan Reddy's call rang in. What she heard next was the revelation that Carl Reddy and Richard Perkins were one-and-the-same, followed by a panic-stricken account of what had transpired at the family beach house. It was stunning news. The break Sharon had longed to see. But it was not the time for celebration. Lives were in danger, and Reddy was most likely on the run. "Slow down, Jan, and tell me what you need me to do."

"We think he took advantage of my being home to go after Ashley at the cottage. I called 911 about thirty minutes ago, told them about the emergency, and they connected me to the Carolina Beach police. They said they would send someone right away. Mom and I are scared. We don't know what's happening down there. You said to call if I needed anything, and you're the only person I could think of. I need you to find out if Ashley's OK? And whether they caught my father? We have to know. If he got away we've got to get out of here and go somewhere he can't find us."

Sharon pieced together a plan in her mind. "Do your best to stay calm, and stay where you are for the moment. I'll make a call and get back to you shortly." She dialed the office of Craig Daniels. When the voicemail kicked in, she decided not to leave a message and called the detective's cell instead.

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On the fifth ring, Daniels answered. "Why am I not surprised to get a call from my favorite reporter just when I was starting to catch some fish."

"Where are you?"

"I'm next to my favorite crappie hole on Falls Lake. Now what's so important on a beautiful spring Saturday it can't wait till Monday?"

Sharon quickly relayed Jan Reddy's account and Daniels agreed to put in a call to the Carolina Beach Police for an update.

As Sharon waited for the call back from Daniels, she could barely contain her emotions. She kept remembering the physical similarity between Ashley and her sister Becky. She was not sure she could handle it if something happened to the girl. From what Jan had told her, the visit to see her at the beach had set all this in motion. She was going to have a hard time living with herself if Ashley turned up dead. She began to offer up an urgent prayer.

The prayer was abruptly interrupted when Daniels called back. "The good news is, the girl is safe. Ashley ran about a mile up the beach and was hiding behind a bush next to a cottage when the police found her."

Sharon looked toward the ceiling and whispered "Thank you."

"Now for the bad news," Daniels continued. "They haven't found Reddy yet. His car is gone and they think he may have looked for her at first, and then left when he realized the cops were on their way. The



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girl was shaken up, but not injured. She's at the station now, giving a statement. Since there was a BOLO already out on Reddy, the guys down there are taking it seriously. State troopers have make, model and license, so there's still a good chance they'll get him before he gets too far."

"That's great news about the roommate. But I hope nobody underestimates Reddy. The man's been hiding under our noses all this time and getting away with it. He can't be dumb. He has to have some kind of emergency plan?"

"As soon as I hang up I'll get out an alert for the surrounding states. Wilmington is pretty close to South Carolina, and Virginia isn't all that far the other way. I doubt he'll go back to the house, but stranger things have happened. It concerns me the wife and daughter could be at risk if he does. It's outside our jurisdiction, but I'll see if we can get Sherriff's deputies out there to watch the house."

"I'll call back and let Jan and Mrs. Perkins know what's going on."

Jan answered on the first ring. Sharon reported on the status of things.

"Please, Ms. Noble." Jan pleaded, "You have to help me and my mom find some place safe to stay. We are racking our brains, and, everywhere we can think of we're afraid he might think of too. We don't dare go to relatives, and, wherever we go, if we try to get money out of the bank to live on, or use a credit card, he's going to find out and come looking for us."

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Sharon tried to think of a place where Jan and her mother would be safe. An idea popped in her head. She rejected it at first as too weird, but the more she thought about it, the more she liked it. "Let me see what I can do. I'll call you back in a few minutes. You should be ready to leave then."

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Jan paced the kitchen floor until the phone finally rang. Sharon instructed her to write down an address.

Jan dutifully jotted it on a sticky note, tore the page from the pad, and put it in her jeans pocket. The mother and daughter went to the car, backed out and headed toward town.

Exactly where are we going?" Donna Perkins asked anxiously.

"We're going to the home of a couple named Goldman. I believe their names are Jacob and Anne. Sharon says they are wonderful people."

"Do we know them?"

"Not exactly, but their daughter's name was Paula. Now don't freak out, mom. Paula was one of the babysitter's Richard killed. We should be safe there. He'd never in a million years think about our going there."

## Chapter 38

Around dusk, a shadowy figure emerged from the woods at the rear of the Perkins home, unlocked the back door, and slipped into the kitchen. A Sheriff's deputy parked under a streetlamp in front of the house remained oblivious. Carl Reddy had been careful to stay out of his line of sight.

Reddy systematically searched the house. There was no sign of Donna or Jan. Suitcases were missing from bedroom closets. He had hoped it would never come to this. He had been so careful these last few years. Only Donna had known the truth about his real identity, and through everything she steadfastly believed in his innocence. As always, she had believed exactly what he wanted her to believe. And when he had come back into their lives, Jan had not suspected a thing.

He wondered what his daughter knew now. There was a chance Jan was only aware of what she had seen earlier in the afternoon. Maybe it could be explained away. After all, nothing really happened. But he couldn't take the chance.

When he had left the beach house he knew he would need to act quickly. Under the circumstances, it made no sense to pursue Ashley. He would have to wait for another opportunity, if there could ever be one. The success of his emergency plan depended on getting back to Raleigh without being caught. When he fled the beach house, he

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jumped in his white Lexus, and drove north to the Carolina Pier. He pulled into the parking lot which was crowded with the vehicles of fishermen. Circling the lot he spied a spot between two camper-top pick-ups and backed in. He retrieved a screwdriver from the glove compartment, and in less than three minutes he had exchanged the Lexus plate with one from an older Dodge Caravan. He waited in the lot until the blue lights and sirens of the police cars converging on the cottage were safely out of sight. Donning sunglasses he headed toward Raleigh, being careful to watch his speed.

Now, as he moved through the house, his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness. After a thorough search, he returned to the kitchen. On the counter a few feet from the phone was a sticky note pad. *That's odd.* He picked up the pad and ran his fingers lightly over the top page, but the scar tissue on his fingertips prevented him from detecting anything. He held the pad up to the light filtering in through the window from a neighborhood streetlamp. Still nothing. He shuffled through the kitchen junk drawer and found a lead pencil, shaded the page lightly, and held it up to the light again. An address was now legible.

Making his way upstairs to his home office across the hall from his bedroom he closed the blind to the window. Not satisfied with the result, he went into Jan's room, pulled a quilt from her bed, returned to the study and hung it over the blind, being careful to stuff it securely around the edges. Then he turned on his computer, clicked on his web browser, and typed in the address he had found on the sticky note. A moment later he was staring at the screen in disbelief. Donna and Jan

## DESPERATE AMENDS

had gone to stay with Jacob and Anne Goldman. His mind flashed to an intense memory, the terror on the face of Paula Goldman as she realized she was going to die.

He moved quickly now, back down the stairs, through the kitchen and into the laundry room. There he pulled the dryer out from the wall, unplugged it and unfastened the exhaust. He knelt down in the spot where the dryer had been. He lifted a trap door. Beneath it was a sealed compartment containing a fire and waterproof steel safe. He dialed the combination and lifted open the door. Inside was an ample supply of cash to tide him over until he could access his secret offshore account. But the real treasure was the shoebox containing the driver's license, passport, credit cards and other documents he would soon need.

After removing the money and the documents he paused for a moment. His eyes focused on another box wrapped tightly with string and resting in a bottom corner of the safe. He considered whether to take it with him or burn its contents. He decided he could do neither. It was far too risky to have the box in his possession. Yet he knew he could never bring himself to destroy the things inside. He closed the safe, fastened the trap door, and reinstalled the washer.

Moments later he slipped out the back door and through the woods to his car. He drove toward the airport. There he planned to leave the car in the parking area, pick up a rental under his new name, and tie up some loose ends before leaving town.

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## Chapter 39

Wes finished chapel service on Sunday morning and went to his car in the prison lot. He was in a hurry. He needed to get on the road in order to retrieve Harry's money before nightfall. It would be at least a five hour drive to the remote mountain farm where the money had been stashed for over two decades, and he was anxious to get started.

As he climbed into his Toyota Highlander his eye caught the image of a figure sitting in a black Ford Taurus stationed several rows away.

*That's odd.* Probably a guard keeping an eye on things. He shrugged. The ways of prison security were still a mystery, although he had been impressed to learn during orientation the procedures were highly effective. There had not been an escape from the maximum security facility for decades.

He nestled in the driver's seat, sipped on a Dr. Pepper, drove to I-40, and headed west. Turning on the CD player, he began to sing along with the Christian artists. The contemporary hymns brought back memories of his days as a pastor. A wave of misery swept over him as he again thought of all he had lost. He switched off the music. He didn't need his vision clouded by tears while driving on an interstate. He tried to get his mind off of the past.

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His thoughts turned to Sharon. He was attracted to her. What man wouldn't be? But the loss of Katlin was still raw. He doubted he was ready for another relationship. At the moment Sharon was a friend, yet he couldn't help but wonder if it could be more, if it was supposed to be more. Unfortunately, things had not gone well the last time they were together. What he had said about forgiveness was what he sincerely believed. But she had surprised him with her reluctance to consider ever forgiving someone like the murderer of her sister.

Maybe it was his imagination, but it felt as if she had grown distant and angry. That's probably why she hadn't called him since he had dropped her off at the newspaper on Friday. He had struggled for two days with the urge to call her, but was not sure it was a good idea.

Shortly after he passed through the edge of Winston Salem he decided he could not stand it any longer. He needed reassurance. He took out his phone and selected her number.

"I'm glad you called," Sharon said with more than a little enthusiasm. "A lot has happened since I last saw you on Friday."

Wes breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe his insecurities had been working overtime. Sharon told him about the previous day's events involving Jan, her mother, Ashley and Reddy. "I'm on pins and needles. We were so close to catching him yesterday. The police in seven states are looking, but, for the moment, we have no idea where he is. It's frustrating."



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“Wow! I had no idea. I didn’t see anything in the paper this morning. Did I miss it?”

“We decided to hold off one more day. If he’s still close by, we don’t want to spook him. Richard Perkins may not yet be aware we know he’s Reddy. He may think his attack on Ashley could still turn out to be a simple assault charge. On the other hand, we might need the public’s help in finding him, and for all we know he’s getting further away by the minute. It’s a gamble, but my gut tells me he’s close by, at least for now. Detective Daniels and I agree, if he doesn’t turn up in the next twenty-four hours, we should go with the story.

“What a remarkable development. How does it feel after all these years to be this close?”

“I don’t think I know how I feel right now. Ask me after he’s under lock and key. So, Wes, what’s new at your end? Didn’t you say something about a trip?”

“I’m between Winston Salem and Statesville going toward the mountains as we speak.”

“The trip wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact Harrison grew up in the mountains, would it?”

Oops! TMI! “I’ll need to take the fifth on your question for the time being. I should know better than to give a sharp reporter like you the tiniest bit of information.

“You can’t blame a girl for trying.”

## DESPERATE AMENDS

“There’s something I need to ask you. The other day when we talked, I thought I might have said something to offend you.”

Wes, travelling seventy-miles an hour in the left lane, topped a hill and found both lanes blocked by eighteen-wheeled trucks only a few yards in front of him. He threw on the brakes and went into a defensive maneuver. His tires screeched as the cell phone went flying to the passenger seat floor. He managed to miss the truck in front of him by a few inches, slip onto the shoulder, and come to a halt behind a disabled vehicle next to a guard rail.

He could hear Sharon yelling, “Are you all right, Wes? What’s happened? Are you OK?”

Wes unbuckled his seatbelt, reached for the phone and quickly reassured her. They agreed to talk again soon. After driving at a snail’s pace for over an hour through single-lane road construction, the traffic began to flow smoothly at interstate speeds again. Wes looked at his watch. He hoped he still had time to get to his destination before dark.

As he began to see mountains in the distance he glanced in his rear view mirror and noticed a dark car. He was not sure of the make. He realized it could be the same one he had seen several times on the trip. It consistently remained behind him, three or four cars back. He tried to shrug it off. Not easy. More than two million dollars. What if someone else knew what he was up to?

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As he drove through Asheville and travelled north on I-26 he checked his mirror frequently. There was no longer any sign of the car. He must have been imagining things. *Got to stop letting my fears get the better of me.*

When he reached an exit not far from the Tennessee border he took a right and checked the map to Harry's small mountainside farm

He followed the directions carefully, navigating turn after turn as he steadily gained altitude. Twice he thought he might have gotten lost only to find the next landmark reassuring.

Twenty minutes after leaving the interstate, while driving along a ridge, he made a sharp right down a narrow dirt drive between thick stands of trees. He continued about an eighth of a mile until he came to a rocky creek crossing. The remains of the ruts of the road proceeded up a hill on the other side. Harry had warned him not to go further. Even an SUV might not make it safely across, especially this time of the year.

He needed to hurry. Darkness comes quickly on the east side of a mountain. Wes climbed out of the Highlander, looked around to make sure he was alone, and gingerly stepped on the more substantial rocks in the creek bed, making his way to the other side.

The old driveway ascended sharply and to the right. A clump of mountain laurel soon blocked his view of the creek behind him. He kept climbing. Tall leafless trees towered above. Spindly undergrowth and a landscape of shadowy rocks, rotting leaves, and decaying logs

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surrounded him. He wished he had been able to get there earlier in the day. He squeezed the flashlight in his hand.

Wes continued as the ruts climbed upward another hundred yards. Then, as they bore to the left, he could make out the outline of an old barn. He was winded now from the climbing and the thin air. No more than twenty feet from the barn door, he stopped to catch his breath. A rustling of leaves. What the...?

A man carrying a shotgun had stepped from behind a tree and was blocking his way.

## Chapter 40

“Who might you be?” the bearded man asked accusingly. “I might near shot your head off. Thought for a second you was a deer.”

The towering figure spoke without the benefit of any visible teeth. A dirty tan baseball cap topped a head of shoulder length, unkempt, hair. His face sprouted a scraggly white beard extending to the middle of his chest. Wes guessed him to be in his late seventies or early eighties.

“Wonder my boy didn’t shoot you too, from where he was sittin’ up there.” The old man pointed behind Wes to a platform between forked tree limbs about twenty feet off the ground. Perched on the planks was a clean shaven man about fifty-years-of-age, wearing overalls and a hunting cap, and pointing his gun uncomfortably in the direction of Wes.

Wes’s heart was pounding so hard he thought his chest might explode. “My name is Rev. Wesley Barrett. I hope I am not on the wrong property. I was looking for the land of a Mr. Harry Harrison who asked me to come here.”

“Well, I’ll be! A man of God, and looking for Harry Harrison right here in the middle of nowhere. This here’s his place alright. But I’m afraid he don’t live here. Never did. If you want to see the man, you got to go down to the prison in Raleigh. You best hurry too. The man’s

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goin' be executed real soon. I 'spect he could use your services, preacher. Now 'posed you go on back the way you come, so you don't frighten off the deer when they come down through here to go to the creek just before it gets dark."

"I'm sorry. I should have made myself clearer. I'm not looking *for* him. He sent me. I'm a chaplain at the prison. I'm here to try to help Mr. Harrison put his house in order. He asked me to come here to get a couple of keepsakes he left here a long time ago, provided they are still here, so I can dispose of them according to his wishes."

"Keepsakes, you say." The old mountain man's change from hostile to friendly was instantaneous. "Well, why didn't you say so? We know about keepsakes. We got things been passed down since our ancestors came to these mountains. We're Barnhills. My boy up there is Willie, and I'm Ollie. Our family has lived hereabouts for five generations. We always liked Harry."

Willie, still perched in the tree, lowered his gun and waved. Wes cautiously waved back.

"We were right surprised to find out about the killings." Ollie continued. "Hard to believe Harry would'a done a thing like that. He come from a good family. His daddy was a lawyer down in Burnsville. He helped me one time when I had a little trouble with the game warden. Harry always did right by us. He let us hunt on his place whenever we wanted to, and we kept an eye on things for him. He knows the way it is 'round here. We don't hunt like city folk. We only

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kill what we eat. Our freezer's been getting empty, and we don't like to run out of deer meat. It don't matter what month it is on the mountain, when the freezer's empty, it's deer season. You get my meaning? You just go on about your business, preacher, and we'll go on about our'n. We ain't goin'a bother you none."

"I'm very pleased to meet you," a relieved Wes said as he offered his hand and Ollie Barnhill shook it vigorously. "Thank you for your hospitality. I hate to interrupt your hunt, but I do need to get this done today."

"Well, truth be known, thar ain't no need for my boy and me to stay here no more, 'cause if there's any deer 'round we done spooked um. But we got other spots."

The younger Barnhill climbed down from the tree and the two hunters tipped their hats, and proceeded to descend the old drive in the direction Wes had just come. He watched until they were out of sight, then proceeded to the old barn.

Just as Harry had earlier described it, the barn was a sturdy two story tin-roofed weather-worn structure which backed up to the vertical side of a mountain ridge. The large front doors below the hay loft were latched from the inside, but Wes found a single side door slightly ajar, entered it, turned on his flashlight, and looked around. A strong odor penetrated his nostrils. Visual evidence of a significant population of mice was pervasive. Bones from an animal carcass were scattered on the dirt floor. Wes was not sure, but the remains of the

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tail made him believe it was a dead raccoon. Near the double front doors, several bats were hanging from the floor joists of the loft. An old wheelbarrow rested against one post. A shovel leaned against another. Wes wondered about the possibility of snakes, though he assured himself, given the elevation, it was too early in the season for cold blooded creatures to be active.

A set of wooden stairs ascended to the loft area near the door. Clearing a layer of cobwebs with his arm, he climbed the steps gingerly. He worried they might not hold his weight, but they proved solid. At the top he turned toward the rear wall that backed up to the side of the ridge. Against the middle of it a large rectangular rack contained a dozen or so pegs intended for hanging tools. Remarkably, two pitchforks and a harness still rested on their hangers undisturbed.

Following Harry's instructions, Wes removed the tools and pulled on a top and a bottom corner peg until they came free of their sockets. He then grabbed two other pegs in the middle of the rack with his hands, and began to pull the entire tool frame to the right. It remained stuck for only an instant then slid freely to the side. A rush of cool air washed over him as he peered into a black cave.

The opening was about five feet tall and seven or eight feet wide. Inside it quickly became much narrower. He checked the entire area with his light. For a moment, the beam fell on a mouse perched on a ledge staring back at him curiously and without fear. Wes took a deep breath, bent over, and entered.



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When he had gone about ten feet, it was necessary for him to get down on his knees and to crawl on rough rocks. Just as he was starting to feel slightly claustrophobic, the cave opened into a much larger room of stone. Wes stood up. All was eerily quiet except for the sound of water dripping into a pool to his right. He quickly surveyed the cavern with his light. On a dry natural shelf on his left he spied the two duffle bags.

You were right, Harry. Still here, after all this time.

Several minutes later, he had pushed and shoved the two bags, one at a time, through the small opening that led back to the barn. Despite the chill of the cave, by the time he had maneuvered them to the loft floor and closed the peg panel, he was out of breath and sweating. But he had no desire to stop and rest. He could lift the bags, but they were too heavy to carry more than a few feet at a time. Stopping to rest along the way, he lugged them to the stairs. Then, a few steps at a time, being careful not to let them tumble, he slid them to the main floor of the barn.

Saying a prayer of thanks for the unlikely provision of a wheelbarrow with a steel wheel in the long abandoned barn, he fetched it, loaded the duffel bags onto it and pushed it outside. While it was mostly downhill back to the Highlander, the weight of the bags and the softness of the ruts tortured Wes's back, arms, and legs, requiring him to stop frequently.

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When he finally reached the creek, little twilight remained. The wheelbarrow would be no help in crossing the creek. Wes struggled to negotiate the rocks while hand carrying each of the bags to the other side. Once, as he carried the second bag, his foot slipped and went into the icy water, soaking his sock and shoe. When both bags had been dragged successfully to the rear of the Highlander, he leaned against the vehicle and tried to catch his breath before attempting to lift them into the cargo area. It was then he glimpsed a black car parked up the hill about fifty feet away. His heart jumped toward his throat.

It was blocking the way out!

Wes reached for one of the bags. The dark vehicle's headlights came on and it began to move rapidly in Wes's direction. Temporarily blinded by the bright beams, Wes stopped in his tracks. The car halted a few feet from him and its occupant shouted in a thick southern drawl, "Leave them where they are. Put your hands on the back of your head. Turn around and walk to the creek. Don't look back or you're a dead man."

Wes's pounding heart dropped into his stomach like a rock. Somebody was about to take Harry's money and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Harry had trusted him with more than two million dollars in cash. And he was going to believe Wes stole it.

But no amount of money was worth his life. Harry could believe what he wanted. Wes was going to do as he was told. Maybe. Just

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maybe he could get out of this alive if he gave up the money. He walked slowly toward the creek, with his hands clasped on his head.

That voice. I've heard that voice before. But where?

When he stopped at the edge of the water, he heard the car door open. Whoever it was would soon have Harry's money and be gone.

BOOM! A sudden jarring explosion and blast of light had filled the air, followed instantly by the shattering of small nearby tree branches.

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Wes instinctively fell to the ground. He wondered at first if he had been shot. He mentally checked himself for injury. No pain anywhere.

“Next time I shoot, I’m a’gonna blow your dang head off if you don’t leave those bags where they is, get in the car, and back right out’a here this here minute,” Ollie Barnhart yelled ferociously.

A moment later a car door slammed and Wes could hear its tires kicking mud and gravel as it raced backward up the hill. He raised his head, peered around the side of his own vehicle, and watched the lights of the Taurus as it continued all the way to the main road above.

“You OK, preacher?” Barnhart asked.

Wes, still hugging the ground, responded, “I’m good.”

“Well, if you’d like, me and my boy here will be glad to help you put these here *keepsakes* in your car.”

“I would greatly appreciate it.” Getting up, Wes made his way back to the car as his eyes again adjusted to the darkness. The men lifted the bags into the cargo area of the Highlander and closed the door.

“None of my business,” Ollie commented. “But these here keepsakes are mighty heavy. You best be careful with ‘em on the way home.”

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Wes thanked the two hunters profusely, shook their hands vigorously, jumped into the Highlander, backed up a few feet, turned around, and sped up the drive. At the road he turned right. At the last second, decided to go home a different way than he had come, hoping to avoid the black Taurus which was probably waiting for him somewhere on the previous route.

Earlier in the day, before he left Raleigh, Wes had marked out and memorized an alternate route in case of emergency. Now he navigated the unfamiliar roads until they led him down the mountain to a main highway. When he was back on I-40, he relaxed a little, but remained vigilant. He was not sure he had outmaneuvered the Taurus.

The trip was uneventful as he passed through Asheville and descended the interstate at Black Mountain. Then, as he was passing a rest stop on I-40 near the town of Old Fort, he glimpsed what he thought might be it parked on the side of an exit ramp. It turned on its lights, entered the highway, and fell in behind him.

Wes instinctively increased his speed. The Highlander was not made for racing, and Wes knew he would have difficulty outrunning the Taurus. He would have to rely on what he hoped would be a skill advantage. He was soon going 110 mph and passing other cars as if they were parked in the middle of the highway. The Taurus fell behind a few car lengths as both vehicles wove in and out of traffic.

The median of the four-lane interstate had almost continuous sets of guardrails lining both the eastbound and westbound lanes. As

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the Taurus continued to follow close behind, Wes saw ahead a break in the guardrail. He swerved and pulled onto the right shoulder, suddenly slamming on the brakes. He fought to keep control of the steering, as the challenged computerized brake system succeeded in preventing major swerving.

The Taurus flew past on Wes's left. As the Highlander tires threw off smoke, he came abreast of the opening in the guardrail. Now going slow enough to make a sharp left turn, he accelerated across the eastbound lanes as approaching cars sat on their horns. He maneuvered through the opening in the rail, descended an embankment, bobbed wildly over a ditch, and climbed a few feet before entering the westbound lanes. He checked his rearview mirror. The Taurus had stopped on the left shoulder of the eastbound lanes.

*"Gotcha!!* He'll never make it across the ditch in that car.

With a triumphant grin stretching across his face, Wes drove to the nearest exit.

He now suspected there was some type of tracking system on his SUV. How else would the driver of the Taurus have known it was him? And how did he find Harry's place when Wes was certain he had not been followed?

If there was a tracker, he was fairly confident it had a limited range, and that a pursuer would need to be fairly close in order to find him. Wes reasoned the driver of the Taurus had known he would be

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traveling back to Raleigh on the interstate, so he lay in wait at the rest stop until his sensor identified the tracker passing by.

He decided to take a series of alternate roads back. As he worked his way into town he faced another challenge. He had originally planned to go back to his apartment. In the morning he would take the money to a bank where a few days before he had rented three large safety deposit boxes. But going home was too risky. Now that he was in the Raleigh area he worried whoever was stalking him would again pick up the signal of the tracker. If he was going to keep the money safe until the bank opened, he would need help. He took out his cell, hesitated for a moment, and called Sharon.

Sharon met him in the parking deck at the Crabtree Valley Shopping Center. Wes had reasoned the concrete parking garage would make it more difficult for the stalker to pick up the tracker. He unloaded the bags and put them in the back seat of Sharon's car. They drove away leaving the Highlander and the tracker behind.

Sharon cracked the window. "What in the world is in those bags?"

"Please don't ask, Sharon."

"Whatever it is, it smells awful."

Wes realized he had been so preoccupied with the perils of his journey he had not even noticed until now the musty foul odor emitting from the canvas bags which had coexisted with mice for two decades.

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“Please trust me, Sharon. I can’t tell you right now what’s going on, but I appreciate more than words can express your helping me out.”

“You said on the phone someone was chasing you and you couldn’t go back to your apartment. Can you at least tell me why someone is chasing you? And if you can’t tell me what’s in the bags, can you at least tell me it’s not drugs or something illegal?”

“Believe me, I wouldn’t be involved myself if it was. I can tell you this, somebody wants what’s in those bags and I have no idea who it is, or how they knew I was going to get them. But whoever it is, is somebody dangerous.”

You sure you don’t want to tell me what’s going on?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t right now. I hope you can trust me when I tell you I am trying to do what’s right. I’ll be able to fill you in soon.”

“I’ll count on it. In the meantime, would you tell me what’s in the bags if I guess correctly?”

“I still can’t tell you.”

“Oh well. As I like to say, ‘You can’t blame a girl for trying.’ Actually, I’m glad you called. Reddy, a.k.a. Perkins, is somewhere nearby. I just know it. I can feel it in my bones. I keep thinking about what he did to Rebecca. I don’t think I could sleep right now if I took sleeping pills. So what do you say we make a pot of coffee and stay up all night and watch old movies on TV.”



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“Sounds perfect.”

## Chapter 42

Jan Reddy and Donna Perkins had arrived at the Goldman's home on Saturday afternoon. They had spent the remainder of the day getting acquainted and sharing life stories with each other.

By Sunday, everyone was carefully avoiding additional mention of Jan's father and the murders. There was not much more to be said. In the afternoon they played a board game. Around four, Jan took a two hour nap. By the time the dishes were done, everyone was weary and relieved to have the option of watching a movie. Twice, lightning from a line of thunderstorms moving through the area caused the lights and TV to flicker. When the movie was over the Goldmans retired to the master bedroom at one end of the house, while Jan and Donna went to their respective guest rooms in the opposite direction.

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Carl Reddy watched from his rental car as the lights on each end of the ranch home were turned off a few minutes past eleven. As the spring storms waxed and waned, he waited patiently. As a child he had been fascinated when his cat crouched motionless for hours waiting for a mouse to emerge from behind his mom's refrigerator. Patience had paid off for the cat and the incident taught Carl a valuable lesson for his own later life as a predator.

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Patience had served him well on his 'business trips'. His methods had been perfected over time. He first researched his victims on Facebook. Then with the aid of a fake ID and public library computers, he chatted extensively with them online while posing as a nineteen-year-old boy. When he was in the area, he had followed them in order to become familiar with their routines and associations. Only when he was confident the time was right did he put his plan in motion. In a series of online chats, employing information from his surveillance, he seduced each girl into meeting him in an isolated area. This gave him the freedom to do with them exactly what he wanted. He was much more careful now than he had been when he was younger. After it was done, he took great pains to insure the bodies of the girls would never be found.

Shortly before two in the morning, he decided it was time. He emerged from the car dressed in dark pants and a black long-sleeve jersey. A hood pulled securely over his head hid all but a fraction of his face. The heavy rains had become a steady drizzle. He slipped quietly in dark shadows between thick forsythia bushes on the opposite side of the yard from the driveway. Ducking low, he made his way past the glassed porch on the side of the Goldman's home. Jutting from the back of the house was another porch, a covered, screened one enclosing a concrete patio. He slipped a box cutter out of his pocket, sliced a screen panel, climbed through, and made his way to the back door of the house. The glass panes on the upper half of the door revealed a kitchen lit by clocks on two appliances. He dried the

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soles of his shoes on the door mat. Holding a pen light on the latch area and using a screwdriver he jimmied the lock. The door popped open.

His plan was simple, but it did carry risks. Most ranch houses had similar floor plans. He would make his way to the main hallway. He believed the Goldmans' master bedroom was to the right, but he could not be certain. Assuming he was correct, he would go there first, and, using his box cutter, he would slit their throats before they had time to wake up. Then he would go to the opposite end of the house, find his wife and daughter, and do the same to them. It should all be over quickly.

He felt no ambivalence about killing Donna and Jan. After all, they had not hesitated to betray him. Over the past few years, he had provided well for them. If he had not created a new identity and come back into their lives, where would they be now? After his parents died he had taken his substantial inheritance and sandbagged it in an offshore account while he disappeared from the authorities. After resurfacing as Richard Perkins, he had taken some of these funds, and in a relatively short period of time, turned them into a series of rainmaking investments. Ironically, it had been the years he spent in prison with drug users which inspired his most lucrative deals. He now enjoyed silent partnership in fourteen highly profitable pain clinics in North and South Carolina. The profit margins were huge, and repeat business was guaranteed by the addictive nature of the products. Best of all, the investments had produced far greater wealth than his tax forms revealed. He had enough money stashed in an

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offshore account to keep him in luxury in a faraway land for the rest of his life.

While Donna and Jan were not aware of the extent of his fortune, he had provided his family the great American dream of an expensive home, luxury cars, country club membership, and a beach cottage. What a waste. A quiet rage was building inside him as he considered their ingratitude.

Reddy was proud of his recently found wealth. But he was even more proud of his exceptional intelligence. His superiority was not subject to debate. He had conclusively demonstrated it. He had been as shrewd in his investments as he was in stalking teenage girls.

Donna had been the perfect cover for his new and highly successful life, as long as she believed in him. And he, in turn, provided her with the things she had always wanted. He had made some serious mistakes in the earlier Raleigh babysitter killings, but he had been far more careful with the other girls, the ones in Charlotte. Donna had suspected nothing. Jan didn't have a clue, blissfully enjoying the benefits of his generosity, at least until now.

Reddy had long ago decided if it ever came to this he would execute Donna and Jan. Although he had killed before on several occasions, he did not think of himself as a violent person. He had never physically abused either wife or daughter. But he told himself he had no choice.

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With Donna out of the way, his escape to a new life would be less risky. She knew things that could get him caught. As for Jan, he could no longer be sure what Donna had told her. The time had come, but first, he needed to deal with Mr. and Mrs. Goldman. He had nothing personal against them. By now they knew he had killed their daughter. But it didn't matter. Their deaths meant nothing more to him than necessary collateral damage helping to insure his success in killing Donna and Jan.

Slipping quietly down the darkened hallway to his right, he took hold of a doorknob he thought would bring him to the Goldmans' bedroom. It turned easily. He cracked the door slightly; then opened it more. To his surprise, light filtering in from a window revealed it to be a bathroom.

As he turned back, the light from the bathroom illuminated the hallway enough to reveal two doors farther down the hall on each side. Because of the layout, he was now fairly certain this was the guest room end of the house. He thought about making his way to the other end to deal with the Goldmans as originally planned, but decided against it. Since he was already here, he might as well get on with it.

He tried the door knob to the bedroom on the street side where he had earlier seen a light go out. It was locked. Pointing the narrow beam of his pen light on the knob, he could tell the lock could be easily released from the hall side by inserting a wire shaped object into a

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hole at the base. He had brought along a couple of paperclips for just such an occasion.

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Jan Reddy was wide awake. After she had gone to bed around eleven she had regretted taking an afternoon nap. At two in the morning she was restlessly tossing and turning, her mind still terrorized by the events of the past two days. The light rattling of the door handle startled her. She sat straight up in bed. Her eyes were fully adjusted to the soft dimness created by the clash of darkness and the faint street light filtering through the drapes. It was not her imagination. Someone was trying to break into her room. She could only conceive of one scenario.

She hastily considered her options. They were limited. The window was the only other way out but there was not enough time. It was either into the closet or under the bed. She slid quickly out of the bed and inched her way under. It was not a moment too soon. The door squeaked and Jan could make out the shoes of a man. He flashed a tiny beam of light on the unmade bed, and around the room, then went to the closet and opened the door, shining his light into its corners and under clothes. For an instant he swept the light across his face.

It was him.

He turned his back to Jan. It was now or never. She tried to crawl out from under the bed in order to break for the door.

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Reddy swung around rapidly and for an instant his pen light blinded her. She struggled to her feet and started toward the door. It was too late. Reddy reached and grabbed her by the arm. She tried to pull away.

“Richard, let me go!”

Someone turned on the lights. Reddy had a box cutter. He was trying to maneuver her into position to slit her throat.

She yelled, kicked, and somehow managed to loosen his grip, as she fell backwards to the floor.

A shot rang out. Reddy let out a scream. The box cutter fell from his hand. Holding his bleeding bicep he charged toward the door where Jacob Goldman stood holding a gun. Goldman pointed it at Reddy and squeezed the trigger again. It did not fire. Reddy shoved Goldman out of the way ran up the hallway and out the front door. A few seconds later the squealing of his tires signaled his escape.

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Jacob Goldman looked down at his gun. It was an antique single action Colt 45. It had once been his father’s weapon. Jacob had owned it for decades, ever since his father passed away, and he had never before fired it. He stored it near his bed, but he didn’t keep it loaded. He had gotten up in the middle-of-the-night to use the bathroom and had heard a noise. He thought at first the sound had been made by one of his guests at the other end of the house. Then he realized someone



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might be trying to break in through the back door. He slipped on his robe, grabbed the gun and searched for some bullets in his bedside table. By the time he was able to check the kitchen, discover the jimmied door, and charge to the other end of the house, the intruder was already attacking Jan. In his rush, he had taken time to load only one round. The other bullets were still in his robe pocket.

Jacob stationed himself at the front door. He couldn't make out the words, but he could hear his wife's voice coming from down the hall as she tried to comfort Jan and her mother. Clenching his reloaded gun, he waited for the police.

## Chapter 43

Dr. Patrick O'Connell was not happy. He'd been awakened by the phone at two in the morning to learn the mission had failed. The man on the other end of the call described his unsuccessful attempts to confiscate from the prison chaplain the duffle bags presumed to contain Harry Harrison's hidden cache. The caller was still on the road nearly two hours away. He agreed to meet the doctor at his office around four. O'Connell reset his alarm and rolled over.

Before he could get back to sleep the phone rang again. Expecting the same person, he answered with a growl.

"Pat, this is Richard, Richard Perkins. I need to see you right away. How soon can you get to your office?"

Perkins. What rock did he crawl out from? "It's been awhile, Richard. In case you haven't noticed, it's the middle of the night. Can't it wait?"

"Patrick, I need your help, and I need it now. I've been injured and I'm losing blood and I need your medical attention right away."

"Look, Richard. The fact that you own forty-nine percent of my business doesn't mean I'm at your beck and call no matter what time of the night it is. Besides, you know I'm not a trauma surgeon. Go to an emergency room. That's what they're for."

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“I’ll explain later, but I can’t go to the emergency room for this, and I have to have medical attention now. I assure you I’ll make it worth your while. Just get dressed and get there as soon as you can. I’ll be waiting in the clinic parking lot in ten minutes.”

“It’ll take me twenty if I leave now, and I’m not even dressed.”

“Then you better get moving.” The line went dead.

O’Connell jumped out of bed, threw on some clothes and grabbed an emergency medical bag he kept at the house. He went to the BMW and headed for the clinic, cursing to himself most of the way. When he needed the funds to start his clinic, he had welcomed Richard as a silent partner. But now he wanted nothing more than to be free from the leech. The most painful moment of each month was making that big fat electronic transfer to Richard’s offshore account.

When O’Connell pulled into a parking space behind the building, Perkins got out of his car and met him at the rear door.

The physician took one look at the bloody right arm his business partner was holding tightly with his left hand and said, “What did you do, Richard? Get shot while robbing a bank?”

“It’s a long story. Can we just go inside and get this fixed?”

“So it is a gunshot?” O’Connell shook his head. “I knew it. Since you wouldn’t go to an emergency room, what else could it be? What have you gotten me into? You know if I don’t report it, I could be charged, not to mention lose my medical license.”

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O'Connell unlocked the door and the two men made their way to an exam room near the doctor's office. The light revealed a wild-eyed Perkins with blood soaked shirt and pants. From the expression on his face, it was obvious the man was in a great deal of pain.

"Don't worry Patrick." Perkins said through gritted teeth, "I'm going to make this very worthwhile for you."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Let's just say, if you do a good job, I'll sign over my share of the business to you and you will be free of me forever."

"Let me get this straight. If I patch you up, I can put that in writing and you will sign it tonight?"

"That's what I said. Now can you get me fixed up? I have somewhere I need to be."

"You keep the pressure on while I get my instruments. You've lost a lot of blood, but I don't think the main artery was hit. Otherwise, You wouldn't have made it here."

O'Connell carried his medical bag back to his office, scrubbed, put on surgical gloves, and removed the prepackaged instruments along with a bottle of antiseptic. He placed a tray on a rolling cart and covered it with a sterile towel. Beginning with the scalpel, and without touching the instruments, he carefully released each one from its plastic sanitized wrapping. The cart was now almost ready to be wheeled back to the exam room. He went to his desk drawer, retrieved

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the revolver he kept in case of a robbery, and placed it under a towel on the second shelf of the cart.

When he rejoined Perkins in the exam room he located a rather large hypodermic syringe in a cabinet, and explained to his patient it would be used for an injection to block the nerve in his right arm. "It will make your arm go completely numb and will last for several hours." It will be completely incapacitated until it wears off, but you will be pain free. When you begin to get feeling back, then you will need to take the pain pills I will give you."

"It won't knock me out will it? I don't want to lose consciousness."

"You will be fully conscious. I can work on you without the block if you want me to, but I wouldn't advise it. You've got a bad wound there. Trust me. You don't want me to go digging around in there until it is numb. When anything is wrong with a shoulder, it can be incredibly painful."

O'Connell administered the nerve block and sat down on a stool to wait until it took effect.

"While the shot is kicking in, why don't you tell me what this is all about?"

Perkins told O'Connell a tale about an argument with his wife that had led to her shooting at him and hitting him in the arm. He said he did not want to call the police or go to an emergency room because he

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did not want to get his wife in trouble. O'Connell wasn't buying it, but he didn't really care. He just wanted to get it over with.

When the arm was fully numb, the physician, donned fresh sterile gloves, took his scalpel and cut a slit on each side of the bullet's entrance hole in order to widen it. Then he inserted the ends of a narrow set of forceps and fished around in the wound in search of the bullet. Just when he was about to give up, he felt it, clamped it and eased it out of the wound. "You are lucky. It might have been a problem if I hadn't been able to find it."

O'Connell took gauze and surgical tape, packed and wrapped the wound, and instructed Perkins on the proper way to change the dressing. When he had finished, he turned his back on his patient with the intent of washing up in the sink. With lightning speed, Reddy seized the scalpel off the tray with his left hand, stood up, reached around and cut a deep gash in O'Connell's throat. Blood spurted out as the doctor grabbed his neck with his hand, and turned toward his attacker. The doctor instinctively gave Reddy a hard shove, pushing him backwards. Reddy stumbled. Unable to break his fall with his numb arm, he crashed to the floor. Attempting to rise, he extended his good left hand and took hold of the exam table. O'Connell reached under the towel, pulled out the gun, aimed it at Perkins, and pulled the trigger. The doctor's frequent trips to the target range paid off. The nine millimeter bullet hit his attacker squarely between the eyes, killing him instantly.

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O'Connell rushed to the mirror over the sink. He desperately hoped the cut was superficial, but he was suddenly feeling cold and faint. He must have nicked the carotid. Then, as he fell to the floor, the last thought he would have in this life passed through his mind. *I'm not ready to die.*

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Central Prison guard George Waters pulled into the parking lot of the clinic. He was exhausted from his trip and feeling humiliated. He had let a chaplain, of all things, outwit and outdrive him. After losing his quarry, he had stopped several times on the return trip and waited for the sensor to pick up the signal from the bug he had planted behind the chaplain's license plate. No luck.

Now he had to explain it all to O'Connell. The doctor could be nasty when he was in an ill mood. When he told the doc he had heard Harrison and the chaplain talking about the money, O'Connell said Harrison had blackmailed him twenty years earlier. Said he wanted his money back in a bad way. He told Waters to do whatever it takes. He would make it worth his while.

Of course Waters had fantasized about keeping the money for himself and disappearing. He wasn't sure even now if he would have been able to resist the temptation if he had gotten his hands on it. But he had worked for O'Connell a long time, and his loyalty to the man had paid off handsomely. He would not, and could not, betray him lightly. Together they had put together a lucrative business. O'Connell

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the perfect supplier, and he the top dog in what was now an elaborate system for selling drugs to Central Prison inmates. A few more years and he could retire with more money than could possibly be in Harrison's bags.

There were two cars in the clinic parking lot, and Waters wondered what was up. He could see a light on in the physician's office but the blinds were pulled. The back door was locked, but he had been entrusted with an emergency key he had used more than once to pick up new supplies in the middle of the night. As he entered the hallway, he noticed the security system had been disarmed and not reset. He first peered into the unoccupied office of the doctor, then, seeing a light on in a room down the hall, he walked to it, turned in, and stopped dead in his tracks.

"What the..." Splattered blood everywhere. He struggled to still the swirling in his head. Both men appeared to be dead, and George did not bother to verify his perception. His first urge was to run far and fast. He did not want to be anywhere close to the bodies when they were discovered. It was possible the police had been notified and were on their way, but he was fairly sure that had not yet happened.

He hurried to the medication room. In the past when he had come to pick up his supply, he had been conscientious to carefully record every drug he took in a coded log. He would also go to the bank the following day and deposit cash in a secret account owned by a shell corporation for O'Connell's clinic. This time he would not need to concern himself with any of those things.



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He found four large boxes, two filled with OxyContin, and the others with Xanax. He loaded them into his car and drove away. He was more than a little stoked. This supply would last for months, and, except for the cut for his usual network of suppliers on the units, he could keep the profits. But what then? When all of this is gone, where is the next batch going to come from. That was going to be a big problem.

## Chapter 44

Music blaring from Sharon's iPhone woke Wes with a start. It took a moment to become oriented. Sharon's living room couch. He spied the phone on the coffee table and wondered if he should answer it.

He tried to clear the fog from his brain. *The money.* His eyes searched below the window. *Whew!* The bags were still sitting where he had put them last night. The music ended.

He must have dozed off while watching an old movie with Sharon. She was nowhere to be seen. He looked at the clock. It was a little past seven-thirty.

The door to Sharon's bedroom was closed. He went to it and lightly knocked. "You in there Sharon? I think you just missed a call."

"I'll be there in a minute, Wes. I just got out of the shower. If you'd like, you can take one in the hall bathroom while I fix us some breakfast."

"I'd better take a rain check. I need to get moving. I've got some business that can't wait."

Sharon opened the door. "Are you sure? I make a mean piece of toast."

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“I better be going. I have a busy day ahead of me. But I will use your bathroom and freshen up a bit first, if you don’t mind.”

“Help yourself.”

When Wes exited the bathroom several minutes later, Sharon was standing in the middle of the living room with a stunned expression on her face. “Are you OK?” Wes asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

She held up her phone. “I pulled up the log. It was Daniels. He just told me Carl Reddy somehow found out Jan and her mother were at the Goldman’s home and tried to kill them. Fortunately they’re OK. Mr. Goldman shot and wounded Reddy before he could hurt anyone. That must have happened sometime in the middle of the night. Then, about a half hour ago, a nurse at Dr. Patrick O’Connell’s pain clinic called 911. She said she’d found the doctor and another man lying dead on the floor of the office when she got to work this morning. Now here’s the real shocker. The other man was Carl Reddy.”

“You’re kidding me!”

Sharon sank into the couch, folded her arms tightly over her chest and began to rock back and forth. “They think Reddy went to the pain clinic to get patched up after Jacob Goldman wounded him, but aren’t sure what happened after that. Evidently, Reddy slit O’Connell’s throat, and O’Connell shot Reddy before he died.

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Wes went over and sat beside her. “Let me get this straight. Reddy and O’Connell killed each other? How did they even *know* each other?”

“Daniels has no idea at this point. O’Connell had a history with Kaminski and Harry, and he also had a connection to Reddy. We have to be missing something.”

Wes put his arm around her and drew her close. She rested her head on his chest. “I can’t imagine how you must be feeling right now. After all these years of dedicating your life to finding him and bringing your sister’s killer to justice, you finally learn he’s dead.”

“I’m not sure I even know how I feel, Wes. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t relieved to know he’ll never harm anyone again. But I’d always thought he would be caught and tried. I’ve fantasized for a long time about what I might get to say to him. Now that’s not going to happen. I guess I’m feeling cheated.”

“Would it help if I stayed with you a little longer this morning?”

“Thank you, Wes. But it’s not necessary.” She pulled herself up and straightened her blouse. I need to get out of here and get on this story. This is the big one I’ve waited for my whole career.” She pointed toward the window. “And you obviously need to do something with those filthy bags of yours.”

“I’ll tell you what, Sharon.” Wes said as he went over to retrieve the bags. “Why don’t we each take care of our business and I’ll touch

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base with you later today. Just know you have a friend if you need to talk.”

“Right now, that means more to me than this journalist can express in words. But aren’t you forgetting something? Your car’s at the mall.”

## Chapter 45

Wes sighed with relief. The money rested securely in the safety deposit boxes he had rented a few days earlier. Now it was time to report back to Harry.

When he entered the cellblock, he sensed trouble. Two inmates were in a corner of the day room arguing while other prisoners crowded around hoping for a real fight to break the boredom of another day on the row. He decided he should delay his visit with Harry until things were quiet. As he turned back, a voice thundered over the loud speaker. "Everyone stop where you are. Put your hands on the backs of your heads and walk back to your cells. Do it now."

A hair-raising tingle seized the back of Wes's neck. The voice was all too familiar. He had heard it speak similar words near a mountain creek the night before. He turned to see George Waters standing in the glassed control room holding a microphone. It all made sense now. Waters must have overheard the conversation with Harry about the money. He had placed a tracker on the Highlander, probably while it was parked in the prison lot. Tried to grab the money. It was the same voice. He knew it. But what now? One thing was sure. The guard must not know he is on to him. He backed out of the dayroom and returned to his office.

An hour later, when he was fairly certain things had settled down on the row, Wes returned to find the cellblock quiet. On the way in, he forced a friendly smile as he nodded to Waters in the control room,

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then went straight to Harry's cell. The inmate listened intently to Wes's account of the previous evening's journey, and Wes's identification of Waters as his pursuer.

Harry walked over and peeked at the landing outside the cell door. "Guards sometimes spy on us, especially if they think something's going down. Waters was probably eavesdropping right here. There's no such thing as privacy on the row." He returned to his bunk. "I never cared much for Waters. But then, I never cared much for any of them. In my estimation a man has to be a little twisted even to apply for a job as a prison guard. I've heard rumors about Waters supplying drugs to some guards dealing on a couple of the other units. I wouldn't doubt it. But not here on the row. Probably too risky."

Harry breathed a deep sigh. "To tell the truth, pastor, "now that the money's safe, I don't care about Waters. I've got other things on my mind. Unless the Supreme Court or the governor comes to my rescue, you realize I'll be dead by this time next week."

Wes still had plenty of concerns about Waters. The man was dangerous. But there was no point in obsessing about it right now. Harry was right. His time was short and everything else paled by comparison. "I take it there's still no word on your appeal. I know that must be difficult. I'm in no hurry this morning, if you would like to talk about it?"

Harry shook his head wearily. "You're a good guy, Pastor. Not many in your line of work would have risked their lives to help me like

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you did yesterday. Thanks for offering, but talking about it is not going to do anything at this point but make me more anxious. I'll admit, when Kaminski came forward, I got my hopes up. But I've always known that was a long shot. It's getting too close now. I've tried everything to get my mind off of it, but it's all I think about. I've tried to pray, but all I find myself able to do is ask God to stop it from happening."

"There's nothing wrong with your prayer, it's the most natural thing in the world to want God to rescue us from death. I've been praying for that too. And maybe God will intervene. Maybe you'll get the new trial you're hoping for, or your sentence commuted. But things don't always go according to our will. Sometimes God's answer is 'No'? I think you once said you were hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst. Tell me, Harry, you've been doing a good job with the steps, are you starting to feel that God is changing you and preparing you for heaven?"

"I don't know, pastor. I did the inventory you told me to do. I prayed for forgiveness. I even felt better after I did. I thought I was getting somewhere, but the doubts keep coming back. How do we know it's true? How can I be sure God ever forgives the sins of a man like me? How do we even know there is a God? How do we know there's a heaven?" Harry looked up at Wes. His eyes had become pools of despair. "Maybe when we die we're just dead, like a dog run over on the highway. Maybe we just aren't anymore."



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Wes went over and sat next to Harry and placed his hand on his shoulder. “You might be surprised to learn, I’ve struggled with the same questions. People often wrongly assume we pastors never have any doubts or spiritual struggles. Believe me, Harry, when Katlin died, I went through a period where I doubted everything I’d ever believed. I would be angry with God one day, and deciding I didn’t believe in Him on another. I came very close to saying nothing mattered. I began to drink more and more just so I wouldn’t feel. But after I lost my church, I went into rehab and it changed everything for me. All the counselors and people who came in from the local groups to speak to us had amazing stories of how God had changed their lives. And you could tell it was very real.”

Harry lowered his gaze and resumed study the floor.

A man like Harry would never be helped by arguments. When it came to debating, he was a professional, a champion when it came to destroying the reason of others. Wes prayed for guidance. “Harry, I believe in God and God’s forgiveness because I personally am privileged to know some walking, talking miracles – people whose lives have been turned around by God’s grace. I believe in God, and God’s mercy, because I was able to take the leap of faith myself after they showed me what was possible, and, while I am far from perfect, I know God is working a miracle of recovery in my life.”

“But you already had a lot of faith. I mean, you were a pastor of a church.”

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Wes put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I'll tell you a secret. If anything, I think it made it harder for me. I mean, in the days of my self-pity I could easily have decided God had let me down. I was his servant and he was supposed to take care of me, and my wife. I thought God had betrayed me, and I was tempted to abandon my faith and become a cynic and a skeptic."

Harry shifted his scrutiny from the floor to Wes's face. "And why didn't you?"

"As I was saying, I saw what God had done in other people's lives and I decided there was hope for me. All of us have a skeptic inside us, Harry. Faith is always a risk, a leap in which we bet our very existence on the reality of God and His mercy. But it's not a leap into total darkness. Jesus has come into our world. He showed us God is real and merciful and loving. I'm here today, in this cell with you, talking about the miracle God has worked in my life because countless lives before me have experienced miraculous spiritual change. Faith is always a leap, but making it is not so difficult when we are willing to see what God has already done in other people's lives. I'm sure you have seen it Harry. You just have to be willing to recognize miracles when you see them."

"I'm trying pastor. I really am."

"I know you are, Harry. I believe you're getting there."

Wes and Harry continued to talk for a while. At one point their conversation was interrupted by an announcement from the control

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room giving all but two prisoners permission to return to the dayroom. Wes, sensing an opening, asked Harry to pray with him. Both men knelt beside the bed while the chaplain offered a fervent prayer for Harry's soul. When Wes ended with "Amen," Harry repeated it. Wes slowly rose and headed for the door.

"Wait up, pastor. Before you go, we need to talk about my amends." Harry went to the table, picked up his AA book and removed a piece of folded note paper from its pages. "I've written down the names of the people and the amounts they're to receive. The list is in the order I want you to make them. I need you to get this done this week. I don't want to die before I've done what I'm supposed to."

After Wes left the cellblock and was almost back to his office, curiosity got the best of him. He unfolded the paper and glanced at its contents. Louis Kaminski was at the top of the list.

## Chapter 46

Wes picked up a morning paper on the way to the bank on Tuesday. The headline screamed, “Babysitter Murders Solved, Killer Slain.” It contained three related articles, all written by Sharon.

The lead story recounted the pre-dawn events of the previous day. A second piece recalled details surrounding the old cases. The third revealed Reddy’s recent identity as Richard Perkins, a successful, wealthy investor, enjoying the good life with his naïve wife and unsuspecting daughter. The final paragraph of the last article quoted cold case detective Craig Daniels, who said investigators were examining a possible connection between Reddy and some missing girls in Charlotte.

Wes read and reread the articles as he waited in a coffee shop in downtown Raleigh. Under the table, an oversized briefcase he had purchased at Wal-Mart the night before was sandwiched between his legs. It contained the \$125,000 he had removed from one of his safety deposit boxes a half-hour earlier.

Thumbing through the pages, Wes’s eye caught another headline – *Decision in Harrison Case Imminent*. According to the clip, The U. S. Supreme Court was expected to announce the following day whether or not they would hear the case.

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This was huge! If they refused, it could be all over. If they accepted it, the justices might still agree with the lower courts' denials. But if they were to decide in Harry's favor, his execution would be stopped and a new trial ordered. Time for the Serenity Prayer. Some things are out of our control. Got to focus on the things that can be changed.

Wes looked at his watch. Kaminski had promised to meet him at ten. It was now twenty after. When Wes had spoken with him the previous afternoon, the man promised to join him at the coffee shop following a scheduled meeting with his lawyer. The consultation had probably run longer than expected. Although money had not been mentioned during the phone call, Kaminski seemed eager to meet. Convincing himself he was not being stood up, Wes decided to read all of the articles again.

At ten fifty-five, he spotted Kaminski exiting an office building on the far side of the street, about a half a block away. As the man strode in Wes's direction, an older blue Chevy Malibu pulled out of a parking spot at the far end of the block. When Kaminski began to cross the street at an angle making a beeline for the coffee shop, the Malibu rapidly accelerated.

Wes watched in horror. The speeding vehicle bore down on its unsuspecting victim. At the last possible moment, Kaminski must have realized what was about to happen and attempted to leap out of the way. It was too late. A piercing thud. His air born body bounced on the hood, smashed against the upper windshield, and tumbled over the

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top of the Malibu. As Kaminski catapulted through the air behind the car, he fell to the street, landing on his head with a sickening thud. His body went limp as blood pooled under and around him. The Malibu's tires squealed as it turned right at the end of the block and disappeared.

Wes jumped out of his seat, ran out of the coffee shop, and rushed to Kaminski's bleeding body and knelt beside it. Several pedestrians surrounded them. Three people were on cell phones, presumably with 911 operators. Wes felt for a pulse. He was a chaplain, not a physician, but he was fairly sure he knew how to feel for a pulse. There was none. Wes took Kaminski by the hand, bowed his head, and softly prayed for God to have mercy on his soul.

Twenty minutes later police had re-routed traffic and were taping off a large area of the street as a crime scene. A growing number of onlookers crowded around the perimeter. As he stood among them Wes called Sharon. The music from her iPhone must have awakened her as she answered groggily.

"You must have been up late getting those stories written last night."

"It's been two late nights in a row. I was trying to catch up."

"I hate to tell you this but you could be in for a third."

Wes briefly filled her in on the hit and run. After the call, he hung around another fifteen minutes watching the police process the scene.

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Several uniformed officers were interviewing eyewitnesses. He realized it would soon be his turn. After all, he had witnessed the entire event. He was rehearsing in his mind the memory of what had happened, when he noticed his knees felt cold and wet. He looked down to see his pants soaked with Kaminski's blood.

The briefcase! Where was the briefcase?

Must have left it under the table in the coffee shop. He rushed back inside.

A woman was sitting at the table Wes had abandoned. The briefcase was nowhere to be seen. He rushed to the counter and asked a female worker if anyone had seen who had taken it. The girl smiled brightly. "It was me. I knew you'd be back, so I kept it for you.

Wes's pounding heart settled back into his chest. "Bless you. Bless you. You're a lifesaver."

"I thought it was probably something important." She reached under the counter, retrieved the briefcase and handed it to Wes. "You have a nice day now."

As Wes left he said a prayer of thanks. He expanded on the prayer when he remembered he had parked his Highlander around the corner and could leave the scene without dealing with the police barricades. He drove to his apartment, changed his clothes, went to the bank and returned the money to the safety deposit box.

## Chapter 47

When Wes arrived at Central Prison he went straight to Harry's cell to tell him about Kaminski. On hearing the news, Harry was visibly shaken. Wes worked hard to convince him there was still hope the Supreme Court would order a new trial based on Kaminski's sworn deposition.

Before leaving, Wes offered prayer, asking God to touch the hearts of the justices with compassion and to give them the wisdom to see the reasonableness of Harry's appeal. He thanked God for Kaminski's courage in coming forward, and God's comfort for any and all who would grieve his loss.

During the afternoon, when Wes was with an inmate in the Mental Health Unit, Sharon called. He let her message go to voicemail and did not listen to it until he was back in the office.

"I'm afraid I have some very bad news for you, Wes. Get back to me as soon as you can. You need to know what's going on before the rest of the world finds out."

Wes had no idea why she'd called. But, whatever it was, he had the suspicion his day was about to turn south.

When Sharon answered, she got right to the point. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this Wes, but the detectives found something in Louis



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Kaminski's billfold. It was a note signed by Harry Harrison written on a napkin offering Kaminski \$500,000 to be his alibi the night of the murders. Harrison promised \$125,000 up front and the rest later. He instructed Kaminski to burn the note, but evidently the man decided to keep it in his billfold instead, probably as insurance in case Harrison reneged on the payment. Anyhow, let me guess. You were meeting Kaminski to give him \$125,000 of the money you had in those nasty bags."

Wes was speechless. He felt sick. His body began to tremble uncontrollably.

What a fool he'd been.

He laid the phone on the desk, held his head between his hands, and tried desperately to stop the shaking.

"Are you still there, Wes?" Sharon shouted.

He gasped for air and spoke into the phone without picking it up, "I'm going to need to call you back."

"Are you all right?"

"Let me call you back."

After hanging up, he spent most of the next hour berating himself. As his trembling subsided, agitation increased. Without being conscious of having made the decision, he found himself on the way to death row to see Harry.

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When he entered the cell, he was surprised to find the inmate lying in bed reading from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Harry smiled and sat up, clearly unprepared for the fury that was to come.

“How dare you! How dare you! You lied to me, Harry. You lied to me and you used me.”

“Whoa there pastor, what’s going on?”

Wes gave an emotional jumbled reply in which he told Harry about the discovery of the note. That soon evolved into a tirade about how Harry had made a fool out of him.

When Wes finally paused from ranting, he asked, “Don’t you have anything to say, Harry?”

Harry’s face was ashen, his entire body limp. “What do you want me to say, pastor, that I’m sorry for trying not to be executed? Or maybe you want me to say how sorry I am I made you look like a fool? What difference does any of it make? I’ll be dead by next Monday, and you won’t have Harry around anymore to make you feel stupid. Is that what you want me to say?”

Wes flushed again with anger and stormed out of the cell, muttering under his breath all the way to his office.

An hour later, as he stared at the beach scene in the picture on the wall, he decided to call his sponsor.

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“Who did you say this is?” Roger said mockingly. “I thought you were dead or maybe abducted by aliens. You don’t call. You don’t come to meetings. So what have you been doing, preacher?”

“Mostly making a fool out of myself.” He spent the next twenty five minutes bringing Roger up to date. Wes wasn’t just angry. He was scared. The inmate’s lying had made him an unwitting accessory to a crime, and, even more to the point, had gotten another man killed.

“What am I supposed to do now?” he pleaded. “I’m the man’s chaplain, and he’s going to die next Monday at two in the morning, but I don’t see how I can continue to work with him. He’s lied to me, used me, and abused me. I feel dirty all over. I’m thinking it’s time to call in one of the other chaplains, but I’ve been so stupid lately, trying to do things on my own, I thought I should talk to you first.” Wes’s thoughts were now racing faster than he could keep up. “Part of the problem is, I promised him I would help him make amends. I was planning to do it this week. I’m the only one who has access to the money, and I doubt either of the other chaplains will touch it, especially now. Part of me still wants to do it. The money could do the people Harry has harmed a lot of good. And I don’t know what will happen to it, if I don’t. I would like to get it out of those safety deposit boxes that are in my name as soon as possible. But I just don’t know what to do. What if one or more of these amends is just another one of Harry’s schemes?”

“Slow down, preacher. Have any of the others come forward to be a witness for him?”

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Wes could see where this was going. It wasn't the direction he preferred. "Kaminski's the only one."

"Well, nothing's certain in this life, but it seems likely the rest of these are legitimate."

"But he lied to me, and now I can't trust he is being sincere about these amends, or anything. Hasn't he made a mockery of the whole process? Even if he says he's sorry and lets me try to lead him to the Lord before he dies next Monday, I don't think I can trust him to be sincere."

Wes paused. He wasn't sure what to say next. He waited. There was quiet on the other end. Roger's silences always spoke at least as loudly as his words. Wes knew the drill. Roger was giving him time to decompress, to be open to what he was about to say. But Wes was hardly in the mental space to appreciate it.

Finally Roger responded. "If you're ready to do some serious listening then I want to say a couple of things. First, whether he's sincere or not is not yours to know. God knows, and that's the only thing that matters. Second, why are you so upset about being lied to? Sounds like you've made it about you. You're all worried about how you look to others because he duped you. Listen to what I'm about to say. Alcoholics lie to me all the time. I don't take it personally. It shouldn't surprise you either, preacher. It's what sinners do. Your guy lied to you because he wanted to live instead of die. Is that so

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surprising? People want to live. It's part of our DNA. People lie all the time when a lot less is at stake."

Wes knew from experience that Roger was just getting wound up. He picked up a pen, began to make Rorschach like doodles on a notepad, and braced himself.

"Remember those lies you used to tell people about your boozing? Why did you do it? People lie because they have something to hide. They lie because they don't want to pay the consequences of telling the truth. They lie because they are human. Believe me. I know from experience, a man has to do a lot of spiritual growing before he is willing to be rigorously honest about everything. I doubt very many of us ever reach the point where we never lie."

Of course Roger was right. But it wasn't just about the lie. "You have to understand. He involved me in committing a crime. I was about to pay Kaminski what amounted to a bribe to commit perjury."

"Did you know it at the time?"

"I should have."

"But you didn't, did you?"

"I guess not. I was a little suspicious, though."

"But you didn't know. And if you had known, would you have carried out his little errand?"

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“Never.” Once again, Roger had him. There was no way he would have gotten himself involved if he had realized what Harry was up to.

“Let me put it to you straight,” the sponsor continued. “You’re trying to make it about you. When you started this whole thing, did you get involved with the man to feel good about yourself, or to help him get a right relationship with his God, himself and the world?”

“To help him, but....”

“No buts, sounds to me like you still have work to do.”

It felt to Wes like Roger had just let the air out of all his tires. “So you think I should keep on trying to work with him?”

“Don’t you?”

He wadded up the paper with his doodles and threw it toward the waste basket in the corner. He missed. “I guess I really don’t want to right now.”

“Hey. There’re several things I’d rather be doing than talking to you right now. We all have to do stuff we would just as soon not. Now get back to work on your own program. Then go mend things with your man.”

After the phone call ended, Wes stared again at the beachscape on the wall. He decided he had two choices. He could go get drunk. Or he could go see Harry. At the moment getting drunk seemed like the

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perfect option. It was a scary realization. He closed his eyes and spent several minutes in prayer. Then he headed back to death row.

## Chapter 48

On Thursday morning, Wes accompanied Harry and all his belongings to one of four cells in the Death Watch area adjacent to the execution chamber. With every step his heart gained weight. It didn't get any more real than this.

The two men had spent several hours together the previous day. Wes had apologized for his anger and Harry had apologized for his deception. Contrary to expectations, their conversation seemed the most productive to date. The condemned man appeared much more sober and earnest than previously. Wes was determined to make the most of it.

When they arrived, Warden Johnson was waiting with a message from Ralph Mitchell. "Your lawyer said to tell you he would no longer be representing you, Mr. Harrison. I won't repeat his exact words because the chaplain's here. But Mitchell said to say he was professionally obligated to notify the Supreme Court about the latest developments, and to let you know he had withdrawn the appeal." Message delivered, he turned abruptly and left.

Johnson seemed to get way too much enjoyment out of his frequent role as bearer of bad news. Wes put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I'm so sorry."



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“Don’t be, pastor. I knew it was coming. I can’t say I’m not ticked that Mitchell bailed on me. He’s worried about his lost credibility with the local judiciary, and possible sanctions from the state bar. I have to admit, if I’d been in his shoes, I probably would’ve done the same thing. But it still hurts. Looks like you’re about the only friend I’ve got left, Wes.”

“And I promise I’m not going anywhere, Harry. I’m not going to let you go through this alone.”

Harry turned and began to unpack a small box containing a few personal things. “I have to admit it really bummed me out when you got so mad at me, pastor. You had every right to be, but it still felt like a knife had stabbed my heart. You’re a good guy and I know you were only trying to help me. It was wrong of me not to be honest with you all along. You didn’t deserve to be treated that way. That’s why I want to be honest with you now.”

Honest about what? Could this be about the murders? “I’m here to listen, Harry. Not to judge. I’m through judging.”

Harry stopped arranging his things but kept his back to Wes. “I’m still having trouble believing God will just set aside everything I’ve done with my life and, despite it all, accept me, and take me to heaven. God knows I’m scared to die, and probably thinks this is just one more of my schemes.”

This could be good. A possible breakthrough. “And is it Harry? Is it one more of your schemes?”

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“Honestly pastor, I don’t know for sure. I don’t think so. But I’ve lied so much in my life, including to myself, I don’t trust my own thoughts about it.”

The answer rang true. “That’s a lot of progress, Harry. I think we’re getting somewhere. God knows what’s in your heart. You can be sure of it. And God forgives you, no matter what you’ve done, and he wants you to receive his forgiveness. You can be sure of that too.”

Harry turned to face Wes. “But how do I know *I’m* for real. We both know I wouldn’t be at this point if I wasn’t going to have to go next door and die in about forty hours.”

A calm peace settled over Wes. He felt the presence of God guiding him. He could do this. “Harry, God loves us. God wants us to be in relationship with Him, for all eternity. God uses any and every kind of situation to bring us to the point where we recognize our need of Him and want to be in relationship with Him. The important thing is, are you ready to do it? Are you ready to give your life over to Him, to accept his love in your heart, to stop trying to be in control, and to let go, and let God?”

Harry leaned his back against the cell wall and locked eyes with Wes. “I want to be.”

“Great. But I can’t get there for you. Only you can do that.” Wes checked his watch. He had too much to do in too little time. “I want you to be thinking about everything we’ve talked about. I’m going to give you some time to yourself to do some more reading and to

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meditate. I assume you still want me to try to make the rest of your amends.”

“More than ever.”

“Then, I’d better get going. I’ll get back as soon as I can. In the meantime, I want you to imagine something. If, by some miracle, the Governor stopped the execution, what would your life be like? Would it be a life devoted to loving God and living for others? Or would you just say ‘whew, that was close,’ and go back to your old life? When you can honestly pray to God and tell Him, whether you live or whether you die your life belongs to God, and God alone, then, Harry, you’ll be ready. So think about it. And, remember, if you decide you’re ready, you don’t need me here. Just get down on your knees and pray. You’ll be given the words. I promise.”

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Wes picked up Sharon and drove to the bank. She helped him remove much of the cash from the safety deposit boxes, and carefully count out different sums placing them in cloth grocery bags. They took the sacks to a personal banker who assisted in converting their contents into cashier’s checks. The checks were then placed in legal sized envelopes clearly marked with the names of the intended recipients.

At a nearby Post Office Wes inserted letters Harry had given him into four of the envelopes, one addressed to Joan Hunter, Harry’s first wife who still lived in Asheville, another to the parents of Kim Gingotta

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in Texas, a third one to his daughter Megan, and the last to Harry's second wife Linda Tipton. After the envelopes were stamped and mailed, it was time for the face-to-face amends.

When they were back in the car, Wes turned to Sharon. "It's a lot of money. Do you think we're doing the right thing?"

Sharon shrugged. "How can anyone know for sure with something like this? But I think so. I can't imagine that the money, along with his apology, won't ease some of the pain Harrison caused them. Who's next?"

"Brook Smith's parents."

"What do you think they're going to do? I'm not sure what I would do if I thought Harry had killed my teenage daughter after getting her pregnant. Last time we talked to them, it seemed unlikely they would accept it. Mrs. Smith seemed especially determined."

"I know, but, when I called, they said they would see us. Let's go find out."

## Chapter 49

Detective Craig Daniels was attempting to wrap up the investigation of the murders of Sharon Noble's sister, Rebecca, and Jacob and Anne Goldman's daughter, Paula. Nothing had ever given Craig greater satisfaction than closing a cold case. Reddy was dead and the evidence conclusive. The boxes marked with the names of the victims would soon be back in storage for good. But there was still some unfinished business.

The murder of O'Connell was technically not his case. There was nothing "cold" about it. But because Reddy had evidently slit the man's throat, Craig had been working with two other homicide detectives to put it to bed. He had also been looking at O'Connell for a possible connection to the Brooke Smith murder. But that was looking like a dead end. The lab report on the DNA from O'Connell's business card came back on Wednesday. It failed to match the DNA on the cigarette butt in Brooke Smith's pocket. Daniels was anxious to move on to other pressing matters, yet he didn't like loose ends. The unforeseen linkages of O'Connell to key figures in both sets of the two-decade-old murders bugged him.

There was also the matter of the missing girls in Charlotte. Craig had faxed everything he had on Reddy to the Charlotte homicide detectives. The times when Reddy had visited the Queen City matched those of the disappearances of the girls, but there were no bodies or

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physical evidence. It angered and frustrated him to think Reddy probably killed them, but it was unlikely the families would ever know for certain, or have the satisfaction of confronting the killer.

Daniels was also helping out in the Kaminski murder. Sharon's friend, the prison chaplain, had witnessed the entire event. Reddy was dead. Harrison was about to be executed for the Gingotta and Brooke Smith murders. But the cases had to be connected in some way. Kaminski appeared to be the key. He had an association with both Harrison and O'Connell. O'Connell was connected to Reddy, though it was not clear how. And Kaminski was hit by a blue Chevy Malibu, most likely the same one that had chased Sharon and the chaplain. It didn't make sense, at least not yet. But he was confident he would put the pieces together soon.

There was one other thing nagging Craig Daniels. The note on Kaminski had proved the nurse's late appearance as an alibi witness was a fraud. But why would the same person who wanted Sharon to quit investigating the old murders want Kaminski dead? It's unlikely the Malibu driver knew about the note. The only conclusion that made sense was the killer didn't want to chance Kaminski's testimony stopping the Harrison execution. Was it because he hated the man? Or was it because he was the real murderer of either Gingotta or Brooke Smith, or both, and he wanted to make sure Harry stayed framed? And, if the driver was the real murderer, then Harrison, despite the Kaminski note, was innocent.

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Craig tried to dismiss these last thoughts. He really didn't want to believe Harrison could have been wrongly convicted, or that the man was about to die for something he didn't do. But his well-honed investigative intuitions would not allow him to let it go. Time was rapidly running out for Harrison. And there was still the matter of the ciggy butt in Brooke Smith's pocket.

As he sat looking at the boxes and stacks of paper representing unsolved cases in his crowded office, Craig's mind returned to the unsolved missing Charlotte girls. On impulse, he looked up the number and called the residence of Reddy's widow, Donna Perkins. "I know the Sherriff's deputies have been there already, but I would like to come out to the house and look around for myself."

"Do I need to call an attorney?"

"Mrs. Perkins, this is not about you. I've already told you, if you continue to co-operate, you've got nothing to worry about."

"When did you want to come?"

"How about tomorrow morning?"

"Don't come before ten. I'm not sleeping well at night and I get my best rest after it gets daylight."

"I'll see you then."

## Chapter 50

Wes and Sharon visited the parents of Brooke Smith as planned. Wes had told them the amount of the check when he called to make the appointment. In the excitement of thinking of a sterling way to memorialize their daughter, Ginger and Randall Smith had clearly lost their ambivalence. They accepted the money without further protest.

At the time of her death, Brooke was planning to go to college and become a social worker. The couple decided to set up a foundation in her name, with the interest from its investments devoted to college scholarships for high school students in the county who planned to pursue careers in social work. As Wes and Sharon were leaving, both Ginger and Randall hugged their visitors and thanked them for helping them find a way for Brooke to share her dream with others.

Wes saw Harry again on Friday. He immediately noticed a difference. The man's eyes revealed unexpected warmth as he listened to Wes's report.

Then it was Harry's turn to talk. He described his time of reflection and prayer the previous evening. "It's hard to explain how I'm feeling right now. All I know is that I believe I've finally turned my life over to the Lord. I've let it all go. All of it, pastor. Whatever happens now is in God's hands. Here I am facing my death and I can honestly say I am more at peace right now than I have been in my entire life."



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Wes's chest felt like it would explode. He offered a silent prayer of thanksgiving. "That's wonderful, Harry. Amazing and wonderful."

"Don't get me wrong. There's still a great sadness weighing on my heart. But it's no longer about the life I'm about to lose. It's about the one I've already lost. My whole life has been a waste. I only wish I could go back and start over."

"I've wished I could change my past too, Harry." Wes wiped moisture from the corners of his eyes. "I know my situation is not the same as yours. By all odds I still have quite a few years to live, and you're facing death in hours. But you never know. I could walk out of here and have an accident and die before you. All God ever gives us is the NOW. And it is what we do with the NOW that matters. I've been waiting and praying for you to reach this moment, Harry. It's time for us to talk about the elephant in this cell."

Harry had a puzzled expression on his face, but it quickly faded. "Are you asking me again, whether I really did kill Brooke and Kim?"

"I'm not asking, Harry. Please don't say anything. Just listen to what I have to say. I still want to believe you didn't do it. If you didn't then I'm so very sorry you've been blamed for this. But I don't want you to say one way or another right now. If you tell me you didn't, I still won't know for sure you are telling me the truth. If you say you did, I'll probably believe you, but I would rather not know, at least for now. If you tell me you're guilty, then I'll feel I should tell the victims you confessed to me, but I won't be able to, unless you release me. I

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don't want you to do that, because I believe any confession should come from you. I'm not saying I think you're guilty. In fact, I'm still holding out a glimmer of hope the governor will grant a delay and there will be time to prove you're innocent. But if you did kill Brooke Smith, your unborn child, and Kim Gingotta, here's what I want you to do. I'm asking for you to think about their families, and how they need to find some peace."

"Pastor, I need you to know something..."

"Stop there, Harry. God already knows the truth. If I can take you at your word about last evening, then God has already forgiven you. That's all I need to know for now. We can talk more when it gets closer to your time. But I want you to think real hard about what I'm saying. Sometimes being a follower of Jesus means we have to do something really hard. If you didn't commit those murders, then I hope come early Monday morning you can face death, as Jesus and many of his followers have done before you, with the dignity, courage and faith of an innocent man. I'm just saying, if you did do it, I hope you can find it in your heart to give those people some peace."

Harry stared at Wes with a troubled look.

"Please Harry. All I'm asking you to do is pray about it."

Harry sighed and turned his back.

## Chapter 51

Wes picked Sharon up in front of the News and Observer building in early afternoon. Their plan was to take amends money to Kim Gingotta's husband, and then to Melanie Anderson, the woman Harry had cheated out of a potential multi-million dollar settlement in the O'Connell suit.

"I got a call from Craig Daniels about a half hour ago," Sharon announced as she fastened her seat belt. "He was on his way back from searching the Perkins home. He found a secret compartment underneath the dryer in the laundry room. In it was a safe. Craig called in a locksmith who was able to break into it. It must have been where Reddy kept the fake ID's and passports the investigators say were in his car when he was killed. Craig probably would have missed it if he had not looked behind the dryer and noticed the vent was unattached. He was really fired up by the turn of events and said he wanted to make sure I got the exclusive. Now get this. It gets

better. He found a box in the safe containing trophies from the Charlotte murders.”

“You mean like the serial killers on television who collect jewelry and stuff from their victims?” Wes eased the Highlander away from the curb and headed in the direction of the NC State campus. “I always thought the trophy thing to be some kind of urban myth.”

“Apparently it’s real, and evidently quite common. In this case Craig hit the jackpot. Instead of jewelry, there were photographs of the girls bound and looking terrified. Reddy had written the names of the victims along with the times and dates of each murder on the backs of the pictures. There were also locks of hair. It’s about as conclusive as you can get. And the photos could provide clues to where the bodies are buried. Craig thinks when Reddy picked up the IDs, he decided it was too dangerous to take the trophy box with him, but he could not bring himself to destroy it. After the police down in Charlotte have had a chance to examine the evidence, and run the DNA from the hair, I will head down and talk to the families

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as a part of my Ripple Effect series. I plan to run a story on it as soon as Craig gives me the OK. I'll probably make the trip sometime next week."

"What great news. At least the Charlotte families won't have to wait twenty years to find out what happened."

"I can't tell you how good it feels for all these pieces about Reddy finally to be coming together."

They rode in silence until Wes slowed for a pedestrian in a crosswalk. The image of Kaminski flying through the air flashed through his mind. Unnerving. In more ways than one. "I wish we could get as lucky on the identity of our Malibu driver."

"I'm just glad you were driving the day he came after us. If not, he might have done to me what he did to Kaminski."

"From what you told me about the first time he came after you, you didn't do so bad yourself. Calling the police to come meet you while he was chasing you. That was really using your noggin."

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“Any theories about who it could be? What about the guard who chased you in the mountains.”

“George Waters?” Wes had already weighed the possibility. Waters was certainly dangerous. But the theory had holes in it. “I suppose it could be him. But I doubt it. He was driving a black Taurus. That makes him a Ford guy. The Malibu is a Chevrolet. If you hang around the race tracks very much you learn men tend to be really loyal to their car brands, especially Ford and Chevy drivers.”

“That’s it?” Sharon asked in mock disbelief. “That’s what rules him out? Couldn’t he have an old Chevy hidden away somewhere he brings out when he’s trying to kill someone?”

Wes sensed she was half teasing because of the race track reference, but it was still a good question. “It’s possible. But why wouldn’t he have chased me in the Malibu in the mountains? Waters knew about the money and tried to steal it from me. The driver of the Malibu seems to be motivated by something else.”

“Craig thinks the man in the Malibu killed Kaminski to keep Harry from escaping execution. He came after me for the same

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reason, to keep me from digging deeper into the deaths. I thought at first the threatening notes and the menacing Malibu were connected to Rebecca's murder. But Reddy was already dead when Kaminski was killed. We obviously have another killer on our hands."

"And this one has to be connected to the murders Harry is about to die for. Seems we keep coming back to the possibility Harry could be innocent. What terrifies me is we are about out of time." Wes turned into the parking lot of the university engineering complex where Gingotta's office was located.

"What do you think we can expect from the professor today?" Sharon asked. "He was pretty hostile last time we were here."

"I know. He's been grieving now for over twenty years and still can't let his anger go. When I set up the appointment, I didn't give him a chance to go off on me. I made sure I mentioned the money before he had time to. It's amazing what the promise of over a hundred K will do for one's disposition. He warmed right up."

"Do you think when Harrison's executed he'll finally be able to get over what happened?"

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“I doubt it.” Wes circled the Highlander around the parking lot. Not a space in sight. “What happened to his wife, Kim, was a horrible thing. But it’s not his real problem. His real problem is his *attitude* toward what happened to her. No external event, not even the death of his wife’s murderer is going to fix what ails him. External things don’t fix internal problems. But I’m sure he thinks it will.”

“Do you realize what you just said? Seems the professor might have a mighty good motive for making sure the state goes through with things Monday morning.”

Sharon had a point. Gingotta hated Harry and wanted him to die. “That’s an interesting theory. Do you know if anyone ever looked into the possibility he did the murders and tried to frame Harry? I wonder if he had an alibi for the night they were killed.”

“I don’t remember. I can ask Craig to check the file.”

Wes spotted a student leave the building walk toward a car and positioned his vehicle to take the spot. “We can call him after our meeting with Gingotta. Since we’re already here, we might as well



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go ahead and help Harry make his amends to the professor. I'm anxious to get this done." He pulled into the parking place.

"You sure you want to right now? We could wait. What if he's the real killer?"

"All the more reason to do it. He's expecting us. We sure don't want to make him jumpy by not showing up. Besides, if we are going to check him out, then it's imperative we see him today."

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## Chapter 52

Professor Anthony Gingotta frowned as he stared at Sharon and Wes through his thick glasses. He was dressed in a bow tie and a short sleeve shirt which barely covered his protruding belly.

“I can’t say I’m happy to see you again, Ms. Noble. I told you last time I don’t talk to reporters.”

“I was hoping you might have changed your mind and be willing to talk to us about your plans for the money Harrison is giving you.”

Gingotta looked at Wes. “You seem a little winded from the stairs, Chaplain. Next time you might try the elevator.”

Wes let the comment pass. There wasn’t going to be a next time if he could help it. “Like I told you on the phone, as a part of his amends, Mr. Harrison has asked me to give you a cashier’s check for \$125,000.”

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“Let me be clear. I’ll take the money.” Gingotta said through a twisted smile. “I would be a fool to turn down an eighth of a mil. But I can assure you it won’t make any difference in the way I feel. I’m still looking forward to Sunday night.”

“I take it you’re still angry with Harrison,” Sharon interjected.

“You never quit, do you, Ms. Noble. One of these days you are going to stick your nose where it doesn’t belong and somebody is going to cut it off. Don’t even think about writing anything about me or Harrison giving me money. It’s none of anybody’s business, especially yours. So, tell me Chaplain, when do I get the money so I don’t have to look at the two of you anymore?”

“I have the check in my hand. All I need is for you to take a piece of paper and write me out a receipt, sign it, and the check is yours.”

“And there are no other strings attached?”

“None.”

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Gingotta pulled a small notepad out of his top desk drawer, ripped out a page and scrawled a note indicating Wes had delivered the \$125,000 check to him and signed it. Gingotta exchanged the receipt with Wes for the check. “No need to shake hands, Chaplain. You know your way out.”

“Again, Professor Gingotta, Mr. Harrison expresses his apologies for the harm he has caused you. I hope for your sake, you can find it in your heart someday to forgive him.”

“That will be a cold day in hell. Now go. And unless you have another nice little check for me, don’t ever come back.”

When Wes and Sharon were in the car, Wes said, “Before we leave, I want to take a look at the cars parked on the other side of the building.”

“What for?”

“I’m betting that’s where the faculty parks.”

When they rounded the corner, Sharon pointed to a sign that said, “Reserved for Dr. Gingotta.”

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Wes craned his neck. “Well, what do you know? The professor drives a Camaro.”

“What’s so special about a Camaro?”

“Don’t you see? Gingotta is a Chevy man. Camaro is made by Chevy. Maybe he has a Malibu hidden somewhere.”

“Didn’t the police already check to see who owns blue Malibus and no one connected to the case came up?”

“Right. But it may not be in his name. It could be in a relative’s name, or it could be titled by a corporation.”

“What do we do now? I don’t think he can be charged with the crime of driving a Chevy.”

“Let’s start by going to see your detective buddy and asking what the record shows about his alibi the night of the murders. And I need to give Daniels this receipt ASAP so he can have it checked for DNA.”

Wes called Melanie Wright, made an excuse, and rescheduled for the following day.

Wes, Sharon and Craig Daniels spent much of the afternoon in the detective's office taking a fresh look at the cases, this time with Gingotta in mind as a possible suspect. Unfortunately, the analysis comparing Gingotta's DNA with the sample from the cigarette butt would take several days. It was already the weekend, and, even if there was a match, it would not be available before Harrison's scheduled execution. As for Gingotta's alibi at the time of the murders, he had told detectives he was home watching an NC State basketball game on TV. There were no witnesses to verify his story.

At Wes's suggestion the detective retrieved the surveillance tape of the Holiday Inn Hotel lobby the night Kim Gingotta was murdered. If Gingotta was the killer, maybe he was on the tape. The quality of the film had never been good, and had become worse with age. Daniels started it at the point where Kim Gingotta had first entered the hotel at 6:47 p.m. They fast forwarded through most of it, pausing to examine closely Harry's arrival at 7:42 and departure at 8:36.

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Then Sharon asked, “Can you play the tape from any earlier point?”

“Sure, we can go all the way back to two in the afternoon.”

“Let’s take a look starting around 4:30.”

As the tape again fast forwarded, Sharon spied it first. “Pause the tape. That’s Gingotta.”

“That’s him.” Wes agreed. “He has a hat on and is wearing a heavy coat, but there’s no doubt about it. So he went into the hotel at 5:50 p.m. almost an hour before his wife arrived.” Wes rose and began to pace. “Somehow, he must have learned of the planned rendezvous. This means he certainly had opportunity to kill her. He also had a chance to kill Harry. So, if he’s the real killer, why didn’t he murder them both?”

“Maybe he knew he could not overpower both of them at once.” Craig speculated. “The wife was strangled. His only weapon was a cord. Maybe he wasn’t sure he could take Harry in a struggle. Or,



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his plan from the beginning may have been to frame Harry. Let's see what time he left the building."

They fast forwarded through the rest of the tape of the hotel entrance, which ended when security swapped it out at 10:00. The recording did not show Gingotta leaving the building.

"He probably left through a rear exit," Craig suggested. "Remember, this was a long time ago. This security tape of the entrance is the only one running back then."

"Can we see Mrs. Gingotta one more time?" Wes asked.

"The detective rewound and began the tape again at the 6:45 mark."

"Can we see it in slow motion?"

As the image of Kim Gingotta glided through the door, Wes said, "Stop."

When the woman's image was paused, he pointed to her hand. "She has her wedding ring on. When we went over the list of her clothes and things, I don't remember her ring being on the list."

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“It wasn’t. She wasn’t wearing a ring when she was found. Nor was it in the room anywhere.”

“So what happened to it?” Sharon queried. “Women often take off their wedding rings when they’re being unfaithful. So she probably took it off herself. But where did it go?”

Daniels reached over and turned off the video player. “Who knows? I suppose the maid could’ve taken it. If so, it’s long gone.”

“But what if Gingotta took it?” Wes chimed in. “Don’t you think a husband might take the ring after killing his wife, especially if she’d been unfaithful to him? Don’t you think there is a chance he would keep it? You could search his house and see if it’s there.”

Daniels face turned to ice. “There’s zero chance we have enough probable cause for a search warrant at this point. If the DNA you got for us on the receipt comes back a match for the ciggy butt, then we have a shot, but that takes time. I can also have the lab compare the partial print lifted from one of the threats sent to Sharon with Gingotta’s prints on the receipt. We know now the threats didn’t come from Reddy. If Gingotta is the real murderer then

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there's a better than even chance he wrote them. But Monday is the earliest we'll know."

Wes suddenly felt nauseous. "But Harrison will be dead by then."

Daniels stood, gathered up the case files and returned them to their box. "And he was convicted by a jury of his peers on two counts of murder. As far as Gingotta is concerned, all we have are theories."

"But Gingotta was at the scene of one of the murders? Isn't that good enough?"

"All we know is he was there the afternoon of the murder. We can't conclusively place him there at the time it happened. We know he left, but don't know when."

"So there's nothing we can do?" Wes pleaded.

"Not today. We can always hope something turns up tomorrow."

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A flush of anger traveled from Wes's head to the tips of his toes. "That's not good enough." He protested loudly. "We can't just sit by while Harry's executed when there is a better than average chance somebody else did it."

"I'm sorry, Chaplain. I wish I could give you some hope here. You've been helpful this afternoon. You sure you didn't miss your calling? You would have made a pretty good detective."

"Right now, I'm not sure of much of anything."

## Chapter 53

Wes went to an AA meeting Friday night. It didn't have the effect he had hoped. He returned home at least as depressed as when he had gone. There had been a lot of talk about powerlessness and trusting God to be in charge of things. But Harry was still alive and there had to be something else he could do. He believed he should trust God, but he also firmly believed God expected him to do his part. He just wasn't sure what that was.

After a lot of soul searching and anxious prayer, he fell into a troubled sleep around 2:00 a.m., forty-eight hours before Harry was scheduled to die. To his dismay, he overslept Saturday morning and was late picking up Sharon for their visit with Melanie Anderson.

They arrived at Anderson's tiny rundown ranch in late morning. A cheerful Melanie met them at the door and led them into the cramped living room. After some brief small talk, Wes handed her the check along with some advice on how to use her household management skills to make it last.

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Back in the car, Sharon asked, “Have you thought anymore about how to check out Gingotta before it’s too late?”

“It’s all I’ve been thinking about. I came up with a plan last night, but it’s not a very good one. At least it’s better than sitting on my hands and doing nothing.”

“Do you care to share?”

“It’s probably better you don’t know. What I’m intending is, let’s say, unorthodox. And it could be dangerous.”

“Then I want in, and it will do no good to argue with me. So, tell me, Chaplain Barrett, what do you have in mind?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be involved.”

“How about treating me like a big girl, and letting me decide.”

Wes filled Sharon in on his plan to deal with Gingotta. After much discussion, he finally agreed to let her come along. When he had dropped her off at her apartment, he drove back to the prison. Wes planned to spend most of the afternoon comforting Harry. He would pick up Sharon again after dark.

Wes's fingers held the steering wheel in a vice grip. A sharp pain ran back and forth between his shoulders. *Need to calm down. Got to keep my head clear.* He pulled into the apartment parking lot, and glanced at the clock on his dashboard. 8:31. A darkly clad figure was waiting in the shadows next to the building.

“Hi Sharon. I see you're dressed for the occasion.”

She had barely climbed into the SUV when he sped away.

“You might want to watch your heavy foot, NASCAR driver. If the cops stop us they're going to think we are a couple of cat burglars.”

Wes laughed. “That wouldn't be very far from the truth. Now would it?”

They rode a few blocks in silence.

“Are you ready for this, Sharon?”

“Wouldn't miss it for the world.”

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“I keep going over the plan in my mind. I know this is really a long shot. Even if we succeed somehow in exposing Gingotta as the real killer, we may not be in time. But I couldn’t live with myself if we didn’t try.”

“You’re a good man, Wes. Not many people would be trying to do this tonight.”

“And not many women would be helping them.”

Wes eased onto a tree-lined West Raleigh street and parked the Highlander a few doors down and across the street from Gingotta’s residence. From their location they could see lights and flickering shadows inside.

“So what’s our plan?”

“We’ll go to the door and ask if we can come in and talk. I’ll make up a story about Harry giving consideration to offering him more money. It’s the only thing I can think of which might get us inside.”

“That’s it? And what if he doesn’t let us in?”



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“We’ll go to plan B.”

“What’s plan B?”

“I have no idea. We’ll figure out something.”

“You really know how to give a girl confidence. What do you need me to do?”

“When we get inside, you ask to use the bathroom. Then, while I keep him occupied, you make a beeline to the door that leads to the garage and check to see if there is a blue Malibu in there.”

“Then what?”

“We fly by the seat of our pants and get out of there. Wait! Do you see what I see?”

“Gingotta must have turned off all the lights.”

A moment later, the garage door went up and a yellow Camaro backed out. Once in the street, it turned in their direction.

“Down, Sharon! Down!”

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They scrunched below the windows. The Camaro went by and continued to the corner, where its lights disappeared.

“Whew!” Wes eased himself up. “I don’t think he saw us.”

“Did you see another car parked in the garage? I thought I did, but I’m not sure.”

“It was a car all right. I caught a glimpse of it, but I couldn’t see it that well from here. Let’s go take a look.”

Wes exited his SUV and walked quickly across the street carrying a bulky flashlight. Sharon hurried to keep up.

“I take it this is plan B, she whispered. Do you mind telling me what we’re doing?”

“We need to get a peek inside the garage before he comes back. Maybe it has a window or a side door with panes we can look through.”

They checked the exterior of the garage. Nothing but brick walls. “We need a way in,” Wes whispered. “Maybe there’s a back door we can jimmy.”

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“You know you’re talking about breaking and entering. How do you think being charged with a felony would go over with your Bishop and fellow ministers?”

“Not well. But if the blue Malibu is on the other side of this wall, then we have a chance to save a man’s life.”

“Let me try something first.” Sharon whispered. “There’s a keypad by the garage door. It looks like the same type my mother has. It takes four digits to open it. I might be able to do it. Technically we would still be breaking in, but how is anyone going to know he didn’t leave it wide open.”

“How’re you going to come up with the right set of numbers? There must be jillions of combinations.”

“It may not work. But I want to try. If it doesn’t, we can still go with your plan. I’m not going to punch random combinations. Most people use four numbers they can easily remember, like the four digits of a street address or of a year that has significance for them. My mom uses 1963 because it was the year Kennedy was assassinated. I did research on Gingotta this afternoon while you

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were meeting with Harrison. I came across some dates worth trying.”

Wes peered over her shoulder as she began pushing numbers.

“This is Gingotta’s birth year.” Nothing happened. “The year of the murders.” Still nothing. “Let’s try the year Anthony and Kimberly Gingotta were married.” The door screeched upwards.

“Amazing. I would never have believed it if I hadn’t seen it.”

Wes’s pounding heart beat faster. He shined his light in the garage. The empty space in front of them had been occupied by the Camaro. On the left wall was a work bench. Above it several tools were arranged on hooks. Next to the workbench, near the rear of the garage, was a three step entrance to the house. To the right of where the Camaro had been, was a blue Malibu.

Wes examined the exterior of the car. His light revealed extensive damage to the grill, the hood, the windshield, and the top of the passenger area. The image of Kaminski flying through the air and crashing his skull on pavement flashed across his mind. A

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queasiness attacked his gut. “It doesn’t even look like it’s been washed. At least there’s plenty of Kaminski’s DNA. I see smears of blood on the windshield.”

“Careful Wes. Remember this is critical evidence.”

“I know. But I need to check one thing.” He went to the passenger side door and opened it, leaned in, released the glove compartment, and pulled out the car manual and some other papers. He found the registration card and held it in front of his light.

“Now we know why we couldn’t find it in the North Carolina system. The car was registered to Innovative Inventions, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.”

Wes closed the door, walked back to the driver side, and reached for the door handle.

VROOM!!

He jerked back. *Uh oh!*

## Chapter 54

The blinding lights of the Camaro entering the driveway were shining directly on Wes. "Get down!" he yelled at Sharon who was still concealed in the shadows.

She dropped and disappeared behind the Malibu. The car rapidly accelerated. Gingotta was coming straight at him.

*He's trying to kill me.* A vision of being crushed between the car and back wall flew through his mind.

The car entered the garage without slowing, and lunged forward.

The steps. Wes leapt. Somehow the yellow Camaro missed his air born body.

*BOOM.* It cut a deep hole into the sheetrock and wooden studs of the back wall, shaking the entire structure like an earthquake.

Wes landed on the top step. With trembling hands he frantically tried the knob of the door to the house. It was locked. *Trapped.* His fingers searched above and around the door for a key. Nothing there but a light switch and a garage door opener.

Gingotta threw open the Camaro door. He stumbled out holding his belly, gasping for air, and blocked the only way of escape.

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Staggering to the workbench, he reached above it and grabbed a crowbar from a hanger.

Wes turned to face his attacker. *Please God. Help me.*

Gingotta steadied himself on the workbench.

“Stop right there.” Wes said with as much authority as his voice could muster.

“It’s all over professor. The police are on their way. They know everything. I called them when I found the Malibu in here a few moments ago.”

Gingotta looked toward the street, then back at Wes. “How the hell... did you get in here?” he wheezed.

Got to keep him talking.

“It seems you failed to close the door. I was driving by and thought I noticed a car fitting the description of one I saw hit and kill Louis Kaminski. So I checked it out. That’s not all. The police know you killed your wife and Brooke Smith. They have you on tape going into the hotel the night Kim was killed and they found your DNA on Brooke Smith.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Remember the receipt you gave me for Harry’s money? It had your DNA all over it. Why did you do it, professor? Why did you have to kill them?”

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“What do you want me to do, Chaplain? Confess so you can try to save my soul like you are trying to do with old Harry? I told you it was a waste of your time. Harry is an evil man. He will never change. That’s why he has to die. You should have let sleeping dogs lie.”

“But why did Kim and Brooke have to die? Couldn’t you have just gone after Harry?”

Gingotta was breathing easier now. “That was the beauty of it. If I had killed him back then he wouldn’t have had to go through everything he’s gone through the last twenty years. I hurt him a lot more by killing them and letting him live. Kim had to go. I loved her and I thought she loved me. But she let that slimy shyster touch her. She didn’t deserve to live anymore. As for the girl, let’s just say she fit nicely in my plan. The police already thought they had a serial killer murdering babysitters. So I made it look like she was one of them. I knew they would think Harry killed her and was the one trying to cover it up. I figured he might have gotten life for killing Kim, but there was no way a jury would fail to recommend the death penalty for killing a young girl, especially one with his kid inside her.”

“Maybe another jury will recommend it for you when you’re tried for the same crimes.”

“I don’t see any police yet. I still think you’re bluffing, Chaplain. The cops don’t have anything on me, now do they? After I kill you, I’ll just throw your body into the Malibu and drive the whole thing into a



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very deep rock quarry. Without the car, they have nothing.” Gingotta stepped forward holding the crowbar high in his right hand.

*Now or never!* Wes slapped the garage door switch. It noisily began to close. Gingotta whirled around. He hit the switch again. With a sharp popping, the door reversed directions. Wes leapt off of the step and put a linebacker hit on Gingotta’s back, driving him down, and smashing his chin to the hard concrete floor. Gingotta screamed in pain. The crowbar went clanging toward the driveway. Sharon jumped from behind the Malibu and grabbed it. Wes was on top of Gingotta, struggling to keep him from getting up.

Sharon yelled, “Lie still, unless you want your head bashed in by this crowbar!”

Gingotta went limp.

Wes continued to hold Gingotta down for the five minutes it took for blue lights to appear signaling the arrival of two squad cars silently speeding to the scene and into the drive. Only then did Sharon drop the crowbar.

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By the time Sharon had given her statement and was free to leave the police station it was well after midnight. She had been trying desperately to reach Owens for several hours. Now she was back in her apartment. From years of experience she knew the deadline was past. The Sunday edition had already gone to press. She dialed once

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more. This time he answered. Sharon wasted no time pleading with him to stop the presses for a special late edition.

The editor's response was predictably swift. "Do you know what a special edition costs? Besides, I'm not going to be rushed on this, Sharon. Get your story ready for Monday. And remember. We've been down this road once and got stung by a phony witness. We need to be more careful. Check all your facts. We don't want to get ahead of the investigation."

Unbelievable.

## Chapter 55

After skimming the Sunday paper as he downed his breakfast, Wes called Sharon. “What happened? I was counting on this morning’s news to give us some leverage with the Governor.”

“Me too. But Owens had other ideas. I’m sorry, Wes. I’m working on the story for tomorrow’s edition. Unfortunately, the Raleigh police have not yet charged Gingotta with the Harrison-related murders. I’m not sure who’s dragging their feet, the DA or the police. Craig said not to worry. They just want to get the DNA results first.”

“Why is everyone waiting? They shouldn’t need the DNA. You have his confession on tape.”

“Craig said they can’t be sure the judge will let them use the recording. It could go either way. Gingotta is not going anywhere. They have him dead to rights for Kaminski’s murder. They just want to make sure they have all their ducks in a row and have done everything by the book when they bring the new charges.”

“But what about Harry’s execution? Are they going to let a man die for something he didn’t do, and send their regrets later? You would think they would at least ask the governor for a stay of execution until they can complete the investigation.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Wes. I’m afraid this thing may have gotten political. I’ve been wondering this morning if people are

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dragging their feet because Harrison was responsible for derailing the executions of some other prisoners on death row. Of course the Kaminski thing didn't help."

"If what you are saying is true, I'm starting to feel like David about to face Goliath."

"I know, Wes. There has got to be something more we can do. I'm afraid anything I write today is going to be too late for Harrison."

"I know. When there was nothing in the paper this morning, my first impulse was to call a press conference and tell the TV cameras about the new evidence. But then it occurred to me they would likely spend as much time reporting on the Kaminsky scam as the confession. That could backfire and push the governor in the wrong direction. If we could just convince her to postpone the execution a few days. We need better leverage. We need the help of someone with far greater influence who can make our case directly to the governor."

"Do you have someone in mind?"

"Actually, I do. Bishop Warren. He knows Governor Sanders personally. If I can get an appointment with the bishop, he might be able to get me in to see the Governor today. I know you are in a tricky position with your editor, but I it would really help if you came along."

"As soon as you have an appointment, let me know. I'll be there."

## Chapter 56

Wes conducted morning worship on death row as scheduled. Afterwards he went to Harry's death watch cell and served him communion. Then he filled Harry in on the events of the previous evening.

A fountain of tears erupted from Harry's eyes. "I don't know how to thank you for what you've done" he said hoarsely. "Risky your life like that for me. And you got a confession out of Gingotta. Amazing. I don't know why, but it never occurred to me it was him. Maybe because I knew how much O'Connell blamed and hated me. I must have been too busy looking in the wrong direction. If only we'd known sooner."

Harry put his head in his hands and sobbed convulsively for several minutes. When the tears finally subsided, he wiped his face with his shirt and lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "Tell me the truth, pastor. Do you think it's going to be enough to get the governor to stay the execution?"

"I hope so, Harry. But you know as well as I do, this isn't going to be easy. I'm one of the few friends you have in the world right now. The public is still angry with you for bribing Kaminski to perjure himself on your behalf. They don't trust you, and will suspect you have somehow found a way to frame Anthony Gingotta for the murders. I

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don't want you to give up hope, but I'm not going to lie to you. I'm not crazy about our odds."

"You're right, Wes. Even with the confession, I know better than to expect the DA to step in and do the right thing. If things go on as usual, he won't admit he's been wrong about me any sooner than he has to. Days or even weeks after I'm dead, he'll issue a brief statement of regret. Then he'll go on and on about this is the price we have to pay sometimes in a free society, and how our justice system gets it right most of the time."

"You would have a better read on him than me."

"I'm afraid there was a time I would have done exactly the same thing."

"Well we still have the governor. I think the best chance I have to help you is to talk with Bishop Warren this afternoon and try to enlist his help. The Bishop was the guest preacher at Duke Chapel this morning. He had some type of lunch event afterwards, but agreed to see me around three. Let's just pray he's willing to help us."

"So close and yet so far. I think it was almost easier this morning when I was resigned to my fate. Don't get me wrong. I want to live. Like you said, it's in our DNA. But the uncertainty... At least now you know now I'm not a murderer"

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“I do, Harry. I’m sorry I ever doubted you. And I’m going to do everything I can to get in to see the governor today and convince her to stay the execution.”

“I appreciate everything you’re doing, Wes. You were wrong when you said you were one of the few friends I had in the world. You’re my only friend. You’re going to come back tonight and see this through with me aren’t you?”

“That’s my plan, Harry. I’ll be here. But I’m not sure of the exact time because, if we get an appointment with the governor, we’ll have to see her at her convenience.”

“I understand. Your meeting with the governor is the last chance I have. But if it doesn’t work out with her, I need you back in time to have prayer with me.”

“God willing, I’ll be here.”

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## Chapter 57

Wes and Sharon were waiting at the entrance to The Methodist Building when Bishop Warren arrived. The bishop led them into his office where Wes thanked him for taking time to see them on a Sunday afternoon.

“This is Sharon Noble from the *News and Observer*.”

“I’m familiar with your writing, Ms. Noble. You have a God-given gift. I’m glad to meet you. Wesley here tells me you can back up some of the things he told me on the phone.”

“It’s a privilege to meet you, sir.”

“So, Wesley, you have my attention.”

Wes gave the bishop an account of how he and Sharon had come to suspect Gingotta, and of the evidence against him. While the actual tape of the confession was in the hands of the police, Craig Daniels had allowed Sharon to transcribe it before she left the station the previous night. She handed the bishop a copy which he carefully read.

“So we have the man’s confession, the question of his wife’s wedding ring, and a possible, but not verified, DNA match to the other victim. And you both feel confident the police will charge him with the Harrison-related murders over the next couple of days?”

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“I’m totally confident,” Sharon responded. “They cannot ignore the evidence, and, if they do, they’ll have to answer to a blistering editorial in my paper.”

“Bishop Warren,” Wes pleaded. “You may be the only person who can get us in to see Governor Sanders. It’s why I asked you to meet with us now. We need to talk to the Governor today, before it’s too late, so we can tell her what we told you. We were hoping you would be willing to call her and get her to agree to see us this afternoon.”

“I hope I won’t regret this, Wesley, but I guess I wouldn’t be much of a follower of Jesus if I didn’t try to prevent the death of an innocent person.”

Bishop Warren placed a call to Governor Sanders’ husband and explained his request. The First Gentleman agreed to talk with his wife and call back within the hour. During the wait, Sharon and Wes provided the bishop additional background information on Gingotta and the murders.

Governor Sanders’ aid called back at 4:05 p.m. to say it was a very busy day for the governor. He apologized that she could not meet sooner, but said she would be able to see the bishop and his group at 9:00 p.m.

“I had hoped for a lot sooner,” Wes complained.

“It’s a whole lot better than nothing, Wesley,” The bishop responded.

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## Chapter 58

The Victorian-style Executive Mansion had been the residence of North Carolina governors and their families for more than a hundred and twenty years. At 8:45 p.m. the governor's husband met the three visitors at the gate to the Executive Mansion and accompanied them through security.

He led the group into the main dining room where they found seats on one side of the oversized table. A waiter emerged instantaneously to offer coffee. While they were waiting the bishop and the governor's husband exchanged information about their respective children and grandchildren, and spoke of an old friend who had recently died. Wes squirmed impatiently and checked his watch repeatedly.

Finally, at 9:36 Governor Sanders entered the room with four aides, two male and two female. One of the males carried a thick folder on which the words Harrison Harrison had been boldly printed. The governor approached the visitors while the aides took chairs opposite them.

"I'm sorry to keep y'all waiting. I've been meeting with the parents of Kim Gingotta who flew in today from Austin, Texas to attend the execution, and with the parents of Brooke Smith who live

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here. I can't tell you how relieved they are to finally have this day arrive."

Wes's heart began to sink.

The bishop introduced Wes and Sharon.

"Oh, yes, Rev. Barrett. I believe we met at the Farmers Market not long ago. I trust things are still working out well for you over at Central Prison."

"They are. I greatly appreciate the opportunity."

"And Ms. Noble was there too. And, as I remember, I have also had the pleasure of your company a time or two at my press conferences. It is nice to see you again. I believe congratulations are in order for the good work you did on the babysitter murders. I can't imagine how hard it must have been for you all these years knowing your sister was dead and that evil man was still out there. You must be greatly relieved he is finally dead and can't hurt anyone else."

Governor Sanders took her seat at the head of the table and looked intently at Sharon.

"You're right." Sharon said. "It has been difficult. My sister, Becky, was a wonderful young woman. I only wish he could have been found sooner. And it's good to know for sure Reddy was the one who did it and he can't hurt anyone again."

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“Well I guess that brings us to why we’re here tonight. I believe, Bishop Warren, you told my husband there was additional information I needed to hear on behalf of Mr. Harrison. I am always willing to listen, but I must tell you the same thing I told the death penalty amnesty group who met with me earlier tonight. It will take a lot to convince me I should interfere with what has been a long and fair judicial process. And frankly, I am not inclined to make the families of Harrison’s victims wait any longer.”

“Respectfully, Governor Sanders,” Bishop Warren boomed, “what if those women were not Harrison’s victims? What if the new evidence we share with you points to a different person as the real murderer? I know you appreciate the seriousness and urgency of the circumstances. I believe Wesley and Sharon have some information you need to hear before the state executes an innocent man.”

“Of course, Bishop Warren. I’ll gladly hear what they have to say.”

Wes summarized the evidence against Gingotta and Sharon handed her a written copy of his taped confession. The governor read the transcript. Wes held his breath.

When she had finished the Governor turned to one of her aides and said, “Spence, I believe you have spent quite a bit of time looking into this matter. Would you remind me of what the file says about Mr. Harrison and the murders?”

The aide then spent the next forty minutes summarizing the murders, the trial, the appeals, and last, but not least, gave a detailed

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account of Harrison's "deceptive bribing of Louis Kaminski to commit perjury and to subvert the judicial process."

The longer he droned on the angrier Wes became. Harry might as well be facing a lynch mob.

When the aid closed the file, Governor Sanders turned to the visiting group and said, "So you can see, Mr. Harrison is not a nice man. If he managed to fool everyone once, what makes you think he hasn't somehow managed to do it again?"

Wes fought the urge to erupt. He could no longer control the shaking in his hands. He was about to say something he was going to regret and powerless to stop.

Sharon put a hand firmly on his arm and said, "I understand your fear, Governor, but, while he may be guilty of a lot of despicable things, I believe, based on the evidence we now have, Harrison was framed by Anthony Gingotta, and Gingotta is the real killer. I'm a family member of a murder victim. I appreciate the fact you want to give the hurting people who met with you earlier tonight some peace. But how do you think they are going to feel when the police charge Gingotta with the same murders and say they made a mistake about Harrison. It seems to me the state owes it to the families to get it right, even if to do so temporarily upsets them. I bet there is not one of them who desires to see the wrong man executed. I'm not a politician, but if I was, I don't think I would want to run for reelection as the Governor

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who had examined the evidence exonerating a man on death row, and let him be put to death anyhow.”

“On the other hand,” the aide Spence interrupted, “I don’t think Governor Sanders wants to be remembered as the one who let Harrison dupe her into preventing justice being done for those women. He had his day in court. He had his appeals. The courts have declared him guilty, and, if the talk radio shows are any indication these days, the public despises him.”

With hands still shaking, Wes prayed for the right words. “Can I say one more thing, Governor? I’ve been spending a lot of time with Harrison. He didn’t kill anyone. But he admits he has done a lot of bad things in his life. I think he has genuinely repented of his sins and found peace with God. Up to now his life has been a liability to this world. If he has the opportunity to live, I believe he will now be an asset. I urge you to give him the opportunity.”

“I know you are sincere in your belief, Reverend Barrett. But I hear he fooled you once before. Maybe he’s done it again. Nevertheless, if he’s actually made his peace with God, it’s a very good thing. I believe Jesus said, ‘There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that repents, than ninety and nine just persons.’ If he has really found God, you are to be commended for doing your job, Chaplain. You have been a great help to him as he has prepared for his eternal destiny.”



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The governor stood and everyone else followed suit. “I appreciate your input, all of you. I promise you I will take into consideration everything I’ve heard tonight from all the parties before I make my decision.”

“Thank you again, Governor, for seeing us and giving us this hearing,” the bishop responded. “We will be praying for you.”

“I hope you pray for me often, Bishop Warren. I need a lot of prayers in this job,”

## Chapter 59

Wes sped down Western Boulevard. It was perilously late and Harry needed him. His heart weighed a ton. Had the meeting with the Governor been an exercise in futility? It certainly felt like it.

As he neared his turn, a large number of demonstrators, both for and against the death penalty, were already gathered in an area on the other side of the boulevard. People were carrying picket signs and the glow of many candles illumined the darkness. As he turned toward the security gate, Wes could hear a verse of "We Shall Overcome" drifting through the night air intruded upon by loud cries of "let the murderer die."

In a corridor on the way to Death Watch, Wes passed George Waters. The guard's expression lay somewhere between a sinister stare and a smirk. When Waters was behind him, Wes felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure Waters was still moving in the opposite direction. He was. Wes stepped up his pace.

He joined Harry in his death watch cell, apologized for arriving late, and brought him up to date on the meeting with the governor. "I'm not going to mislead you, Harry. There's still a chance, but it doesn't look that good."

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“I’m not surprised. I know you did the best that you could. While you were gone, I weighed this every way I could. I used to be on the other side. I know how they think. I don’t want it to be so, Pastor, but I know this has to be it. I want to thank you for coming tonight, and for all you’ve done and gone through to try to help me.”

“How’re you doing?” Wes wanted to kick himself for asking the question as soon as the words were out of his mouth. What possible answer could there be at a time like this?

“They brought me my last meal around seven. I had a filet mignon, baked potato, a big bowl of macaroni and cheese and a banana split.”

“How was it?”

“I’m sure it was better food than anything I’ve eaten the last twenty years, but I couldn’t really tell. Let’s just say I think I would have enjoyed it more under better circumstances. I’ve never quite understood the ‘last meal’ thing. I’ve been told some of the men in my position don’t bother to request anything special. Who cares about food when he’s about to be put to death? But I figured, why not?”

“I’ve heard the last meal tradition is derived from Jesus’ last supper. The Lord used it as an opportunity to prepare his disciples for his death and resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit.”

“I had never really made the connection.”

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"I have an idea, Harry. Why don't we open our Bibles and read Jesus' words to his disciples on that night."

Wes helped Harry find the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John.

*"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."*

The two men continued to read, talk, pray, and spend time in contemplative silence until 1:00 a.m., when the warden appeared at the door. Two guards led Harry out of his cell and walked him the few steps across the hall to the preparation room. Wes was required to wait outside in the small death watch day room.

This was absurd. Why wouldn't they let him be by Harry's side? The man needed him. Now he could only imagine what his friend was going through. A nurse technician would locate appropriate veins and hook up three IV lines. When the IV's were in place the warden would offer Harry the opportunity to make a last statement. If he chose to do so, it would be delivered in the privacy of the preparation room. A recording would be made and a transcript provided to the witnesses.

From his location outside the prep room, Wes could now recognize Harry's voice, but he was unable to hear well enough to know what was being said. Was he talking to the warden, or was he

## DESPERATE AMENDS

making a final statement? Wes looked at his watch. No call yet from the governor. If she was going to, it should have been by now. At 1:42 a.m. he was allowed to rejoin Harry.

Harry was now strapped to the gurney, still in the preparation room next to the chamber, his head slightly elevated, with two IV lines in one arm and one in the other.

“If you didn’t know better, pastor, by the looks of things you would think I’m in the hospital and they’re trying to save my life, not end it. They tell me two of the lines are live and one is a dummy. Three of the warden’s men will be behind a curtain and will start the injections. Nobody is supposed to know who they are and they don’t know which of them has the dummy. They seem to have it all thought through.”

Wes reached for his hand. “I’m sorry it has come to this, Harry. I was so hoping it wouldn’t.”

“I know. Me too. But I believe I’m ready, pastor. I believe I’m ready. Would you pray with me some more?”

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## Chapter 60

The witnesses had gathered in a space outside the viewing room. When Brooke Smith's parents arrived, Sharon went to the couple and gave them a hug. "We need to talk. I want you to know I went with Chaplain Barrett and the Methodist Bishop to see Governor Sanders this evening to ask for a stay of execution. I need to tell you what we told her, so you will know the truth, no matter how this turns out."

Sharon summarized the events of the past two days and asked them to read Gingotta's confession.

Mrs. Smith studied it carefully then handed it to her husband. Bewilderment was written on her face. "You're sure this man is the real murderer?"

"Absolutely. Harry Harrison did not murder your daughter. What he did to her, a seventeen-year-old girl who trusted him, was vile and despicable. But, unless something happens in the next few minutes to stop it, he's going to die for two murders he didn't commit. The real murderer is in custody and I am confident he'll be charged tomorrow."

Mrs. Smith was visibly distressed. "Even if we believe you, isn't it too late. What could we possibly do?"

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Sharon told her. Mrs. Smith pulled her husband aside. They spoke briefly. He nodded. She went to a private corner of the room, took out her phone and made a call.

At 1:45 a.m. the witnesses were led by a guard into the cramped viewing area. The family members and officials filled the chairs, while the press stood around the wall. Everyone waited in silence. One of the prison guards entered the room and distributed Harry's final statement to members of the press.

Sharon skimmed over it at first, then, as the seconds ticked away, she read it more carefully.

*For most of my life I lived in a dark place. I lived only for myself, and did not care about others. I am so very sorry for everyone I ever hurt. To the parents of Kim Gingotta and Brooke Smith, I want you to know I am not the one who murdered your daughters. I believe you will learn who the real killer was very soon. But I am the one who was ultimately responsible. If I had never taken advantage of them, the real murderer would have left them alone. If you are never able to forgive me, I fully understand. I certainly do not deserve it. But it is my deepest desire that each of you, and every person who knew and loved your daughters, will soon find peace from your long ordeal. Harry Harrison*

A television reporter leaned over to say something to Sharon, but stopped as the witnesses watched the gurney on which Harry was restrained rolled into the tiny area behind the glass. Harry's head was



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still slightly elevated. He was conscious, but appeared sleepy, no doubt from the tranquilizer he had been given a few minutes before. The IV lines were attached to plastic tubing which ran to an area on the other side of a closed curtain where moving shadows indicated that the executioners were taking their positions, and preparing to discharge their injection devices.

A hush fell over the witness room. The clock on the wall now read 1:58. Everything was ready. The seconds ticked.

At exactly 1:59 and 23 seconds, the witnesses flinched in unison as a phone located somewhere on the other side of the glass rang.

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Wes was standing nearby and watched as Warden Johnson answered the call, listened, then said, “Thank you, governor.”

The warden shouted to the executioners, “Stand down. The governor has ordered a stay. Pull the gurney out of the chamber. Let’s get those IVs out of him and take him over to medical.”

A moment later, two of the executioners filed past Wes on their way out of the death watch area. The disappointment on their faces was transparent. Then the third executioner emerged from the chamber. George Waters brushed aggressively against him as he left.

After the IV needles had been removed in the prep room, Harry, who would likely remain under the influence of tranquilizers for several more hours, was wheeled to the medical services unit. Wes accompanied him, prayed a prayer of thanksgiving, and stayed with Harry until he drifted into a deep sleep.

He patted Harry on the hand. “I didn’t think I’d be saying this right now, my friend, but I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As Wes exited the building on the way to his parking spot, he found himself in the middle of jostling bodies and television cameras. Blinded by the lights for a moment, he covered his eyes and turned

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around. When he removed his hand and his vision adjusted Sharon was standing in front of him. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“It won’t come close to topping what just happened back there, but it seems we have another story. The SBI showed up while we were waiting to witness the execution and I understand they are arresting some prison personnel on drug dealing charges.

As if on cue, the door to the building swung open. The cameras and reporters surged forward. George Waters emerged with head bowed and hands cuffed behind his back. He was followed by several SBI agents who had two more guards in their custody.

Sharon pointed to one of the agents holding the door. “He’s a friend of Craig Daniels. I interviewed him a few minutes ago. During the O’Connell investigation Daniels found some incriminating evidence against your guard friend. The agent over there said the three guards ran quite a drug operation for the prisoners in here, with Waters running the show. Ironically, all three had volunteered to be Harrison’s executioners tonight. I guess things didn’t turn out the way they had planned. My guess is they were planning a party for about now. About a dozen inmates scattered through various units will also be charged. It’s been quite a night.”

“Yes it has. I’m still running on adrenalin, but I don’t think I have ever been so tired.”

“Me either. But my night’s not over yet. I’ve got two stories to write. Let’s get out of here.”

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As they slipped away, Wes said, "That was too close for comfort. I thought after we left the governor, she would surely go to bed, forget about Harry, and sleep like a baby."

"Actually, she may have, until one of her aides woke her to take a call from Brooke Smith's mother. Of course it's possible the governor was persuaded by the evidence we laid out for her, and she was just waiting until the last minute for political reasons. We'll never know for sure. All I know is Mrs. Smith begged the governor to stop the execution long enough to be certain they had the right man. That could have turned the tide."

"However it happened, I will always believe it was a God thing."

"I will too, Wes. I will too."

## Chapter 62

On Tuesday morning Wes and Sharon travelled to Charlotte to interview two families whose daughters were murdered by Reddy. On the return trip Sharon received a call from Craig Daniels. He was the bearer of some very good news. The DNA from the cigarette butt found in Brooke Smith's pocket had indeed matched Gingotta's.

After Sharon conveyed the information, Wes asked, "What do you think is going to happen to Harry now?"

"With the DNA match, and the murder charges filed against Gingotta, he's off the hook. Craig said it was all over but the paper work. The governor has no choice but to give him a full pardon. I would not be surprised to see your guy released sometime in the next ten days."

"It looks like old Harry is going to get a chance to try out his new faith and changed life in this world, at least for a while. I can't tell you how good it makes me feel. I believe in redemption. It's happened to me. And now it's happened to Harry."

"That's wonderful, Wes. I hope you're right, about Harry."

"What's next for you, Sharon?"

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“I hope to finish my “Ripple Effect” series soon. My editor wants to run it while everyone is still thinking about the Gingotta and Harrison headlines. What about you, Wes?”

“When I first came to Central Prison I was convinced I would hate being a chaplain instead of a pastor. I have to confess, it’s growing on me. I’ve been praying about it, and I’m starting to believe it is what God is calling me to do, at least for the foreseeable future.”

Traffic was now picking up as they neared the I-40 bypass around Greensboro.

“Hey! Do you have time for me to show you something?” Wes suggested. “It will only take a few hours longer.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Let’s take a shortcut home?”

“A shortcut that takes a few hours longer? How can I resist?”

Wes drove west and north until he reached an entrance to the Blue Ridge Parkway and turned south. They were now traveling forty-five miles an hour on a twisty curvy scenic road. As the Toyota Highlander climbed, spring foliage along the road slowly gave way to mountain forests still painted with the grey bleakness of late winter. But even here, along the mountain tops, wonder filled the air. It was a bright sunny day, the sky a rich blue.

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Wes turned into one of the overlook parking areas. They exited the SUV and slipped on their jackets. Wes led Sharon along a short path to a place where the woods opened to a majestic panoramic view. Blue ripples of mountain ranges decorated with tufts of smoky, low hanging clouds stretched before them into the distance.

“It’s beautiful, Wes. I’ve always loved the beach, but this is amazing.”

A chilly wind rose from the valley below. Wes put his right arm around Sharon’s shoulder and pulled her gently to his side. Sharon reached around Wes’s waist and pulled him closer.

“And God said it is good.” Wes uttered with reverence.

“And God said it is good.”



## Epilogue

Six months later Wes and Sharon celebrated her birthday at The Angus Barn, a fine dining steakhouse near the Raleigh Durham Airport. After dinner and a serving of chocolate chess pie, Wes said, "I want to show you something."

"I'm always game for one of your shortcuts," she teased.

They took I-40 toward the city, exited at an old strip mall, and found a parking spot in a nearly full lot.

"This is the place I was telling you about," Wes said, pointing to a large storefront. "This used to be a furniture store, but it's now a church. Harry joined it after he was released."

"Any particular reason why he decided on this one?"

"As a matter of fact there is. This church has a great prison ministry. Every Tuesday, a group of their men come to the prison and teach a couple of Bible classes. One study is a kind of introduction to Christianity. The other is about becoming faithful disciples and servants of God, both in prison and after release."

"Don't tell me Harry Harrison is one of the teachers."

"Not yet, but he's been through the classes. It's amazing how much Harry has changed. Come on. I'll show you."

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Sharon exited the car. "I might have known. You wine me and dine me on my birthday, and then you take me to church."

"What can I say? I'm a hopeless romantic."

Sharon and Wes found a couple of empty folding chairs near the back of the crowded worship center. Three females, accompanied by a praise band, were standing at microphones singing, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." The congregation joined in softly as they followed the lyrics on a large video screen.

When the hymn ended, a heavily tattooed man in a worn knit shirt and blue jeans welcomed everyone to a night devoted to the church's prison ministries. He then introduced Harry as the newest member of the ministry team.

Harry rose, faced the congregation, and began to speak. He spent several brutally honest minutes describing his past. Then he talked about a young chaplain who had come into his life, and who, despite every reason to give up on him, had not done so.

Sharon reached over and placed her hand in Wes's.

"I know there are skeptics out there who don't believe in death row conversions," Harry continued. "I think there will always be people who think I'm just up to one more of my evil schemes. I don't really blame them. For over fifty years I mocked everything good and holy. But because of God's wonderful grace, I can tell you tonight I am not that man anymore. Don't get me wrong. I didn't change myself. I

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could never have done that. I was too far gone. But God has changed my heart.”

As the congregation nodded and applauded, Harry paused briefly before continuing. “When I lay on that gurney and they started the IVs I felt myself drifting off to sleep. I was dying, but I was no longer afraid. I was comforted by the warmth of God’s forgiving love freshly received in my heart. I thought I would wake up in heaven. But here I am. I believe I am still in this world for a purpose. Some of you know I’m trying to get my law license restored. I hope to use my experience and training to help other wrongly convicted inmates, especially those facing execution for something they did not do. But that is only a part of my story. My new found friends in this ministry have helped me understand that the number of persons convicted of felonies in this country has grown exponentially since the early 1980s. More than half of all felons who are released from jail or prison will be rearrested at some point, more than forty-percent in the first two years. When you come out a convicted felon, even if you have the best of intentions, the cards are stacked against you. It’s nearly impossible these days to get a job. As soon as they run your background check, it’s over. Felons can’t get any kind of benefits to tide them over either. Many turn back to a life of crime. That’s where you come in. We need volunteers to help create a ministry that does more than visit prisoners and hold bible classes. We need to surround released prisoners with our love and support. We need to help them find jobs, and to get back on their feet, so they can have a fighting chance. I believe God has called me to this ministry and I ask you join me in it.”

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When Harry finished speaking, a question and answer session followed. As Wes and Sharon got up to slip out, the words of Psalm 79:11 appeared on the media screen.

*“May the groans of the prisoners come before you;*

*by the strength of your arm*

*preserve those condemned to die.”*