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Prologue

The River

In the middle of the land where people lived flowed a river unlike any other. The first unusual nature of the river was that it flowed in two directions. Sometimes it flowed to the north, other times it flowed to the south. If one were to follow the river to the north a person would eventually come to an immense lake. Some, however, claimed that it was not one massive lake, but rather many smaller linked lakes. No matter which viewpoint a person held, everyone knew that with a large amount of snow melting or rain falling, the river flowed southward.

Following the mighty river to the south, one would eventually come to small foothills. As one continued travelling south down the river, the foothills grew in height. Eventually the southbound traveler discovered that he was beneath a series of 7,000 meter high mountains and volcanoes.

When a large amount of rain fell here or as the snow on the immense peaks melted, the river flowed north. From time to time one of the volcanoes erupted. When this happened, the river carried the ash to the north.

Another unusual feature of the river was that as it flowed through the land where people lived, it branched off into many streams. These streams twisted, joined, and then separated again many times as they made their way north or south. In some places these streams turned into a swamp or a ford. In a few places the river's streams ended as ponds or small lakes. Some of these ponds and small lakes dried up when little or no precipitation fell on the lake or in the mountains. Then when there was precipitation the ponds and small lakes reappeared.

The branching and rejoining of the river was made possible because most of the land was incredibly flat. The over forty thousand square meters of land between the immense lake and the massive mountains fell or rose, depending on one's point of view, no more than a few meters.

The first explorers that left the mountains and the lake reported that no matter where they went along the river, the land beyond was flat. Many did not believe the explorers until people began settling further and further away from the lake and the mountains and volcanoes. Then the settlers learned that the explorers were correct. The land in between was incredibly flat.

Settlers began to dig holes in the flat land to make hills. They also piled up dirt as they created quarries and mined for minerals. These man-made hills and holes did not affect the flow of the river; it still branched off into many smaller streams just as it had always done.

One generation after another kept moving further away from the river. Eventually, people lived on all the land in between. They lived in cities, towns, villages, farms, and large ranches. The largest cities were still along the immense lake and in the foot hills of the southern mountains. It was originally reported that the people lived by the lakes and in the mountains. It made sense that the largest cities would be nearest the lake and the mountain. And it seemed reasonable that the further a person lived away from the large cities the further away their neighbors lived.

About half way between the mountains and the lake, in a partially unimportant and lightly populated stretch of the river was a place that at one time was called the Black Forest. Before it was known as the Black Forest it was known as the Black Swamp. For the longest time no one lived there because those that tried to died of various mosquito-carried diseases.

As time went on the land between the mountains and the immense lake was slowly settled, the richer lands being settled first. Yet, because of war, famine, disease, and religious hate people eventually began living in the swamps. A group of people known as the Verlassens eventually were forced to live in the Black Swamp.

The Verlassens were a hearty and entrepreneurial people. They learned how to drain the swamp by making the streams in the swamp deeper. They also dug drainage ditches that fed into the streams; here they also buried long lines of clay tiles in the ground to drain the water from the swamp. These underground streams led to the man-made ditches that fed into the deepened streams. These tasks succeeded in drying up the Black Swamp. Thus, people no longer referred to it as the Black Swamp, but the Black Forest. The area retained the "black" part of its name because of the large hard wood trees that had grown up in the swampy land. The foliage of the large trees was so thick that no light shone on the ground. Thus, it was always dark and black and unable to be used.

After the Verlassens had drained the swamp they wanted to plant crops. They were expert farmers even before they came to the area. Yet, farming the Black Forest proved to be impossible even for the Verlassens because the roots of all hardwood trees covered most of the ground and because no light could hit their crops. In order to overcome these problems the Verlassens had to cut down many of the trees and sell the wood to capitalists. Then they chopped up the roots and dynamited the stumps. Slowly the hardwood forest fell and the land opened up allowing the light to hit their crops. Today very few tall hardwood trees are left in the Verlassens' land and so today few people call the Verlassens' land the Black Forest but the fertile land of the Verlassens.

Priests led the first Verlassens into the Black Swamp. These priests were not as we know them today. Rather, they were men who were educated by church-sponsored universities and colleges who did not take vestment vows. (Vestment vows gave a priest the right to administer special sacraments.) These priests started and nurtured the small Verlassens farms and villages along the streams of the Black Swamp. They were the ones who taught them to dig the ditches and deepen the streams. They also financed the clay tile mills and the grain mills and suggested dynamiting the roots. Without the priests' guidance the first Verlassens living in the Black Swamp would have surely died and their name would have been forgotten.

In spite of all the help the priests gave to the Verlassens, their influence slowly diminished. By the fourth generation after the settling of the Black Swamp many public schools and universities had been built by the government. The richer Verlassens began sending their children to the highest level of education being taught in the government schools. Eventually the knowledge of their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren surpassed the knowledge of the priests. At the same time the richness of the soil made many of the descendents of the Verlassens very wealthy and they did not need the financial help of the priests. Most earned enough money to not only support their families, but to send their children to the best universities and colleges and buy the finer things of life.

As the power and prestige of the priests dwindled, both the priests and the Verlassens grew corrupt. Not only did the priests stop teaching the truths of God, they themselves stopped believing in them. Instead they began debating on trivial spiritual matters. The biggest debates centered around the true source of the river. Some said the source was the massive lake, while others believed the source was the glaciers and snow on the mountains. A small group of priests pointed out that the source of the river was neither the lake nor the glaciers. Rather they claimed that it was the precipitation from above. Precipitation, this third group pointed out, fell on everything including the mountains, volcanoes, the great lake, and even the land in between. Those who believed the source of water was the lake and/or mountain considered the third group to be heretics. They laughed at the third group and tossed them out of their universities and colleges. In some cases they even hanged them or burned them at the stake.

In spite of all the debates and crimes committed because of the debates, one truth always remained; everyone needed the river to live. No matter how much knowledge and wealth the Verlassens and their priests had, they always relied on the river to provide life, whether they acknowledged it or not.

What follows is a story of the fourth and fifth generations of two Verlassens families.

Chapter 1

Two Families

Year 1

“Do you think we’ll catch any fish today, Vinnie?” Marie asked her older brother Vincent. Everyone called him Vince except his siblings. Marie was seven years old. Vinnie was almost nine. Vinnie was a tall slender boy with dark wavy hair and dark eyes. Marie was a tall girl with wide hips, dark hair and brown eyes. Both wore simple clothes and no shoes.

Marie and Vinnie walked side by side eastward down their long stone driveway. They were approaching the road that ran in front of their parents’ farm. The newly paved one lane road ran north and south for most of its track. The road paralleled a small stream for about half a kilometer in each direction. In front of the farm the road and the stream were about half a kilometer apart. To the south the road eventually turned east toward the stream and crossed it. Going this direction the road eventually made its way into a small town. To the north the road dead ended into an east-west road that also crossed the stream. Taking the east-west road to the east would bring a person to another small town. To the north the stream gradually increased in size as other rivers flowed into it until after 200 kilometers it emptied into a large bay that was at the center of a importance for a bustling shipping and manufacturing metropolitan area.

When Vinnie and Marie reached the road in front of their parents’ farm, they turned south. As they walked down the road they approached an old one-lane bridge. On the left side of the bridge just before it crossed the stream was an abandoned stone quarry. The quarry and the stream were lined with tall trees. Sometime in the past the stream had eroded the bank, separating the quarry and the stream. During high water the stream flowed into the quarry bringing with it nutrition and fish. This made the quarry an ideal place to fish.

Behind Vinnie walked his younger brother Alphons. Everyone called him Al. Al was six years old. Behind Marie walked her younger sister Adeline. Everyone called her Addie. Addie was about to turn five. Addie resembled her sister in appearance. Al looked nothing like his siblings. Like their older siblings the second row wore simple clothes and no shoes.

Vinnie, Marie, and Al had long branches resting on their shoulders that would soon be used as fishing poles. A string was attached to the end of the poles. About a meter from the end of the string a piece of cork bounced in cadence with their steps. The end of the string sported a homemade hook. Addie also carried a branch on her shoulder. However, there was no string on the end of her branch.

"It rained early this morning, Marie. That means the fish will be bitin'. We'll catch plenty," Vinnie remarked. Then he added, "As long as Addie stays out of the water this time." The smell of new tar and worms on the road was combined with evaporating rain puddles. Every once in awhile Al picked up a worm and put it in a can.

"It wasn't my fault. I just fell in."

"You didn't fall in," Al retorted as he picked up a worm. "You jumped in."

"Uh uh! You pushed me in!"

"I thought you said you fell in, Addie," Marie turned around to look at Addie.

"I did fall in because Al pushed me in," Addie pushed Al. Al stopped, and put his face next to Addie's glaring eyes.

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

Vinnie stopped and turned around. "Oh, just hush! If you two make all that noise at the quarry we won't catch anything."

"I won't catch anything because you didn't give me a string, Vinnie. Why didn't you give me a string?"

"Because the last time I gave you a string you tangled it up in everyone else's string. I don't know why I bring you along. You always make it impossible to catch fish, Addie."

"You didn't bring her along, Vinnie. She just came along and there's nothing wrong with that," Marie responded.

"That's not true. Mom makes us bring her," Al spoke up.

Addie started to sniffle. Vinnie took a deep breath. The three stood in a circle as Vinnie addressed them in a commanding voice, “All right, let’s get this straight. No cryin’, no arguin’, and no talkin’ whatsoever. No swimmin’, pushin’, or jumpin’ in the quarry. No nothin’ except fishin’! Okay?”

Marie and Al responded positively. Addie did not. “Well, Addie?”

“Well,” she exclaimed as she put her hands on her hips. The branch in her hand pointed at Vinnie’s chest, “How am I supposed to fish without a string?” Determination was on Addie’s round pale face.

Vinnie sighed as he pulled a string from his pocket. He held it out before him, but did not tie it to Addie’s pole. “Okay. I’ll give you a string if you promise to keep your pole and string away from everyone else’s.”

“I promise.”

“You promise to everything else?”

“I do.”

“Good.” Vince tied the string to Addie’s pole. “Now let’s get goin’ before the sun gets too high.” The four of them proceeded to make their way down the road without another word. With the rain the night before and no clouds in the sky it was sure to be a hot sticky summer day.

Corn taller than two meters grew on either side of the road. Yet the corn on their left was higher and fuller than the corn growing on their right. Still, the corn on both sides of the road was higher than the siblings with the exception of Vinnie. A windless morning kept corn pollen from being sprinkled on the children and the road.

The corn on their left had been planted to within a meter of the road. That corn and land was owned by the Weller family. The Weller family’s farmhouse was about half a kilometer past the bridge.

The corn that was growing to the right was separated from the road by an old split rail fence. About half way between their farm and the stream the fence turned away from the road. The split rail fence marked the boundary of their farm. At the point where the fence ended, tall lush trees began to line either side of the road.

Just before they reached the bridge the children turned left off the road onto the quarry’s dirt and stone entrance. There was an old wooden gate stretching across the entrance, but that didn’t stop them. They easily navigated around and through the gate in spite of the sign that stated in bold red letters, “Closed! Keep Out.”

A small, dilapidated wooden building sat at the intersection of the dirt entrance and the road. An old sign hanging on the building’s lone door simply stated “Office”. On top of the office was a sign that advertised “Weller Stone Quarry”. Small trees, vines, and weeds were doing all

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they could to strangle the small office. The children passed right by it and walked up to the edge of the quarry's blue water. Most of the quarry was surrounded by large willows and maples.

Vinnie pointed to the right toward the river bank, "I'll fish on that fallen tree by the opening to the river. Al, you can fish next to me if you wish."

"Sure, but I'm goin' to sit on the quarry's edge."

"Afraid of fallin' in again, Vinnie? You might drown this time," Marie and Addie laughed.

Vinnie sighed. He pointed to his left as he ordered, "Marie and Addie, you fish over there somewhere."

"Why over there?"

"Because I expect that within five minutes you two will begin gabbin' and chase all the fish away from you toward me."

"Will not. We promised not to talk," replied Addie.

Marie leaned over and whispered to Addie, "Will to. What else is fishin' good for?" Then Marie stated in a louder voice, "Come on, Addie. Let's leave the pros alone. They'll only find somethin' to complain about if we stay by them anyway."

"Bye, 'plainers," Addie retorted as she grabbed her sister's hand. The two girls walked away from the boys. They found a large willow tree to sit under. Some of the willow branches touched the smooth surface of the water.

During the next hour Vinnie caught three fish. Al fell asleep after catching one small fish. The whole time Marie and Addie talked. The girls didn't catch any fish. They could have if they had been watching their corks. Both of their corks bobbed after a few minutes of being in the water, but neither girl noticed. The fish took their bait and left their hooks empty without the girls missing a beat in their conversation. After that, their corks remained motionless on top of the smooth water.

"Marie, what's school like?" asked Addie. She began creating small waves with her toes. The only other items to make a wave in the quarry were an occasional falling leaf or Vince catching a fish.

"It's all right. You get to meet lots of kids and learn things," Marie took her shoes off and dipped her feet into the water.

"Kids? What kids?"

"Kids that live around here," Marie said as she moved her arms in half circles.

"Like the Wellers? I don't like that Jane Weller. She's mean and bossy. All the Wellers are mean."

“Yes, they are, but they’re not the only kids that go to school. There are plenty of great kids that you’ll meet when you go to kindergarten this fall.”

“Like who?”

“Like the Liniments’ kids. They live up the stream on the other side of town,” Marie smiled as she pointed down the stream by waving her hand in circles.

“They’re nice?”

“Yes, they’re nice. There is a girl your age and a boy my age. We ran into them during the church social. Don’t you remember?”

“No.”

“You were probably too busy eatin’ your ice cream to notice them. Well, the next time we see them I’ll point her out to you. She’s nice; you’ll see.”

“What are you doin’ with our river and quarry, Pohl?” asked a voice from behind the girls. The challenge came from Jane Weller, a girl the same age as Marie Pohl. Jane was with her older sister, Joyce and, younger brother, Larry.

The Weller siblings were handsome and well dressed. They wore bright colored swimming clothes, new sandals, and straw hats. The girls had long blond hair with a hint of red. Larry’s hair was the same except it was cut short and neat with the front parted to the left. Their faces were round and their eyes were hazel. The three received their looks from their mother and a lofty temperament from their father.

“Fishin’. What’s it look like, Well-head?” Marie yelled in reply without turning her head. “And this ain’t your quarry and it ain’t your river.” Marie paused for a minute and then corrected. “And it ain’t a river. It’s a stream, Well-head.”

“Oh yeah? Then why is our name on top of the office?”

“That’s just what they call it because the county bought the land from your great grandparents.” Marie continued to slowly move her feet in the water. Addie took her feet out and tensed up.

“Well, we’re going swimmin’ in our quarry and you can’t fish in it any more!” Jane ran for the quarry and jumped in. She was followed by her sister and brother.

When the heads of the three Weller siblings’ reappeared above the surface of the water, Vinnie yelled from the other side of the quarry, “Marie and Addie, you promised that you wouldn’t go swimmin’.”

“It ain’t us,” Addie responded. “It’s the Wellers.”

“Yeah, it’s us, and this is our quarry and river and you ain’t allowed fishin’, swimmin’, or doin’ anything else in it. Now git before we tell our parents you were here,” Joyce yelled.

“Yeah? This ain’t yours, Weller,” Marie retorted.

Crack! Al jumped and fell into the quarry. When he resurfaced, he yelled for help. Vinnie grabbed a limb from the fallen tree next to him and stretched it out to Al. Everyone else in and around the quarry looked up as the rumble of thunder following the lightning echoed and faded away. Tall cumulus clouds that produced the lightning were quickly rising in the west. The clouds were scarcely seen by the children because of the intense humidity hanging in the air. Yet the children could see that the horizon was dark and their skin tingled. All knew that this meant only one thing. A fierce late summer storm was blowing in.

“Go figure! The Wellers show up just in time to ruin everyone’s day,” Marie yelled to no one in particular. “You’re a curse, Well-head. I hope lightning strikes the quarry while you’re in it, Jane Weller.”

Al climbed out of the quarry with Vinnie’s help. Then the Pohl siblings started making their way to their parents’ farm. Behind them the Weller’s were climbing out of the quarry. When the Pohls reached the road, Addie spoke up, “Why are Wellers so mean?”

Vinnie put his hand on Addie’s shoulder as he responded with a smile on his face, “It’s because they are always born when a volcano erupts.”

“What’s a ‘cano and what’s it got to do with the Wellers being mean?”

“It’s volcano,” Vinnie emphasized the ‘vol’. He continued, “Down south there’s a bunch of tall mountains. Every once in a while the rock far beneath one of the mountains gets so hot that it blows the top of the mountain off. That’s a volcano,” Vinnie stated. He saw a puzzled look on his sister’s face so he added, “It’s like when Mom turns the stove on to heat up the coffee pot. After a while the water in the pot gets hot and steam comes out the top.”

Addie’s eyes lit up. “Wow! Can we go an’ see a ‘cano sometime, Vinnie?”

“I doubt it. They’re far away. It would take a lot of money to get there.”

“Oh,” Addie’s shoulders dropped.

From an early age the Pohls were well aware of their social status. They were one of the poorer Verlassens families. The younger Pohls, including the four now briskly walking down the road, carried shame because of their lack of wealth. Most Verlassens families believed that wealth was a sign of the blessing from God due to righteous living. Reality, however, was something else.

The Pohl ancestors were one of the first Verlassens families that the priests led into the black swamp because they were the bravest, the strongest, and the smartest. Like the other first families the Pohls bought and settled in land that was higher than the rest because it wasn’t wet as long and as often as the lower land. The lower land was usually near the streams. When the swamp was drained the higher land proved to be less fertile and not as profitable as the lower land. Thus, the first Verlassens families were always poorer than the later arriving ones.

The Wellers were late comers to the black swamp. They bought the fertile land along the stream that separated them from the Pohls. So with each harvest the Weller family grew richer than the Pohl family. They claimed they were wealthier because they were righteous and thus blessed by God. The priests backed this statement up with speeches from the pulpit, not because they believed it was true. Rather, the priests claimed this to patronize the richer families to ensure their constant tithing. Whether rich or poor everyone accepted the priests' word as if it was from God Himself.

Another reason that the stream dwelling families were always wealthier than the first arrivals was that the lower land was closer to the bed rock. Thus, many quarries and mines were dug along the streams. Since, the families that lived along the streams grew rich because of the fertile land, they also had more influence among the politicians and the priests. They used this influence to convince the counties to buy the land along the streams at an inflated value and for a percentage of the profits. This in turn made the Verlassens who lived near the streams even richer. Many of the first comers eventually learned of the land conspiracy and began to resent the richer stream dwelling Verlassens. They also began doubting the words of the priests.

"Anyway," Vinnie pointed to the ground as he continued, "Deep down below the ground is where the devil lives. When volcanoes explode, the hot rock and ash that makes up the devil's home are thrown into the air and lands on the snow in the mountains. The hot rock and ash melt the snow and the water and ash goes into the river. That ash is full of evil since it was in the devil's house. As the river rises the ash flows down the river. You can't see the ash in the river, but some say they can taste it."

"Like Grandpa?" Addie asked.

"Yeah. And if a mommy drinks the evil ash water just before her baby is born, the baby will have some of the devil's ash in them. They are evil babies and turn into mean and bossy people. People say that the Wellers are always born after a volcano erupts. The Wellers have the devil's ash in them. That is why they are so mean and evil. Some are even born with deformities and even die at birth." Vinnie gave a wicked smile as he said "evil babies."

Marie interrupted, "That's a bunch of hog wash, Vinnie, and you know it."

"Grandpa says it's true," Alphons spoke up.

"Grandpa also said you were going to be a great basketball player. I don't see that happenin'." Alphons, unlike his older siblings was a short stout boy. He had a round face and the blondest hair that anyone had ever seen. His eyes were deep blue.

As the four children approached the homestead, the wind began to lift cut grass and leaves high into the air. "An updraft. We better hurry it up," Vinnie stated. More thunder was heard in the distance. It continued to grow darker as he continued, "Soon it's going to pour."

"What's going on at the house?" Marie asked as she and her siblings walked at a brisk pace. In the driveway sat several vehicles including Doc Liniments' expensive automobile.

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“Don’t know, Sis.”

The four young children started to run quicker when large cold rain drops began to pelt them. They rushed up the back porch steps and were greeted by their older sister, Catherine. Everyone called her Kate. She was a tall teenager with long dark hair. Thin wire rimmed glasses hid her brown eyes.

Hard rain and hail started to beat loudly on the roof of the porch. The wind blew some of the rain and hail onto the edges of the porch’s wooden floor forcing the children to stand against the house.

“Let us in, Kate. We’ll get wet,” Marie yelled after she jumped at a loud clap. Marie was afraid of lightning. Addie began to cry, and Marie pulled her close.

“You’re already wet. You can’t go in. The grown-ups said so,” Kate had a melancholy and stressed look on her face. She tried every once in awhile to smile in order to fool her younger siblings. Her ploy did not work. The four youngest Pohls knew something was wrong.

“What’s up? Why all the cars in the driveway?” Vinnie asked. His back was against the house. He was staring at the cars parked in the back and side lawns. The rain was coming down so hard that the ground didn’t have time to soak up all the water. Puddles began forming in the yard and driveway. A small stream began running down the wheel paths in the driveway toward the road. Kate did not answer.

After a few minutes the wind began to let up, but the downpour continued. Moving his back off the house, Vinnie exclaimed, “This is ridiculous. I’m going in.” He started towards the back door, but he was stopped by his grandfather, who was coming out. Grandpa Pohl was a large powerful man even in his advanced age. His face was weathered by years of working in the sun. His head wore a crown of shiny skin. His powerful stature made everyone respect him especially his grandchildren. Vinnie moved out of the towering man’s way.

“How’s Pa?” Kate asked.

“What’s wrong with Pa?”

Grandpa Pohl stopped at the end of the porch and looked toward the road. “Pa was working in the field with me and your Uncle Mel when he grabbed his chest and collapsed. We took him to his room and called Doc Liniments. The doc’s lookin’ at him now.”

As Grandpa Pohl finished speaking, a fancy car drove into the driveway. The sliding front spoke wheels caused orange water to splash onto Doc Liniments’ car. Father Hemmingway stepped out of the new car. Father Hemmingway was a fat young man. He opened an umbrella and began running up the short backyard sidewalk. The umbrella kept the priest’s head and torso dry; but the rain that was hitting the orange puddles splashed dirty water onto his long black vestment. The dirty water turned the lower half of his vestments dark orange. The air carried the smell of the orange earth.

“Figures they’d send a young priest,” Grandpa Pohl muttered.

“How’s he doing?” asked Father Hemmingway as he and Grandpa Pohl entered the house.

“Not good. Doc says he doesn’t have long...” their voices were drowned out by a clap of thunder. Marie, Addie, and Kate clutched each other. Addie and Marie cried. Vinnie stood with his back against the house. His face was white as ash. Al ran out into the rain toward the big red barn. His tears rolled down his cheeks, off his face, then onto the ground; thus helping the rain form puddles. The fish that he and Vinnie had caught were flopping on the edge of the wet porch along with their scattered poles.

Chapter 2

The Dance

Year 11

Marie Pohl sat nervously on one of several white wooden chairs placed on her mother’s front porch. The porch was as long as the two story farmhouse’s front. It had a roof and a solid fence its full length with the exception of a two meter opening that led down concrete stairs to the front lawn. The stairs were connected to a cement sidewalk. The sidewalk led to the road’s side cut in front of the house. Where the sidewalk met the side cut large white hydrangea grew. The potent smell of the flowers greeted any visitor to the Pohl farmhouse. Any minute now a car was expected to pull in. Marie was waiting for her date to the senior prom.

She had grown to be a tall beautiful young lady. She had long dark thick shiny hair, that bounced with a life of its own as she moved about. She always did her best to show joy and excitement, something that her lush hair exemplified. Marie was on the cheerleading squad and was one of the girls expected to be elected queen at the homecoming dance. Everything on Marie was perfect; from her hair to her bright face, to her large breasts to her long legs, with one exception. Marie retained the wide hips of her youth. She hated her hips and everyone knew it. When Al first discovered this, he began calling her Hippo Hips, a name that everyone repeated and Marie despised.

A week ago Marie was ecstatic when John Liniments asked her to be his date to the prom. She had been trying to get his attention and affection for many years. The task was not easy because his family had more money than quite a few others in the area while her family had little. Being asked to the prom was a sure sign that she was on the way to winning him.

John had asked her during lunch at school. After she said yes she told no one until she was at home. There she told her mother and her sister Addie. No one else knew that John and she were now a hot item. She told John that she wanted it that way. “I want it to be a surprise when you and I walk together into the Sea of Love.” The prom was named “Sea of Love”. More than anything else Marie wanted it to be a surprise to Jane Weller, who was the lead cheerleader.

Jane, Marie, and the rest of the high school girls had dreamed that John would ask them to the prom. John had been a star basketball player in high school and had scholarship dreams until he hurt his ankle during a late season game. The accident ended his college sports’ dreams and what would have been a record setting high school basketball year. John’s popularity with the girls did not subside after the accident because he was very handsome, smart, and had

money. All the locals believed that in spite of the accident John would still follow his father's foot steps by graduating from the state's medical school and taking over the family practice.

As the high school prom approached many couples kept their dates secret. This led to speculation, teasing, and emotional jarring. Jane had spread the rumor that no one had asked Marie to the dance and so she was forced to ask a cousin from out of town. Marie had spread the rumor that no one had asked Jane to the prom and so she was forced to ask a social outcast from the neighboring town. Marie reflected on all this as she nervously waited for John to drive up to her house.

"Has your date arrived yet?" Marie's mother asked as she opened the screen door and walked across the porch. When she reached a chair next to Marie she sat down. Mother Pohl was average height and slightly overweight. Much of the beauty of her youth had gone. Her silver hair had lost its bounce years ago and her muscles had lost their strength causing all parts of her body to sag and shift about. The only place where the beauty of her youth remained was in her dark eyes. They commanded strength, confidence, and compassion. Mother Pohl had shown all the effects of raising five children on her own on a small country farm.

"No." Marie was sitting at the edge of her chair staring down the road. "How do I look, Mom?"

"I told you before, you look lovely, dear." Her mother took a sip from the lemonade that she had carried from the kitchen. "Sure is hot for spring."

"Is he here yet?" Addie asked as she opened the screen door and ran down the steps to the end of the sidewalk. She peered down the one lane road in order to answer her own question.

"You'd think she's the one going on the date," their mother said to Marie. Then she yelled to Addie, "Girl, why are you wearing your Sunday dress?" Then she softened her voice and turned her eyes upward, "Mother of Mercy, help me. Why did your Son give us so many girls? All these girls will be the end of me."

"Look, there's a car coming down the road!" Addie started pointing and quickly ran back on the porch. She sat next to Marie, straightening her dress and arching her back to force out her not quite mature breasts. Addie still looked just like Marie, only a few years younger.

Marie stood up, leaned over the porch's rail to verify her sister's statement, and then sat back down. "Everyone be calm. Don't act like we're excited."

Their mother smiled, took another sip from her drink, and then stated, "Remember what we talked about, dear."

"Yes, Mother."

"What did you talk about?" Addie leaned over to Marie as she whispered, "Was it about sex?"

"Addie Marie, you shouldn't be talking like that." Mother Pohl was a religious woman and attended church at least twice a week. Since her husband died, she lit a candle every week and prayed for his well being.

“Sorry, Mother.”

The car pulled into the side cut and stopped. Marie released her breath when she realized that it was her sister Kate with her new husband. The couple stepped out of the car and made their way to the porch. “Just wanted to see what my siblings looked like before their big dates.” Kate remained a tall slender woman. She wore the same style wired glasses that she wore in her youth. Her dark hair was rolled up in a bun and pinned down.

“Mother, how many people are coming? How many people did you tell?”

“Don’t know for sure.”

“Oh, this will ruin everything.”

“Didn’t know that we were unwanted company. Should we leave?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. Sure, you’re welcome. Did you tell anyone?”

“You mean did I tell anyone who would tell Jane Weller? What is it with you two? Sparring with each other all through your whole life,” Kate replied with a probing look as she walked past Marie. She and her husband walked to the end of the porch and sat in the two remaining chairs. “Evening, ma’am,” was all Kate’s husband, Bob Kirk, said. He was a muscular, humble man of average height and weight.

“Addie, fetch them some lemonade.”

“Mother, can’t it wait?”

“If he comes before you’re finished we’ll tell him to wait.” Everyone on the porch chuckled except Addie. Addie’s cheeks turned red. She complied with her mother’s request by quickly walking toward the front door.

On her way in the house Addie was met by Vinnie and Al who were making their way out. “What’s with you, Vinnie?” she asked as the boys walked out the door. Everyone turned to look at Vinnie. He was dressed in formal wear. Addie hurried into the kitchen not waiting for an answer.

“Why are you dressed up, Vinnie?” Marie began suspecting the worst, but didn’t want to accept that her brother might be going to the prom because it implied that he’d be going with someone that she had seen him talking to a lot lately.

“I’m going to the prom, why else?”

“But you’re out of school. How can you go?”

“Because, sister, as you already know, I can go if someone in your grade asks me to.” Vinnie was tall, thin, and maintained a look of confidence and strength beyond his age; the result of taking his father’s place on the farm. He continued, “Not that she asked me. A few weeks ago, I asked her if she had a date. When she replied, “No,” I asked her if she’d mind if I’d take

her. She didn't, and she and I, or should I say, we," Vinnie emphasized we, "are going to the dance together." He stood proud as a rooster as he revealed his little secret for he knew that he had gained a date to the most important teenage event in the area with the prettiest, richest, and best developed girl in the county. Vinnie knew the revelation would shock his sister to the point of ruining her evening. The only reason why Vinnie wanted to ruin his sister's evening was because it would help him gain points with his date. With enough points Vinnie hoped he would win his date's heart.

"You girls were concentrating so much on getting ready for John's arrival that you didn't even notice your brother getting ready for his date? Reminds me of my wedding day, when I was getting dressed so I could marry your father. Oh, he was so handsome. Many wanted him but I got him. I was so nervous that I couldn't sleep the night before. It rained all night, but I didn't notice. When morning came I put the dress on three hours before the ceremony and got my dress all dirty. What a sight I was." She smiled as she tugged at her son's tie. The children had heard this story before, but said nothing to stop their mother from repeating it.

Marie wasn't listening to her mother's story. She was still thinking about her brother's words. She didn't want to ask him who he was going to the dance with because the way he had informed her told her who it was. She noticed that every once in a while her brother looked over at her and smiled. Marie had hoped she was wrong, but her brother's smiles told her she wasn't. Finally when her mother finished her story Marie asked, "With who?"

"Jane Weller."

Marie turned ashen. This would prove to everyone at the prom that she had lied about Jane. Since she had told everyone Jane's date was with an outcast it would mean that she thought of her brother as an outcast. Marie's lie was sure to lower her esteem in her peers' eyes. She immediately began formulating a response to the coming questions and statements. Marie was always conscious of what people thought about her. In her mind, reality didn't matter as much as peer perception.

Mrs. Pohl knew the game her children were playing, but she said nothing to curb it. "My, you look so handsome, Vince. Just like your father. He'd be proud if he saw you in his suit. Probably looking over a railing now and bragging to his peers about you. Now you better get along, dear." His mother sat down as she finished addressing her son.

Vince leaned over and kissed her cheek, "Thanks, Mother."

"If Miss Weller's anything like your sister here, she's probably wasting away, a bundle of nerves." A hint of juvenile humor entered her composure as she spoke.

"Yes, Mother," he said as he made his way down the stairs with joy, pride, and nerviness. The new car he borrowed was parked on the south side of the house near the back entrance.

"I expect you to bring her by so I can take pictures."

"Yes, Mother," he replied as he walked along the south side of the porch.

Everyone on the porch wished Vinnie well; everyone, that is, except Marie. She looked like she was dead.

Addie returned to the porch with the lemonade in time to wish Vinnie bye. Then she asked, "Where's he off to looking like that?"

"He's going to the dance with Jane Weller," Katie replied. Addie's face turned white as she looked toward Marie. Then she turned to watch Vinnie drive the borrowed car out the drive and down the road.

Marie joined her looking after Vinnie as she whispered, "Isn't he afraid his kids will be ashes?" No one on the porch answered.

The Pohls on the porch were paying so much attention to Vinnie's car driving down the road and across the bridge that they didn't notice a car pull in behind Kate's.

Chapter 3

First Offspring

Years 19 & 23

"Kate, something must be wrong with John and me. Everyone else is getting pregnant and we're not. Two years of trying and nothing. All our classmates are having babies. What's wrong with us?"

"Nothing's wrong. If there was something wrong your husband's a doctor, he'd know. Be patient, Marie. You have your whole life ahead of you. There's plenty of time to have kids. You're young. Enjoy the life of a new couple before you decide to have kids," Kate replied looking serene. Then she leaned a little toward Marie as a mischievous smile formed on her face, "Besides, isn't trying fun? So what if you try and try and try and try."

The Pohl sisters were seated on short beach recliners. The beach they were on was made up of fine white sand. The bright cloudless sky was turning their smooth skin bronze in all places except where their small swimming suits covered them. An umbrella cast a shadow over their well built shirtless husbands, who were sound asleep on blankets next to their wives. The beach stretched for nearly twenty kilometers from end to end. It was part of a large bay at the mouth of a river running through the center of the big city. Much of the length of the beach was lined with resorts, apartment buildings, and hotels. Many people crowded the beach.

At the water's edge Kate's young children were running away from small incoming waves. Kate looked in the direction of the children in between drinks and words. Addie and her new husband were flirting in deeper water.

The Pohl sisters' mother was seated in a chair on the hotel's balcony located behind them. She was reading a local newspaper. Al and his fiancée were seated next to her playing a card game and sipping a fruit drink. Every once in a while a light breeze blew the smell of the fresh water in the hotel's direction.

Of Water

John and Marie married after John finished residency. After marriage Marie moved out of her mother's house and joined John in a large city about two hours from where they had grown up. They rented a small apartment near the beach, but planned on buying a home soon. Kate and her husband lived in the small town near Mother Pohl's farm. They had picked up Mother Pohl on their way to the beach with plans to spend a holiday weekend at a hotel near John and Marie's apartment. Addie and her husband rented a hotel room on one side of their mother while Kate and her husband rented a room on the other. Al and his fiancée stayed with John and Marie.

Marie pulled away from Kate. "I'm serious, Kate. Even Vinnie and Jane are having a baby. Jane's six months pregnant. I mean, my God, how can people like that have babies before people like us?"

"People like what? Vinnie's our brother!"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"Surely you're not implying that that old fable grandfathers tell their grandchildren has any truth to it?"

Marie had hoped Kate would be more like Addie. When Kate proved to be her old religious self, Marie changed her viewpoint. "About ash water? No. But everyone knows what kind of people the Wellers are. Her name may be Pohl now, but she's still a Weller at heart, and she's turning Vinnie's heart into a Weller too."

"That's ridiculous. You're just jealous."

Marie leaned back in her chair, "Oh God, why do I ever bother talking to you about serious matters?"

"Normally you talk to Addie about serious matters. You're just talking to me now because she's so wrapped up in the honeymoon mode."

"Oh, great!"

A phone began ringing in the hotel room. Mother Pohl answered and then placed the receiver down, "John, it's for you. It's the hospital. Some kind of an emergency."

Marie quickly turned her head in his direction and gave him a look that expressed her dissatisfaction. "Must you?"

John began to stand as he responded, "I'll go see what it is. If it's not life threatening I'll see if someone else can handle it. But remember, I'm on call which is part of my being in the medical profession." John was a tall man. His head was capped with a full head of dark wavy hair. His eyes were bright green. His face shone with the look of a youth at Christmas. Everyone who met him was put at ease by his boyish charm.

After a brief phone conversation John approached Marie and explained his need to depart in spite of her displeasure. "A woman came in that's going to deliver prematurely. She and the baby need me."

Dr. John Liniments returned to the hotel room, grabbed the car keys, and headed to the hospital. When he arrived he immediately went to the delivery room nurse's station to get an update. He picked up the charts and noticed the name of the expecting mother. He dropped the charts and headed down the hall. A nurse followed him giving verbal updates as they briskly walked to the room that was set aside for expecting fathers. When they reached the room John instructed, "Thanks, Nurse. I'll meet you in the prep room. I'll just be a minute."

John entered the room and found a single man seated and looking down at the floor. A small TV perched in a corner displayed a local station. As John approached, the man looked up. When he recognized John he rose. "John, thank God it's you. How is she?"

"She's stable, Vince."

"The baby?"

"It's too early to tell."

"Where are you guys? I've been trying to get hold of mother."

"She's at the beach's Holiday Inn." John pulled a pen from his pocket, grabbed Life magazine that was resting on the lone table in the room, and scribbled the phone number on the magazine cover. "Here's the number."

John turned to leave the room. He stopped long enough to say, "Vince, in spite of what has been said in the past your sister still cares for you and your wife." This wasn't true, but John said it anyway because he believed he needed to say it before Vince met his sister. Marie and her siblings were sure to bring their mother to the hospital. So Marie and Vince were sure to meet for the first time in over a year. The last time they exchanged words was at Vince and Jane's wedding and it was full of unkind words. John hoped that his words would give the soon to happen reunion a better chance of going well.

"My sister's always had it in for my wife, even when we were kids. When Jane and I married last year I knew what her reaction and attitude toward me would be. But all that doesn't matter now. Just save my wife and son."

John left the room contemplating his wife and Jane's mind-set. He had learned of the growing personal feud between them during his first date with Marie at the high school prom. Back then it seemed like a typical high school girl rivalry. He and Vince laughed that night when they passed each other in the restroom. As time went on the feud progressed. The humor quickly diminished. "It's like this feud has a mind of its own, like it is being controlled by some intelligent force or being," John thought out loud as he entered the prep room.

"It seems like the greatest pleasure these two women have is ridiculing, mocking, and winning something over on the other," John told himself. "It's their inferiority complexes working at its worse."

John knew that Marie's personal inferiority complex came from growing up poorer than most of her neighbors and without her father.. He knew that she hated her looks especially her hips. John often told her that she was the sexiest woman he had ever seen and meant it, but Marie didn't believe him.

John suspected that Jane's personal complex had something to do with the local belief that her family was immoral and unethical. "Cursed by God," he had heard others say.

"These women's personal beliefs and attitudes aren't much different from the rest of us," John told himself. He had studied how many people interact with each other even before his college psychology classes. He noticed that all the relationships he had ever witnessed had a thread of the comparison complex and these were used to boost and/or repair an inferiority complex. Why people have an underlying belief of inadequacy was still a mystery to him. "What is even more puzzling is why our subconscious remedies not only don't solve the problem, they only exasperate the problem," he told himself as he finished preparation.

John's train of thought stopped as he entered the delivery room. "How is she?"

"Fully dilated. Everything seems ready."

"Your baby's ready to enter the world, Jane."

"Where's Vince?"

"We're keeping him outside."

"Get him!" Jane demanded between contractions.

The staff was surprised at Jane's coarse words, but John was not. "Do as she says, Nurse."

Vince entered the delivery room as the baby was entering the world. He stood at his wife's head smiling.

The baby boy was placed in an incubator and was being attended to when Jane demanded, "Let me see him." Some in the delivery room staff looked at John who nodded yes. Then they rolled the incubator so the boy could be in view of the parents. "You're a Weller which means you are special. You're better than the rest. You're blessed of God. I name you Sylvester, after your grandfather, Sylvester Weller. He's the greatest man in this part of the country."

Vince's pride vanished at this mother's words. He left the delivery room and headed down the hall. Jane did not notice Vince's exit. She was staring at her son as they wheeled him out of the room.

Shortly after, John left to find Vince. He found him standing at the end of the hall staring out the window. They were up several stories. From here the two men could see the river view flowing from the south into a bay. There lay the long beach that John had left to come to the hospital. John silently stood behind Vince who did not turn away from the view.

“You’d think that I would have grown used to it by now,” Vince stated as he stared out the window. “But every once in a while that Weller pride comes out and shocks me. God knows why I still love her in times like this,” he sighed, “but I do. I still love her.” Vince paused and then turned to John, “She cares for me. She loves me. Sometimes I feel like a trophy she holds up and shows the whole world. In those times her pride isn’t so bad. I even enjoy it. Being held up makes me feel good. It makes me feel like a man, a great man. But I’m not sure if she sees me as a Pohl or a man whom she picked to be her husband.”

“Vince, you’re one of the best men I know. You don’t need her to prove that. And now you’re a man who just had a son, a son that was born prematurely.”

At that point his mother-in-law, Mary, and Jane’s parents entered the hall. “How are they doing, John?” Mary Pohl asked.

“Both are stable, but I fear for the boy. He’s quite early. They have good care here; a great staff. He’ll receive the best of care.”

“He deserves the best of care. The Wellers always have the best of care,” Jane’s father responded with an arrogant tone.

“Where are they? Can we see them?” Jane’s mother asked.

“Not yet, but shortly. Jane is being attended too. You’ll be able to meet her in her room. They’ll know her room number at the nurse’s station. As I was mentioning when you walked in, Sylvester,” John looked at Vince asking, “That’s his name correct?” Vince nodded yes and John continued, “Sylvester was born premature. He’ll need round the clock care in a room set aside for early babies. Only the parents are allowed in the room, but you can see him through a window. Vince, I’ll meet you in the room in a few minutes.” John left Vince with his mother and parents-in-law.

After a brief awkward silence Vince’s father-in-law stated, “We’re going to see our daughter.”

“I’m going with Vince to see the boy,” Mother Pohl responded.

On the way to see the baby, Vince and his mother met up with Marie, Addie and her husband, Kate and her husband, and Al and his fiancée. It was an awkward moment for all. Marie and Vinnie stared at each other without saying anything. Mrs. Pohl’s dissatisfaction with her children was tangible. After a brief silence they moved toward the viewing room while Mary Pohl informed the assembled group of the situation. They all looked through the window at the boy as the nurses attended to him.

Vince left his mother, siblings, and in-laws when John walked into the prenatal room. He looked for John’s approval to enter. John opened the door and the two men stood alongside of the boy’s incubator.

After Vince left them, Marie was the first to speak up, “How do the Wellers cope with so many births like this?” She didn’t ask the question because she needed comfort or because she felt compassion for Vince and Jane. Rather, she was stating that this was just another cursed Weller birth. Because of Marie’s statement a quiet debate broke out between the Pohls. Kate

and her mother denounced such thinking, but Marie and Addie were of another opinion. Al remained quiet. After the exchange of opinions Marie and Addie made their way back to the beach.

After a few months of the best care that Vince and Jane and her parents could afford, the baby died. The couple was so distraught that no one said anything else about the lost boy, not even Marie.

Three more years of trying to become parents left Vince and Jane childless, broken, and weak. As a last option they adopted a baby boy. They named him Sylvester in memory of their first son. Everyone began calling him Sid so that his parents would not be reminded of the troubles of trying to have an infant of their own.

During this time Jane and Marie's feud grew in intensity while John and Vince became the best of friends.

One year after Sid's adoption, John Liniments stood outside the delivery room door waiting for his child to be born. He was not used to being on the outside waiting to be allowed in the delivery room. In his whole medical career this was only the third time that he had been on the outside waiting. He did not like having no control. Other than those previous two times John was always the one in control. When he was the delivering doctor John was the one who made the decisions. His present situation reminded him once more what it was like to be a man who was about to be a father.

"An expecting father has no control; all he has is hope and fears," John stated. "Men may have religious convictions, but when expecting, he has only hope and fears. He waits for word of the birth of his child."

He looked at the man seated next to him, "When will I be allowed in?"

"You know the answer to that question better than I do," Vince replied. Then he added with a smile and a pat on the back, "By looking at your current state, a person would get the impression that this is your first child. Didn't the birth of Tony and Lew teach you anything?" John and Marie's first two children were boys. Anthony was the oldest, born nine months after Sylvester's death. Most called him Tony. Louis was born a year after his elder brother and everyone called him Lew. Both boys looked like their father when he was their age.

"My problem is that I know all the things that can go wrong."

"Where's your faith, John? Isn't that what you always told me after Sylvester was born?"

"I don't remember telling you that. Only a cold-hearted fool would give such advice. Did I ever say that?" John searched his memory for the answer to that question. He was not being sarcastic. He was being honest. So he asked his friend, "Was I a Job's friend? If I was, then I'm a cold-hearted fool and I apologize."

Vince thought for a moment. "Sorry, John. You never gave me such advice. You're better than Job's friends, although I wouldn't call such men friends. Jane and I did have Job friends. In fact we still do. You were never, and to this day are not, a Job friend."

To help John be calm, Vince continued by explaining the reason for his initial question. "Your situation is different from mine, John. I lost a child and am still kept from having one. Whether or not we will ever have a child of our own requires the faith that John the Baptist's father didn't have. When Sylvester died some people asked us, 'Where's your faith.' They were looking down at us because they felt we had given up having a child of our own. I know that I needed faith back then as much as I do now. So I didn't need that advice." Vince blew air out his nose as he looked at John and placed his hands on his friend's shoulder again, "What I needed was someone to be there for me and just listen. I work things out verbally. That's the way I'm made. I just needed someone there when I thought things through out loud. You were that person and still are that person. Others have been Job friends."

"Thanks, Vince. I've always tried to be a good friend."

"Don't mention it. John, even though you know all the things that can go wrong with Marie's delivery, you shouldn't concentrate on those things. Yes, you're not the one in control. Even if you were the delivering doctor you're really not the one in control. God is. All we can do in times like this is to wait with faith in him. He says, 'Be still for I am with you.' We do not know which way the water will flow. Do not concentrate on what can go wrong, concentrate on God's love."

At that a nurse came to the door to let the father in. Vince went to a waiting room where Addie, Kate, Al, and their spouses waited. Jane was not present. Mother Pohl was also not present. She was in a nursing home suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Within a few minutes the waiting family was told of the birth of a girl. The parents named her Marie Ann.

Chapter 4

Dry up a Spring

Year 26

Marie sat at the dinner table staring at plates. Hers was full of a half -eaten salad. The plate to her left belonged to Tony, her six year old son, and was licked clean. The next plate belonging to five year old Lew, was empty except for some green peas. The plate belonging to four year old, Marie Ann was next to Lew's. It too was empty except for green peas. The plate on the opposite side of the table had not been used. It was the plate that Marie stared at the most. She sat at her dining room table, contemplating just why she was spending another evening staring at an empty plate.

"Is John still at the hospital? Is he at the office? Is he at a bar alone? Is he at a bar with his coworkers? Is he at a bar with a woman? Is he in a hotel room with a woman?" The longer Marie stared at the unused plate the more her fears grew and the more she sank into depression.

John had given Marie no reason to question his loyalty to their marriage except for the fact that more and more he missed the evening meals. Sure, he had called to explain, but that was not good enough anymore. Marie believed beyond a doubt that John could find another woman if he wanted to. "He could find a young, beautiful woman with everything right about her," Marie stated to herself, "and the woman would have perfect hips. After all, I saw how he was looking at a young girl at church the other week."

"The first few times that John was absent from family time, including the evening meals, I was not bothered," Marie lied to herself, "when we were first married. But now his absence is making me lonely." Marie wept.

She was even beginning to loathe spending all her time with her young children. Before and shortly after marriage Marie was a partier. She was a group person and in every group she made herself the center of attention. Being the center of attention made her feel special and loved. It made her almost believe that she was not a poor, wide-hipped fatherless girl.

Marie stood up and wiped tears from her cheeks. "John's not with a woman. He's too religious to fall for that temptation. No. He's busy saving lives, busy being a nice person. But at what cost? What of our family? We need him too." In order to reach a conclusion that she had made before, Marie stated out loud as she walked into the kitchen, "What of me? I have needs too."

Reentering the dining room she began cleaning off the table when the doorbell rang. "Come in, Jennie," Marie yelled. The windows were open to let the cool evening air in.

A teenage girl entered the house. She was wearing a light blue blouse, a blue skirt that went to the knees, bobby socks and tennis shoes. "Your pot roast smells good, Mrs. Liniments."

Marie looked at her and envied her hips. "Do you want some? There's plenty left over."

"No, thanks. We had chicken. I'm quite full." Jennie began removing items from the table and carrying them into the kitchen. She noticed that one plate had not been used. She would be sure to tell her mother and her friends that John had not joined his family for supper again.

"Your outfit looks great, Mrs. Liniments." Marie was wearing a sleeveless white dress with pink flowers on it. The dress went down to her knees. The chest had large pink buttons that were fastened. Marie was wearing panty hose, but no shoes. Dark dress shoes were lying near the front door.

Marie noticed that Jennie was carrying John's empty plate. To counter what was sure to be fresh neighborhood gossip, Marie stated, "John's at the hospital delivering another baby."

Marie was convinced that no one would check to see if her excuse was true or not. She also knew that it really didn't matter what she said, everyone would believe that John and she were having marital problems. "People love believing the worst of others," Marie thought to herself. "It helps support the delusion that their life isn't as bad as it is."

"When he's finished he'll come home, pay you, and drive you home; if you don't want to walk, that is," Marie then began giving Jennie the same old instructions that she always gave the

babysitters. They ended with Marie pointing at the refrigerator, "I'll be at this phone number if you need me." Marie had been helping out at a church sponsored teenage youth center ever since shortly after the birth of Marie Ann. Helping out twice a week gave her adult attention that she so longed to receive. Marie made herself the center of the volunteer's attention whenever she could, and that was often.

After grabbing a small black purse and putting on her shoes; Marie left the house, entered her car, and began driving to her destination. On the way she crossed several streams as she undid a few of the buttons on her dress. The subdivision that she and John lived in contained a small winding stream that eventually emptied into a large river that emptied into the bay. If Marie would have looked she would have noticed that the stream she crossed several times was changing directions. It had been flowing to the south. Now it flowed to the north and into the bay.

When Marie neared her destination she did not park in the lot closest to the youth center. Every time before this Marie had always parked in the youth center. Yet this time she parked her car in the parking lot of a large hotel across the street from the youth center. While thinking many thoughts Marie turned off her car and quickly walked to the crosswalk. When she was about ready to cross the street she paused and quizzically turned around to look at her car. Marie asked herself, "I parked there?" Then she stated with a giggle, "I parked there."

After a brief moment of staring at her car, Marie crossed the street and entered the youth center where she was greeted warmly by the other volunteers. A few of the teenagers had arrived early and were playing in the center's gym. The volunteers made their way to another room. There they joined hands and prayed for the success of the evening.

As they prayed Marie stood next to a divorced man that she had met shortly after she began helping at the center. She clasped his hand to pray. While they were praying he moved his index finger enough to tickle Marie's palm. She turned her head slightly in his direction so that he could see that she was smiling. After the evening activities were over the man walked with her across the street to the hotel's parking lot. They talked for awhile as they stood next to her car. Marie remembered John's empty plate. After a few minutes of the man's gentle words and the thought of the empty plate, Marie yielded to his advances and they made their way into the hotel.

The weeks that followed the affair, Marie did not go to the youth center. She told the other volunteers that she was not feeling well. This was true. She was not feeling well. However, her feelings were neither due to a bacterial nor a viral infection. She wasn't feeling well because of guilt, and not being prepared for this, she did not know how to overcome it.

After a few weeks of being mauled by guilt Marie packed her kids into the car and drove to Addie's house. She was at home alone with her children while her husband was at work. Addie greeted Marie as she walked through the house's side door. Their kids rejoiced at seeing each other and ran to the back yard to play on the swing set. The ladies made their way to a small table in the kitchen. Through a large window they could watch the children playing. Addie presented Marie with a glass of spiked lemonade and a deck of cards. Marie shuffled the deck and pulled out a peanut can full of coins. Addie's coins were in a cigar box.

Of Water

While dealing the cards, Marie opened the conversation, "Addie I'm having a hard time dealing with something." For several days Marie had been contemplating just how she was going to tell her sister. She continued, "You know how hard it's been with me not having John around the house. He's always at work, or God knows where else and with whom. I'm with the kids all day and it drives me crazy. I'm tired of being a baby making machine. I'm tired of not having adult interaction. I need more to my life."

Laying a set down Addie answered, "Oh, I understand just what you're saying. I need to get out of the house as well. Sometimes I can't stand waiting hand and foot twenty-four hours a day on Laura and Kathy. That's why earlier this week I accepted a part time position in an office and have asked Norm's mother to watch the kids while I work. Besides Norm and I could use the extra money."

"That's great, Addie. You deserve a break, some time with other adults. My problem goes beyond motherhood."

"Gin," Addie laid all her cards down. "How so?"

Marie counted out some money. "Well, I've been trying to think of how to tell you and there is no better way than to just come out and say it." Marie slid the money across the table and began shuffling the cards. "When I started working at the youth center I met a handsome, sweet man who made me feel wanted. Our relationship was purely platonic. We just enjoyed each other's company and working together at the center. You remember I mentioned him to you?"

Addie picked up her cards while she listened to Marie. Marie continued, "Then one evening he told me that he wanted to be with me. I knew what he meant; and I was flattered."

"What did you do?" Addie picked up a card.

"I turned him down. He understood my reasons, but he said that if I felt the same way about him that I should give him a sign by parking in the hotel parking lot across the street from the center, instead of the center's parking lot as all the other volunteers did. He said he would start parking there in hopes that I would change my mind. He said that if we parked in the hotel lot we would not draw anyone's attention."

"This guy was serious?"

"Yes and to tell you the truth I was flattered. Every time I saw his car in the hotel lot it made me feel good. Everything tightened up if you know what I mean. My God, just think another man wanted me, even after I had children and with my wide hips. It made me feel like I did in high school, when boys flirted with me, making out, and all that."

"So, what did you do?" Addie stated as she pointed out the window, "Laura, stop that! Don't treat the younger kids that way. You should know better."

"It wasn't my fault."

"You mean the flirting. You flirted back?"

"I mean, well, my God, John's not around the house. We hardly talk anymore. And this man was giving me all that attention and affection. He was concerned about my feelings. He even said he loved me."

"So?" Addie picked up a card, "Gin."

Marie looked at her sister's cards, "This is not fair playing while I'm trying to say something."

"Marie, you're always saying something. Pay up and go on."

"So one day after I had driven to the youth center I found that I had parked in the hotel's lot. I don't even remember driving into that parking lot. When I noticed where I had parked I thought about moving my car to the center's parking lot. But I didn't. I left it there, crossed the street, and went into the center. Then when he touched my hand to pray I made the decision."

Addie stopped shuffling the cards, "What decision?"

"Well, let me explain. After we left the center I played coy with him acting as if I had to park in the hotel's lot because the center's lot was full. I made him nearly beg me to go into the hotel. Addie, he was begging for me. God, it felt great. I hadn't felt that way in a long time. So I went in."

"You had an affair? I don't know, Marie; flirting is one thing, but sleeping with another man? That goes against all we've been taught." Addie leaned forward as a brief moment of silence followed. Addie studied Marie. Finally she asked, "So you're having a hard time with the guilt?"

"At first the guilt was and still is a big problem. And now," Marie broke her eye contact with Addie and put her hands on her stomach, "now I'm late."

"You're late?" Addie sat back. While Marie was telling Addie of the affair Addie had been seated on the front edge of her seat taking it all in. "Oh Marie, you're pregnant? By him? Oh my God, what have you done? What will Mother say? What of John? God, Marie, why did you do it?"

Marie became upset, "I told you why. Why ask me to repeat it? What do you want from me? I did it and that's that. If I were in that position again I would do it again too."

"My God, you're not going to keep seeing him, are you?"

"Oh no, I can't do that. I've already told him we can't see each other anymore and I quit the volunteer job."

"Did you tell him about the baby?"

"I couldn't tell him I'm pregnant."

“Then what are you going to do? You’ve got to tell John. How are you going to tell him you’re pregnant? Did you have sex with him recently?”

“Yes, recently, but not after the affair, I felt horrible. I do still love him. I just can’t take the kids and the loneliness. I can’t have another kid, Addie. I need a life.”

“What? You’re going to have an abortion? Oh my, what will John say? What will Mother say? Marie, you can’t do that. It’s a baby, your baby. It’s a sin. You can’t take that child’s life.”

“It’s my life, too.”

“Yeah, it’s your life. But there’s a difference in the outcome. If you have the abortion it may end up helping you and your life will go on. But what about the baby? If you have an abortion, the baby’s life will not go on. The baby will lose much more with an abortion than you will if you keep the baby. How can you even make a comparison of who will lose out on what? Any loss you have is nothing compared to the loss of a life. Mothers are supposed to protect the life of their children at all cost, no matter what the sacrifice. There should be no comparing who will benefit more. The mother should always know that there will be sacrifice when they have a child. Some will sacrifice more than others. But all will have to sacrifice.”

“God, don’t lecture me, Addie. Don’t get all religious like Kate would.”

“Religious? What are you talking about? I’m not talking about religion. I’m talking about life, the life of your baby.”

“You’re talking about religion. The priests tell us this and that and we’re supposed to accept it all blindly. Well I’m not blind.”

“Marie, you’re not making any sense. This isn’t about religion, or priest, or laws. This is about the life of your baby.”

“Is it a baby? It’s just a bunch of cells.”

“Oh my God, Marie. That’s just a lame justification. Those cells are the baby’s life just as much as our cells are our lives. Just because someone doesn’t look like us doesn’t mean we can kill them. Just because they can’t talk, walk, sing and dance doesn’t give us the right to get rid of them; to kill them.”

“Kill! Come on Addie. Those cells wouldn’t live if they weren’t attached to me. The doctors say so and the courts say so. Even John says so, any doctor will say so.”

“You don’t know what John will say.” Addie paused to consider Marie’s word. “You are right. If the baby’s cells were detached from you; he or she would die. Yeah, that’s true. The baby in the womb is dependent on the mother for its life. But is it any different for the baby outside the womb? How many months, even years are children dependent on their mother?” Addie pointed out the window, “Kathy and Marie Ann wouldn’t live if we didn’t give them milk and cereal. Even your boys still need you. Marie, don’t take away the baby’s life.”

The two sisters didn't like arguing. Yet they were so comfortable in their relationship that when they did have disagreements they always respected each other's opinion. Marie verbally considered Addie's advice, "So you want me to tell John that I had an affair and got pregnant, have the baby, and assume all will be well in the Liniments' household."

"I don't know how John will react. I don't know what will happen in the future." Addie considered what she just said and then continued, "No. I do know what will happen. Things will change. Things always change. Most likely if you tell John and keep the baby things will be harder for you. But it will be worse if you don't tell him and get rid of the baby. Even if John forgives you, and I believe he will, things will be harder because you have already changed. With what's already happened, I know that things will be harder than if you didn't have the affair. Look at how you have fretted over what has taken place. Marie, one thing's for sure, if you take the baby's life and not tell John about the affair, you will change. It will change you. You won't forget. The guilt will remain and fester. It will affect you in the future. Marie, you need John's forgiveness and the baby needs its life. It's the better decision for the baby and for you in the long run."

Marie did not respond. She looked out the window. She was not looking at her children. She was looking at her options and the results of each option. She made a decision and then resumed the card game. She did not tell Addie what she decided. "Let's just play and not talk about it anymore, ever again."

After the card game ended, Marie tucked her children in her car and headed home where she prepared the evening meal. When John arrived home the family ate. John asked the children what they did while he was at work and then gave them a short recounting of his day. Marie remained silent until John asked her, "How are Addie and Norm doing?"

Marie thought briefly and then responded, "Addie's starting a job as an office secretary. They need the money and she needs to get away from the kids."

John did not respond right away. He knew where Marie was heading with her last statement. He knew that if he responded Marie was sure to break into her "time away from the kids" speech. Even if he didn't respond she would still probably start the speech. This was something that John was tired of hearing, not because he didn't love Marie and thus care for her needs, but because lately Marie had been prone to talk about her problems more than solve them. He also suspected that in part she was blaming him for something, probably not being at home as much as she wanted him to be. Yet, he was pretty sure that his being away was not Marie's biggest problem at this moment. He knew that Marie had stopped going to the youth center and that they had stopped having sex for some reason. She had never told him why and he knew that she wanted to.

John also knew that she still wanted to, and therefore, needed to get out more. "She had some other place in mind, perhaps a job," he had reasoned.

Finally, his love for her compelled him to respond. He would take the personal hits if it meant that Marie was healed and happy. He would start by giving a preapproval to her getting out more. "That's great for Addie. I'm sure she'll be a great secretary. She always has been so organized. And being away from the kids for a few hours in the day should be good for her too."

Marie did not say anything else. John had passed the test. He was open to hearing her confession. She would wait until the table was cleared and the kids were outside playing. Then she would tell him of the one night affair, its ending, the pregnancy, and her decision to have an abortion. She would not tell him that the baby belonged to the other man. She would have him believe the child was his. She would tell him that at her age the pregnancy and delivery would be hard and that she could not go through with it.

Chapter 5

Out with the Old, In with the New

Year 27

Small waves gently tapped against the hull of the fifteen meter fishing yacht. John and Marie Liniments had bought it with hopes that time alone on the boat would rebuild their love and marriage. Today it was being used as a meeting place for the Pohl family. All the Pohls and their spouses agreed that fishing together would remind them of old times and that in turn would help them make some important decisions regarding their mother. They had left the marina before the sun rose and had planned to remain on the large lake until dusk.

The family reached one of John's favorite fishing spots and dropped anchor when only a full moon and the Milky Way were in the sky. When all started to fish the sun began rising in the east. A scan of the horizon showed that no land was in sight. A scan of the sky showed no cloud was in the violet sky. After a few hours the yellow sun turned white as it continued to rise off the eastern horizon. The full moon was setting in the west.

Only three people knew of Marie's decisions the year before. One of the three, her husband, did not know the total truth. Yet everyone knew that something had changed Marie. She was quieter and somewhat removed. Her volatile relationship with Jane had cooled off and she had begun to share kind words with her brother, Vinnie.

"I'm catching nothin'," Al said in desperation after four hours of fishing and three hours after the sun rose. He was in the front of the yacht. Al was wearing a swim suit, a T-shirt, and a pair of flip flops. He was slowly drinking a can of beer. His wife was in a reclining chair behind him prepared to get a better tan. She was wearing a two piece swim suit.

"Just like old times. You never caught much when we were young," Addie laughed. She was fishing next to him. She was wearing a bright bikini and a straw hat. She was bare foot and had started her first mixed drink.

"I caught my share."

"Not as much as Vinnie. He's a fisherman of fishermen. He always caught more than the rest of us," Kate replied even though in their youth she seldom fished with her siblings. Kate had given up fishing for the time being. She was in a chair next to Al's wife. She had given her pole to her husband, Bob, making him fish with two poles. He was next to Addie. Kate was wearing a black one piece swim suit with a loose T-shirt over it. Bob wore short jeans, a white T-shirt, and a fishing hat. Rolled up in his sleeve was a half-used pack of cigarettes. A

Of Water

lit cigarette was in his mouth and a can of beer was in a cup holder located on the rail in front of him.

Marie, John, Vinnie and Jane were fishing in the back of the boat. Both women were wearing bikinis and sunglasses. Both men were wearing swim shorts, T-shirts, baseball caps and sunglasses. The sun was to the rear of the boat. All four were fishing off the stern.

"Today John's giving him a run for the money," Marie spoke up.

"Whatever you say, Hippo Hips," Al laughed out.

Marie shot back, "Right, Chubby."

"If we'd keep all this talking down we'd catch more," Vinnie replied.

John gave Vinnie a high five, "I hear you, Brother."

"How many times did I hear that in our youth? Just like old times all right. Next thing you know..." Vinnie's words were cut off by Jane jumping in the water followed by Marie. Kate and Al's wife were the next to take the plunge. Addie didn't want to be the last woman on board. so she handed her pole to her husband and jumped in.

"Women!"

"Well, there goes fishing. We'll catch no more."

"It's getting too hot to keep fishing. Come on in. The water feels great."

"Oh! I caught one! I caught one!" Bob's cigarette fell into the water as he spoke.

Addie screamed, "My top!" Kate's husband pulled his catch out of the water and examined the bikini top hanging at the end of his hook with wide open eyes.

Norm immediately pulled his lines in, "Can't miss this opportunity." As he jumped in Addie screamed again. Soon everyone was in the water except John and Vinnie.

"Well, we might as well clean and fry the fish."

"The only thing we can do now."

"Do you hear that, Marie? The fish are more important than we are."

"Well, I know what will change that," Marie took her top off and held it out of the water. "No man can refuse these."

"Sounds like a good plan," Jane took off her top and held it up too.

Vinnie looked at John, "You know if we don't jump in now, we'll be in the doghouse for weeks." Both men took off their hats, sunglasses, and shirts and jumped in.

Of Water

As soon as Vinnie hit the water, he remembered something. When his head reached air he wiped the water off his face and looked back at the boat, "Damn."

"What?"

"I can't believe it."

"What?"

"I forgot to put out the swimming ladder and there's no one on board."

"What are we going to do?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Without a ladder there is no way to get back onboard."

"You're serious?"

"So serious."

"Are you sure?"

"That's what I've heard."

Bob and Al failed at several attempts to get back into the boat as everyone else grew weary of trying to keep their head above the half meter waves. Addie was the first to express a growing fear, "I'm getting tired. I don't know how much longer I can tread water."

Marie was next, "Me too. If no one comes by we could all slowly drown. I heard of that happening once."

The fear of watching each other drown and then drowning themselves began to sink in to each of the family members. Fear made staying afloat harder to control. All began to concentrate on the pending death. "What can we do, John?" Vince asked.

John thought about their predicament out loud, "What we need is solid ground to stand on."

"There are sandbars in this area, aren't there?"

"Yeah. If we're lucky maybe there's one close by. Everyone spread out."

After ten minutes of searching for a sandbar Kate yelled to her husband, "Bob, I'm getting too tired to swim."

"I'm coming, baby."

Of Water

By the time Bob reached Kate, Addie began yelling, "I found one! I found one!" She moved higher out of the water and began jumping up and down.

"Addie, you still don't have your top on!" Norm yelled back. Addie screamed and dropped back down in the water.

"Thank God," Vinnie and John spoke at the same time.

Everyone slowly made their way to the sand bar. Kate's arms were around her husband's wide chest as they made their way. When everyone reached the sand bar, all stood up except Addie who kept her arms folded over her chest. The boat was floating just over fifteen meters away from the sandbar.

"Now what?" Bob spoke up.

"I suppose we men could push and pull the boat over here," John answered. "Vinnie could get in then, being the tallest."

Within half an hour, John's plan worked and all were back in the boat. Everyone was silently contemplating just how narrowly they escaped death. The men began cleaning the fish. Vince was the first to speak, "You know this whole trip has been just like when we were kids." After a brief silence he finished his point, "Addie always spoiled the fishing then as she did now."

"I didn't jump in the water first. God, you always blamed me for that and it was never my fault."

"It wasn't the jumping in the water that scared the fish away. It was you being topless." Everyone laughed. The laughter released everyone's tension and nerves.

The men finished the cleaning and the women cooked the catch of the day. Conversations picked up concerning their children, schools, and jobs as the waves that rapped against the hull of the boat slowly grew in size, and a southwesterly wind grew in strength. After everyone ate and the dishes were cleaned they all sat around to talk about the subject of the day. On the horizon a small cloud rose from the face of the waves. It stopped its ascent and rested in the western sky.

Vince opened the subject, "Well it certainly has been an eventful day. We wanted it to be just like old times and it couldn't have been more true to our youth. How many times could we have drowned in that quarry? I remember pulling Al out more times than once." All shook their heads in agreement with smiles on their faces as he continued, "As we all know there's another reason why we all needed to get together. When was the last time you visited Mother?"

Kate was the first to answer, "Bob and I were with her last Sunday. We took her to church, out to eat, and then to a park. She had a good time watching the kids play."

Marie was the next to speak, "On Saturday she was with our family at Tony's birthday party. Addie and Norm's family were there too."

Al was the last to answer the question, "I stop by on my way home from work at least once a week. Wednesday is the must visit day. I hope that the routine will help her out. Vinnie, it seems that with every visit she gets worse. She hasn't recognized who I am for several weeks now." All nodded in agreement.

"She doesn't recognize any of us anymore," Vince stated what had just been acknowledged. "Friday is my day to come into town and pick up things needed on the farms." Several years earlier the Pohl family had agreed that Vince should maintain the family farm just as he had been doing since their father, grandfather, and then their uncle Mel died. He bought the land on paper only. Everyone knew the plan was to use some of the money the farm made to help pay their mother's bills. Vince also helped Larry, Jane's younger brother, on the Weller farm. Over the last few years Vince and Larry jointly purchased more and more farmland so that together they maintained nearly one thousand acres.

Vince continued, "So every Friday I stop in to see Mom. Two weeks ago I decided to bring in some old pictures of us as kids. Dad's pictures were in there, too. She acknowledged that she knew Dad, but could not remember from where." All looked down at the deck or to the horizon at this news.

Marie spoke up next, "So she has advanced Alzheimer's. We've all seen it coming. You said there's something we need to discuss. Surely it's not that she's getting worse. What is it? What's wrong?"

"On Friday the doctors told me that she has a serious infection, or disease, or something. They don't know exactly what it is yet. They're treating her, but can't cure her until they know exactly what it is."

"Is she in pain? There was no sign of it when she was with us." Kate injected.

"I didn't notice anything either."

"Me neither."

Vinnie raised his hand to settle everyone down, "Not yet, she's not in pain. Since they haven't figured out what's ailing her, they can't say what her future holds."

John's doctor instinct spoke up, "What are her symptoms?"

"Well, I'm not a doctor like you. All I can do is repeat what they told me. Her kidneys and lymph glands are shutting down. Also, they said that at times it seems that her lungs fill up with fluids and then drain again."

"What is it, John?" Addie asked. She began twirling her long hair with her fingers.

"Don't know. Can't say without more information."

Vinnie continued, "Anyway, they said that at the rate it's going, if they can't help her she'll die before the end of the year, maybe earlier because of her advanced age."

“What?”

“Oh, my God,” Marie’s mouth hung open and the whites of her brown eyes showed.

“There’s more. Since they’re not sure what she has they want our permission to do some tests.”

“Sure! Anything to heal her.”

“You don’t understand,” Vinnie continued. “These tests may be painful and they don’t guarantee that they’ll help her.”

“When do they want our answer?”

“Right away. It’s best we decide today.” Everyone shifted their positions. They looked at each other, not knowing what to say or do. Everyone was hoping someone else would do something.

“Are they expecting us to pay for the tests?” Bob spoke up. He was a car mechanic with modest pay. Mother Pohl’s five-year nursing home stay had been paid for by their farm agreement and Medicare. They had agreed that when that money ran out they would all chip in an equal amount to cover her expenses. Based on the past steady rate of expenses the money from the farm would dry up in three more years. Any new medical expenses would quickly erode all Mother Pohl’s savings. Thus, the siblings would need to contribute money if the doctors were to expect the family to pay for extensive tests.

“Money’s not an obstacle,” Marie objected. “John and I can afford any new medical expenses.”

“Vinnie and I could, too. But they said that if we agreed to the treatments they would not bill the tests to us.”

“Is that common practice?” Marie asked John as she squinted her eyes and moved her head back.

“Only if they need to know more about something new and/or dangerous.”

“I’m of the opinion that we should not subject mother to the extra pain. If they’re sure that she could die by the end of the year, why extend it a few more months when all she’ll experience is pain?” Kate stated. Addie agreed with her.

“They are sure she’ll die by the end of the year, perhaps sooner if they do nothing.”

Many disagreements on the quality of life verses the quantity of life broke out in the boat. Voices were slowly rising in each conversation. Mother Pohl’s Alzheimer’s weighed in heavily on the argument. None of the Pohl siblings and their spouses liked seeing her the way she was. They all agreed that she was not the strong, intelligent willful mother of their youth. She was someone else. Yet, she was still their mother. Their love for her was as strong as ever.

Kate stood and raised her arms up as she loudly stated, "All human life is sacred."

"What does that mean?" Marie asked emphasizing "that" with a dissenting voice. The decisions that she had made the year before had weighed heavily on her conscience. She had always wondered if she did the right thing. By now Marie had almost convinced herself that she had. Now Kate was stating that all human life was sacred.

"We don't decide to give life, and we don't decide to take it away," Kate said in a quiet voice, lowering her head and her arms as she spoke.

"What about," Marie started to ask.

Kate raised her hand. "Hear me out, Marie." Kate lowered her hand and continued, "What I mean to say is this. Our lives are from God, set apart by God for his purposes whether we acknowledge it or not. Sure, if we have sex it may result in a new life and just the same, if we don't have sex or if we have an operation, we won't have children. But in the end it's really God who gives life."

"So, Mom's not about to have a baby," Al said with a rolling laugh.

Marie looked in Addie's direction to see if she had told Kate about last year's decisions.

Jane thought about Sylvester and wondered if Kate decided to take Marie's place in ridiculing her. Jane said to herself, "Kate never did so in the past, but people change. Marie certainly has. Perhaps Kate has too."

Kate tilted her head and flashed Al a half smile. Then she continued, "Then there's death. No human has the right to take anyone's life away. There have been rare times in the past when God has given a person or group of people the right to take another's life, like in the case of the Old Testament Israelites. But it was still God who chose. If we don't have God's direction and permission to end a life, then it is murder. Murder is if we take someone's life or if we don't prevent a life from being taken without God's direction. God decides if it is the time for a person to die or remain alive."

"Mom's dying of natural causes. No one's killing her as far as I can see, are they, Vinnie?" Addie asked.

"No."

"I don't think so either," Kate agreed. "Let me continue and you'll see where I'm going with this."

Some shook their heads yes, others answered with an "Okay."

Kate waited for everyone to relax and sit in their chairs. "In between life and death it is our responsibility to care for the life of not only those we love but for everyone else, including ourselves. Sometimes care giving is easy to understand and sometimes it is not. When we were children and became sick our parents gave us medication so that we could get better and to ease the pain of being sick. That is care giving by most everyone's standard. Then when

we became adults and became sick we took care of our own colds, flus, broken bones, and body problems. So what happens when a person gets old?" Kate raised her hands to her sides with palms out. "What happens when they can't take care of themselves or make their own decisions about health problems? What happens when we can't take away all their pains? What happens when they are not the persons they used to be? Do we stop caring for them?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell us," Jane testily added, rolling her head and eyes back. Jane didn't like to be lectured on spiritual matters by anyone else especially a Pohl.

"Please, let her finish," Bob responded to Jane as he glared in her direction. He had the same opinions about life as his wife.

Kate continued, "The doctors say that we would be good care givers if we let them do what ever they want and any cost is acceptable. Should we let them give her pain when it does her no good? They're asking us to decide that with a slight hope of extending her life another month, well then, the pain that they give is acceptable. What if they say the outcome is she'll be in a wheelchair and still unable to help herself or anyone else?"

Addie asked with a quizzical look on her face, "So you're saying that with Mother like she is we still should do all we can to make her comfortable? To not induce pain?"

"It's clear that if we let them experiment on her she still won't recognize us, and shortly after she'll be in pain, and they won't be able to extend her life. Should we induce pain to her because it could have the chance of helping others down the road? I say that that is not care giving. The motive behind it sounds noble; to help people in the future. But Mother's life is as sacred as yours, mine, and all others. I don't want to see Mother leave this world and I miss the way that she used to be. But one day soon she'll die no matter what they do. They said so themselves. Death is a part of life. I say we should not subject her to pain, just because it may help someone else in the future. She's not a guinea pig. She's our mother."

"Human life is sacred," Addie agreed moving her head strongly down once.

No one said anything for a while. Some exchanged glances, others looked off the boat. Marie looked hurt more than the others. Much was going through her mind. Only Addie and John would have suspected it had more to do with her actions than a decision on what to do about their mother.

Finally Vince spoke up, "I agree with Kate and Addie. Marie?" He turned his head sideways toward Marie.

Marie shifted her eyes toward John, and then Addie. She let out a slight sigh, "I agree."

"So then it's settled. We will not allow the doctors to investigate the illness Mother has if it subjects her to pain and discomfort. If there is no pain involved then they can help her. Of all things they should make sure she is in as little pain as possible. And they cannot take Mother's life away. I'm glad we came to these decisions." Vince put his hands on his knees and smiled.

All nodded in agreement.

To the west the sun was setting and a storm was growing. Vince pointed this out as he readied the yacht. The boat began heading toward shore as he stated, "I do have some good news to share. Jane is pregnant with twin girls." All congratulated them.

The day after Christmas Mother Pohl died a peaceful death. The doctors learned as much as they could about Mother Pohl's illness while staying within the directions from the Pohl siblings. They checked their records and inquired of other medical institutions and hospitals to see if any similar case had been recorded. Mother Pohl was an isolated case. After a few months of watching, no new cases were discovered. They closed the mysterious case and moved on to others.

Chapter 6

Walk on Water

Year 28

John Liniments sat in the corner of a small hospital room with his wife, Marie. Also in the room were father, sister Ann, and her husband, Jim Blackthorne. Ann was sitting in the opposite corner of John and his wife. Ann was a thin short woman that looked ten years younger than she really was. She had dark hair which she kept in a tight bundle. She quietly wore an emotionless face as she looked at the person lying in the bed in front of her. Sitting next to Ann was her husband, Jim. He was a tall muscular man. The top of his head had little hair that was combed to the side. A long pointy mustache and thin beard hid his stern face.

At the center of the room and against one wall sat a bed. Mrs. Liniments, John and Ann's mother, lay in it. She had been diagnosed with cancer. The toll of the cancer could be seen on her face. It had drawn and thinned the muscles making her look frail and very old.

The hospital had run several tests on Mrs. Liniments at the direction of the doctors to determine how far the cancer had spread. The family was seated in her room waiting for the lead doctor to arrive. He was going to tell them the results of the test.

John and his father knew the lead doctor by reputation only. He had moved into the city and had taken up practice over ten years ago. He treated only cancer patients. Mr. Liniments Sr. was a retired country general practitioner. Mr. Liniments Jr. was a pediatric doctor. So their medical paths did not cross the lead doctor's path.

Behind the bed was a large window. Outside the window a mid winter snow storm had just begun. In the distance a frozen river could barely be seen. Most of the bay that the river emptied into was also frozen. The snowstorm hid the frozen bay from view. John used the storm to break the silence, "The weathermen say that we could get over a foot of snow tonight. The way it's shaping up out there looks like they're right. You can't even see the bay anymore."

Everyone looked out the window except his mother since the window was behind the bed. No one said anything for a few minutes until Doc Liniments, sitting next to the bed holding his wife's hand spoke up, "Reminds me of the time that one of the Weller kids were born. Hell of a

storm was a blowing when a knock came to the door. It was Mr. Weller. Oh, he was a sight!" Doc Liniments threw up his hands and gave up one of his best boyish grins. "Looked like the abominable snowman!" he said in a loud voice.

He continued to tell his story with much animation, "He had driven to town like a bat out of hell to get me. The baby wanted to come out early. The Weller's always had trouble delivering babies. His car slid off the road and gotten stuck about a mile from town. He had to walk the final mile through all kinds of snow drifts. When he got to our house he was all covered in snow and ice. He looked like the abominable snowman alright," the smile on Doc's face widened as he shook his head sideways.

"Everything turned out OK though. I got to their farm in time to deliver the baby. Was the last baby born outside of the hospital as I recall. Remember it mom?" Doc Liniments asked while rubbing his chin.

Doc was a tall man. His head was capped with a full head of white hair that bounced up and down as he talked. His face always illuminated by the look of a youth's joy at Christmas. Everyone who ever met him was put at ease by his boyish charm and look.

"Yeah. John had just been born a few months earlier. Marie, you were a gonna come into the world later that spring. Babies were being born all the time that year. Kept you busy and helped pay the bills. 'Babies are good for business.' you'd always say." Mrs. Liniments' voice was weak.

"Just wished they'd all been born in nice weather. But when it's time for the baby to come, they don't ask the weatherman if is sunny or not," he led everyone in a chuckle.

As he finished a knock came to the door. It opened and the lead doctor stepped into the room. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, come right on in. We were just recalling when these youngsters were born. Them were some busy times. Delivering babies was the best part of being a family practitioner. Well, almost always. That's why I advised junior to go into that business."

"On days like today I wish I was delivering babies instead of delivering news," The lead doctor voice dropped and he looked down toward the floor. The room's occupants made way for the oncologist as he walked to the head of the small bed. He stopped and addresses Mrs. Liniments, "How you feeling today?"

"A little tired. Other than that, fine," she was not being honest and everyone knew it. "How am I?"

"The tests reveal that your kidneys and lymph glands are affected; their shutting down. At times it appears that your lungs have filled up with fluids and then they drain again. In short, you're stage four." John and his father knew what this meant. No one else did. The lead doctor put his hand on her shoulder, "If you would have only come in sooner."

"I don't like doctors and hospitals."

The oncologist cocked back his head and looked at John as he asked, "But you married one and your son is one?"

Mrs. Liniments tilted her head toward her husband and presented a half smile, "We married before he became a doctor and I had no say over John's occupation. Besides how can you not love these two, even if they're doctors?"

Ann asked with a quaint smile, "What will you do to help her?" Ann was an optimist to the point of not being able to properly accept life's hard realities. She preached that people are survivors not victims. Her incomplete view of life stemmed from past dark episodes that she had tried to forget. Since she could not forget them; she reanalyzed and relabeled them to the point of distorted truth. This helped her stop punishing and blaming herself and it even helped her forgive some of the people who harmed her. Yet, it also caused her to ignore half the truth when life's unpleasant side paid her a visit. As a result of this life viewpoint Ann kept herself from true healing. Those who accepted her message were also kept from true healing.

"That depends on your mother."

"What are my options?"

"You can choose from several kinds of chemo therapies. I'll have an assistant explain them to you later. She'll be by soon. You can make an appointment with her. After your conversation with her you'll be released from the hospital." As the lead doctor spoke he kept shifting a clip board from one hand to the other.

"That sounds great mother," Ann replied with a smile on her face. "We can begin planning your birthday party."

"My what?" Mrs. Liniments gave her daughter a cold look. "My birthday's months away. I don't remember saying anything about a party."

"That's because I just thought of it. We can call it 'Recovered at,'" Ann stopped for a second and placed her hand on her mother's shoulder and smiled, "Can we say your age?"

"Better not tell anyone my age, and I don't feel much like a party." Mrs. Liniments crossed her arms over her chest.

"Doesn't sound like a bad idea dear," Doc Liniments spoke up. His mouth did not know that his mind was stuck on the statement, 'stage four'.

John did not like where the conversation was going. He knew that his sister was purposely keeping their mother away from the most important subject of cancer. He suspected that his sister knew what stage four meant. He did not want to hurt his sister's feelings so he carefully considered his words. He used one hand to grasp his other hand's wrist, "When can we expect her to be cured? It would be best to have a party when she's feeling better."

The oncologist knew that John knew the answer and had asked it to redirect the conversation. He answered with a strong quiet voice as he gripped the clip board tightly with both hands, "There is no cure for stage four cancer."

John quickly responded as Ann's smile disappeared, "How many stages of cancer are there?"

"There are only four." The lead doctor looked at the clip board as if there was something there to read.

After a brief silence Jim Blackthorn, Ann's husband spoke up, "I don't think I like that answer." He was not being completely truthful. It wasn't the answer he disliked; it was John's questions.

"I don't want to cloud the seriousness of Mrs. Liniment's condition." Every time the lead cancer doctor had to break the news that someone would soon die he struggled on how and sometimes if he should break the news. This time the issue was being forced which made him uncomfortable. The more the conversation dragged on the more he shuffled the clip board from one hand to the next.

John wanted the truth to be known. He pressed ahead with another question, "How long does she have?" Everyone was too shocked to speak up.

"Depending on the type of treatment, her life could be extended six months to a year."

John pushed the truth forward with one final question, "And if she does not undergo treatment?"

The lead doctor looked around the room before he answered. He could tell that he had been forced into the center of a family rift and no matter how he answered John's question the rift would close up and crush him. "No more than six months." There was a long silence. Ann and Jim stared at the cancer doctor long enough to cause him to leave the room.

"I don't think I like his bedside manner," Ann stated when the door closed.

"Neither do I," Jim agreed. Both Jim and Ann looked at John angrily. Yet they said nothing.

Marie said the first words since she greeted everyone when she entered the room almost an hour earlier. "The truth needs to be brought out in the open so that a correct direction can be set." She meant medically.

John was thinking of decisions that determine one's eternal fate after death when he injected, "Now that we know what the future holds mom can make the best decisions."

"Perhaps we should get a second opinion," Mr. Liniments stated with hopes to ease the friction growing in the room. He could tell that his wife was stressed. "Why don't you kids let your mother and I wait alone for the assistant to come."

"Actually, we need to get back to the kids. The sitter can not stay much longer. Mom anything you need, I'll help. Just give me a call." John kissed his mother on the cheek.

Ann rose and hugged her brother before he and Marie exited the room, "I'll come by tomorrow mom," she stated as she kissed her mother on the cheek. A tear was forming in her eyes as she hugged her father and stated, "Stop by the house and eat dinner with us tonight dad."

Mr. Liniments was surprised at the invitation. This was the first time that Ann had invited him to dinner in several years. Jim did not like Ann's family, especially her father. Ann and Jim left the elderly couple in the room alone.

John Liniments sat alone on a bench in the middle of a lush park. Throughout the park tall maples and oaks were painted with new leaves. A red brick path wound around their mighty trunks as if it was afraid of being crushed by the trees' large roots. Every once in a while a jogger or a dog walker made his or her way down the path. Every few meters an elegant green lamp post lined the path. Below the lamp post rose multicolored tulips. White butterflies and red cardinals dashed in, out, and around the trees and the lamp posts. Behind John trickled a small, rock bottomed creek. John paid little attention to his quaint surroundings as he waited for Father Hemmingway to arrive.

"Why am I having a hard time dealing with this?" he asked himself. "I had time to prepare. I knew of her cancer almost a year ago. And six months after the doctor said she was stage four she died. Surely this was enough time to be prepared. I wasn't even that close to mother. I was when I was little; but that began changing in my teenage years. I often fought with her in those years. Then slowly my father and I became close." John sighed, "Why is her death bothering me?"

"Perhaps it was because of my sister. She was so hard to deal with through it all." John clinched his hands into a fist. "She kept making mom drink that feel good humanistic garbage. Mom needed to accept that she was about to die so she could make proper decisions and set everything right with God."

John noticed Father Hemmingway walking down the sidewalk. His step was sure and quick in spite of his excessive weight. John estimated him at 280 pounds which was less than the last time he had talked to him; which was at his mother's funeral. The long black vestments flowed around Father Hemmingway as he waved and smiled at someone further down the path. The father's vestments matched his deep black eyes and dark black hair. His white chubby face showed a luminescence that was hard to comprehend and hard to look into. Father Hemmingway took a seat next to John. The bench creaked under the new weight.

"Mornin' John. Vigorous day isn't it." Father Hemmingway took a deep breath. "Just love the smell of the marigolds."

John took in his surrounding for the first time since he entered the park. A thin smile entered his face. John was always amazed at the way Father Hemmingway presence changed everything. "Spring's my favorite time of the year father." John looked down again. "But I'm not enjoying it this year."

"Taking your mother's death harder than you expected? She meant a lot to you, did she?"

"I loved my mother, but we weren't that close. I guess that's why I asked you to meet me. It's been weeks and I'm still feeling down. I don't know what's wrong with me. Why am I taking this so hard?" John face displayed pensive sadness.

“How old are you John?”

John sat up straight and looked into the father’s eyes, “Thirty-five.”

“Tony’s getting up there, almost in the double digits. He’s getting tall too. He’ll be a good basketball player like his father.”

“Scouting already are you? We live kinda far away from home for him to play on your team. Do you want us to move back home?”

Father Hemmingway chuckled as he answered, “Hmmm, perhaps.” He leaned back, and looked straight away as he shot off another question, “How’s your relationship with Marie?”

John looked in the same direction as Father Hemmingway was looking. He brushed his thinning hair back with his hands, “Not as good as it was, as I’d like it to be.”

“Troubles?”

John looked at Father Hemmingway. He placed his hands in his lap. “She had an abortion last year father.”

Father turned to look at John, “You were against it?”

“Of course. But my opinion didn’t count. She gets head strong like that.” John looked at the ground again. “The child wasn’t mine. She didn’t tell me, but I knew. We hadn’t,” John paused, “come together in a while.”

“That’s four deaths in just as many years; your wife’s mother, your sister’s boy, your wife’s unborn, and now your mother. Death’s a hard thing to come against. To come against it so many times in so few years and so close to us is extremely hard to take. Have you talked to anyone about these deaths?”

“No, not really. Just you, just now.”

“How about God?”

“Don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? Either you been talking to God about this or you haven’t.”

“How do you talk to God? Just say, ‘Hey, how you doing big guy? Life been good? Been kinda hard down here.’”

The father chuckled making his belly roll in waves, “Something like that, but with a bit more understanding of who he is. We should talk to God much like you and I are talking now. One talks for a while and the other listens, and then the roles switch. Do you know that it says in the Bible that a man before the flood walked with God? That’s a way of saying he had

conversations with God. The Bible also says that another man, Abraham, was a friend of God. That means he talked with God too. I could go on and on, but you get my point.”

“I can understand talking to God, but listening. Isn't it arrogant to assume God's going to talk back to me? Maybe a little loony too?”

“No,” Father Hemmingway dragged out his answer as he leaned back. His belly stuck out enough to look like a black kettle. Then he sat upright and smiled a boyish grin as he continued. “I've got a secret to tell you. When I decided to go into the priesthood I didn't have a relationship with God. Was like that for several years into it too. Then a few events happened in my life that made me examine who I was and what I was doing. God showed me that I didn't have a true relationship with him. The key word there is relationship. I said it all those years without understanding that my relationship with God should be like a relationship with any other person,” he tilted his head to the side as he added, “except of course that he's more than a person. He's God.” With his head still tilted Father Hemmingway turned his eyes toward John, “Do you know how a person can have a relationship with God?”

John rubbed his forehead, “It has something to do with what Jesus did by dying, right?”

“Right.” Father Hemmingway continued by telling John how to have a relationship with God through Jesus.

“So a relationship with God's going to solve all my problems?”

“Nope.”

“You're confusing the hell out of me,” John crossed his arms over his chest.

“You're right about hell coming out of you, but you're wrong about the relationship solving all your problems. You see, the point isn't the relationship, the point is God. He sends the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit begins to educate you, John. You're like I was a few years back, and sometimes still am, but the difference is God's right here with me. We talk and we listen. I talk through my troubles and then mostly I listen.”

John started to squirm, “Perhaps you can answer something I heard once?”

“Go ahead and shoot. I'll do my best to answer your question.” Father Hemmingway took a deep breath as he embraced himself.

“Can God create a rock bigger than himself?”

Father Hemmingway began to barrel laugh so hard that he had to stand up. His laughter changed to coughing. After a few minutes he wiped his eyes. “Sorry. Hope I didn't hurt your feelings. I didn't see that one coming. Haven't heard it in a few years. Makes me laugh every time I hear it.”

John's eyes were wide. “You OK.”

“Haven't felt better,” Father sat back down and put one arm on top of the back of the bench.

John brushed his hair back with his hand again, "So what's so funny about that question?"

"Can we go farther than infinity? Can we live longer than eternity? Can we get truer than absolute truth? Can we get cleaner than purity?"

"Those questions don't make any sense, Father. I can't answer them."

"You're right. We can't do those things and those questions make no sense to us. But God can answer them and even do them if he wanted to because he transcends his creation and those things are created things. In that way the question you asked doesn't make sense."

Father Hemmingway sat up straight and looked John in the eye, "John, leave philosophy to fools like me. You seek out a relationship with God who's so beyond the greatness of any created rock that he's in a whole different league. You see he's neither created nor can be created. In that fact alone God is uniquely beyond creation, whether mineral, water, or air. You'll find these things out when you begin to listen to him."

"Well, we better leave it at that," Father Hemmingway stood up quickly and held out his hand. "Consider what I said and we can talk later. I like coming to the big city, but I don't like leaving my congregation, as small as it is. Someday soon I'll introduce you to someone local you can team up with. That is if you're willing to take the first step with God. There's someone around here that I want to catch up with."

John stood up and took the father's hand. "Thanks father. You've given me something to think about."

Chapter 7

Dust Bowl

Year 30

"John you oughta" see the twins," Vince turned the pick-up truck onto a stone road without slowing down. "It was okay for us to meet halfway; but you shoulda' come all the way to our house to get a good look at 'em. Sure, they're a handful, but they're as cute as a button. Brings a smile to my weary eye every time."

"Could you not hit every pothole?" Sid spoke up from the bed of the pick-up. His arms were against the side rail and the cab back. The back window of the cab was open.

Vince quickly looked in the rear view mirror so he could burn a point into Sid's dark eyes, "Remember what we agreed on. You can come as along as you didn't whine like a little baby."

Sid looked down and softly replied, "Sure," and followed it with an even softer, "Whatever."

Vince turned to John and smiled with half his mouth, "Ignore him John. That's what I do. He's been this way ever since the twins were born." Vince shook his head and looked forward turning the pick-up quick so it could follow the turning road. A full smile returned to his face, "You got to see 'em, John."

“Sorry, Vince. Going all the way to your place and then coming back out here would have wasted almost a whole day of hunting. Besides, I just saw the twins two weeks ago when Kate and Bob’s grandchild was baptized,” John stroked his chin, “John, that’s his name, right? Good name if you ask me.”

“Yeah,” Vince shook his head.

He turned off the stone road and stopped the truck. Dust rolled up from the tires and spilled into the bed of the truck. Sid, Louis, and Tony coughed as they tried to wave the dust away from their faces. Vince exited the truck and opened a gate that blocked a drive that was no more than two parallel dirt tracks that twisted between trees and shrubs before they disappeared into the heavy undergrowth. Vince returned to the truck, threw it into drive, drove it through the open gate, and then stopped the vehicle a second time. A new cloud of dust invaded the bed of the truck.

“Enough already with the dust!” Sid demanded in-between coughs.

Vince opened the door as John continued, “Mary and Marsha are cute, couldn’t get any cuter. I’m glad for you two. But a man has to have his priorities.”

Vince nodded in acknowledgment and exited the truck. He closed the gate, returned to the truck, threw it into drive, and hit the gas pedal.

Within a minute of driving Vince turned the pickup sharply. The truck banked steeply to the driver’s side to avoid a bank of a river that appeared out of nowhere. John returned his right hand from outside the opened window and gripped the top of the door. He gripped the dash with his other hand. “How’d you come across this land?”

“The man who owns it is too old to farm it and his kids and grandkids don’t want to have anything to do with it. He doesn’t want to leave it, but he can’t afford the taxes. He asked me to lease it or farm it for a set price. It’s a bit far from my farm and a good chunk like this area isn’t farmable. Normally I would have said no. However, there’s lots of deer here because he didn’t allow hunting. He was a dairy farmer. Once he agreed to let me hunt it, I signed the papers on the condition that I get first dibs to buy it. It won’t be profitable, but who could pass up the deer? The only thing I grow here is hay, ‘cause that will assure a good supply of deer.”

The truck leveled out as it left the river bank. Vince drove down the twisting dirt tracks about five more minutes until they ended at a large flat field of grass. Vince stopped the truck and turned off the engine. “This is where we make camp.”

Everyone got out of the truck and the boys began unpacking the gear. John and Vince each grabbed a tent. “How much land do you manage now, Vince?”

“A few thousand; enough to ensure a good inheritance for the twins.” He threw down the tent and began setting it up along the river bank.

“And Sid?”

Of Water

"Inheritance is for blood. The boy understands that. We're givin' him a good life until he graduates high school. That's all he expects."

John looked in the direction of the boys. Sid was staring at his father. Vince continued to put up his tent. John thought he saw gloss under Sid's eye. John returned to putting up his tent.

Within fifteen minutes everyone was satisfied with the camp. John grabbed two guns and handed one to Tony, "You'll never forget your first time hunting, son. Ten's the age of ascent." John looked at Louis, "Next year it'll be Lew and Sid's year." Then the two headed east. Vince grabbed his gun and headed north.

Louis and Sid grabbed fishing rods, walked south down the dirt tracks that the truck had followed until they came upon a shallow part of the river. They crossed the river, crossed a rusty barbed wire fence that lined the river, and continued south until they reached a deep hole in the river. There they crossed the rusty fence again and sat upon the river's high bank.

"Your dad sure is harsh," Louis stated as he wormed his hook.

Sid's bobber splashed as he replied, "He's not my dad. He reminds me of that all the time now." He took up the slack and sat down on the bank. His knees were bent so that only his shoes and butt touched the grass. He placed his rod on the grass between his legs and stared at it.

Louis' bobber splashed near Sid's. "What do you mean?" Louis sat down, took up the slack, and leaned his back against a rusted fence post. He placed his rod between him and Sid as he continued to watch the bobber.

"Everything's about the twins. 'The twins this,' and 'the twins that.'" Sid spoke in a high voice as he daintily pointed his hands from one direction to another, "Oh, look at the cute little babies. Let me cuddle them and love them." Louis laughed as Sid pretended to hold a baby and then place it on the ground.

Sid slammed his fists into the ground where he had placed the imaginary baby, "Everything was great until those little shitters came along." The smile left Louis' face. He could never predict where Sid would direct anger.

"And then there's my loving dad." Sid lowered his voice, "The twins are so cute. John, please, please come stare at my precious two children." Sid leaned over and grabbed Louis' shirt, "You gotta see 'em, John. Come see the twins or I'll pound you."

Louis laughed again. Sid let go of Louis and looked at the river. "I hate the twins. I hate Vince and Jane. I'm thinking of takin' Vince's graduation promise early. I'm thinkin' of leavin' earlier before he kicks me out."

"When?" Louis looked at Sid with wide open eyes.

Sid looked intently at the river. In a lower voice he answered, "Any day now." Then he looked down at his rod.

Of Water

Louis looked at his bobber again. "My mom always says that your mom is a snob. I didn't know that living with a snob could be so hard. My mom calls your mom all kinds of names too. What's a bitch, Sid?"

"It's a female dog that's mad."

Louis looked at Sid, "Is your mom a bitch?"

Sid looked at his bobber, "Yeah, and a snob too."

Louis looked at his bobber again, "Guess my mom's right about some things." After a few moments, Louis looked at Sid again, "You can't leave them, Sid. If you leave, we'll never see each other again."

Sid turned toward Louis again, "I was thinking of moving in with you. Your family seems to be all right. You have such nice parents."

Louis rolled his eyes and turned toward the river, "Boy, do you have it wrong! Sometimes I think my parents hate each other. It's my mom's fault. She acts so strange. Some days she'll just sit on the couch and stare at the wall. Tony and I think she's in some kind of trance. It's scary, Sid. The only time she talks to us is to yell at us. Of course most of the time she's not at home because she's at work or some party."

"I never see her yell at you."

Louis looked sideways at Sid, "She never yells at us when we're with people; when we're with people she's nice." Louis looked back at the river and pointed to his chest, "I'm happy when we're with people because she actually pays attention to us and is nice to us. At first I couldn't figure it out, why she was nice to us only when we're with other people. I thought she was just being nice to other kids. I thought she wanted them to be her kids and not us."

Louis picked up his rod, began slowly pulling in the bobber, and looked sideways at Sid, "I was jealous of other kids, like you, Sid." Louis looked at his bobber and stopped pulling it in. "But then I realized that if there are no other adults around, then she's not nice to other kids either. She's only nice when adults are around."

Sid looked at his bobber. It had drifted downstream. He pulled it in and then stated, "Maybe that's what Jane means when she says your mom's a rag doll that married money to impress other people."

"Makes sense."

"Well, at least your dad is nice."

Louis looked at Sid, "Yeah? My dad's never around." Louis gestured with both hands and with a raised voice said, "Do you see him around now? He loves his work. He doesn't even know me. He thinks I want to shoot a gun with him next year. I don't want to shoot a gun. I just want to fish with you."

Of Water

Louis and Sid said nothing for a long time. They sat on the high bank watching their bobbers. At separate times each boy pulled in a fish. Some they threw back into the river because they were too small. Eventually, each boy pulled in keepers.

After several hours of nature's silence, the sun grew close to the horizon. Louis looked up and stated, "We better get back. They'll be coming back and making something to eat. I'd like to eat my fish. I'm hungry."

Sid looked up and said, "You're right."

Louis grabbed their fish and rods as Sid climbed across the rusted fence. Once Sid was down on the other side Louis passed him the fish and rods and crossed the fence. Then the boys began retracing their steps with Louis leading the way. When they reached the shallow part of the river, Sid held the fish and rods as Louis crossed the rusted fence. Once Louis was down on the other side, Sid passed the fish and rods over the fence and climbed the fence. Just as Sid's first leg was over the fence the barbed wire he was standing on dropped. Sid's body plunged into a rusted fence pole. His crotch was pierced. Sid yelled as blood began soaking his pants. He reached up, grabbed some small weeping willow branches, and pulled himself free of the pole. Then he let go of the branches. Barbed wire cut into his pants and legs as he fell to the ground. He rolled down the steep bank and landed in the river.

Sid's blood swirled in the water as he reeled in pain. He unbuckled his pants as Louis staggered down the bank. "Oh, God! Is it bad?"

Sid lowered his pants and stared at the damage. "It doesn't look bad, mostly scratched my leg. It did pierce me." Sid washed his wounds with the clear river water. "Thank God, your dad's a doctor."

"Can you walk, Sid?"

"Don't know." Sid grabbed Louis' outstretched arm. He grunted as he rose.

"Let me get a crutch." Louis made his way down the river and pulled a short thick piece of driftwood from the bank. He returned to Sid who was buckling his pants. Louis handed the make-shift crutch to Sid. "This should help." Louis then proceeded to retrieve their rods and fish. Rather slowly the boys made their way back to camp.

As the fishing duet approached the camp they were greeted by Tony, "What happened to you?"

Sid told his story and Louis raced into camp retrieving the fathers. The group came together at the truck.

"Get him up on the tailgate. I'll get the first aid kit." John ran to the front of the truck and pulled a white box out from behind the seat. A red cross was painted on the front of the box.

"Why did you have to do a dumb thing like this? Just like you to ruin everything." Vince's hands were resting on his waist and he was slightly shaking his head back and forth. "Were you goofing off? Jumpin' on that old fence? Damn it boy, didn't I warn you?"

Sid looked at Vince with wide opened eyes and in a high voice he stated, "It was an accident. We were coming home and..." Sid winced as John poured some alcohol on the wound.

"You'll be okay. No organs were damaged; just scraped skin and there's a small hole. When's the last time he had a tetanus shot? John began wrapping Sid's leg with gauze.

"Last year when he stepped on a nail. This boy's so clumsy, John. Always fallin' and gettin' cut. He'll be no basketball player like you, me, and your boys," Vince slightly shook his head and tightened his lip, then he put his hand on Louis' shoulder, "Did you catch some fish, Lew?"

Louis was still holding the fish as he watched his father wrap the gauze on Sid's leg. When addressed, he slightly nodded his head yes as he looked at Vince, "So did Sid."

"Come on. Let's clean 'em. Looks like there's enough for all to eat."

After eating the fish they started a fire, sat around it, and recanted their day's adventures. The men drank coffee and the boys drank a hot chocolate powdered drink. After a while Vince got up to relieve himself. John followed. John made sure they were out of ear shot before he spoke up, "Vince, don't you think you're being a bit harsh?"

"Harsh? Towards you?" Vince's brow formed a "V" as he looked toward John.

John turned toward Vince, "No! Sid!" He returned his gaze forward, "I've been thinking about life for a while now you know, about what we leave behind us. Have we been a good or bad influence or no influence at all? What our children and grandchildren will say of us; about God and faith. My parent's deaths got me thinking."

The friends stood in the wilderness near the motionless river's high bank and began watching twilight wane. A large cirrus cloud slowly displayed a deeper kaleidoscope as the evening star twinkled through the canopy. The smell of the burning elm from their fire blended with nature's scents. The growing sound of serenading crickets, frogs, and toads mingled with the men's words.

"My father died when I was only eight. I thought a lot about life and God back then. Thought I had a good understanding," Vince shook his head slightly up and down as he smiled at his youth.

His demeanor stiffened as he continued, "Then Sylvester died. Now I have a better understanding of just who God is. He exists and He created us; but since then He doesn't get involved in our lives. He doesn't care one way or another about what happens here on earth. I don't think He can relate. How can someone omnipotent and eternal understand the pain and hardship of this life? The state of the world is evidence enough. If he'd care he'd do more to correct this mess we live in. No, we make our own life, John. We chose our own path," Vince briefly turned toward John, "that path should be a good one; first for ourselves, then for our family, then for our friends, and lastly for strangers."

"Can't our choices be good for all? Do they always have to follow that pecking order?"

“Perhaps sometimes they don’t; but usually a choice that is good for you is not good for others.” Neither man spoke as some crows noisily fought over leftover fish from the men’s supper. “I suppose what you’re thinking about is Jane and my decision to keep Sid out of the will.”

“No, not really; I was thinking more about the boy’s feelings. He needs more than three meals a day and a roof over his head.”

“That’s all I had.”

“It’s true you lost your father when you were young; but you still had a mother who loved you.”

“I love the boy, just not before the girls. The twins are going to be the positive influence, the legacy that I leave behind. The boy can make his own way like I did. It didn’t hurt me. I’m one of the richest men in the area.” Vince stiffened and took a deep breath. “He’s got a head on his shoulder. He’ll do all right.”

John began, “I...”

He was cut off by Vince who shook a finger at John as he spoke, “See what religion’s done to you, John? You’re preachin’ to me about something that doesn’t affect you and never will. It’s my decision about my family. This is the reason why I’m not religious anymore. If you knew the things that religious leaders do, you wouldn’t be either.”

“I’m not talking about religious leaders. I’m talking about a relationship with God; talking to Him and seeking Him out.”

Vince stared at John. “You’re scaring me, John. You’re talking like some religious nut or something. Perhaps it is best that you didn’t see the twins. If you’re going to start talking like that, then perhaps it’s best if you keep your religion in your own home.” Vince left John standing alone. John looked down at the stream. It had grown too dark to see. He slowly looked toward the horizon and then into the sky. He uttered a few quiet words and returned to the fire.

Chapter 8

Blood and Water

Year 41

“You absolutely, positively cannot bring her to the dance!” Vince’s face flared as he shook his finger in Sid’s face.

Sid slapped Vince’s hand away, “And you’re going to stop me? How? Kick me out of the house? Done that two years ago.” Rage flew from his brown eyes. “Cut off my allowance? You never gave me an allowance, in spite of the fact that I did all that hard labor for you.” Sid poked his finger onto his adopted father’s wide chest.

"I gave..." as Vince started to speak a delicate hand rested on his shoulder. Vince stopped talking and turned his head to look at the hand and then the pale round face behind it. The face bore a stern, small smile and determined hazel eyes.

"Calm down, Vince. Sit down." Both men looked at Jane but did not move. Jane removed her hand from Vince's shoulder and gestured toward the unmatched reclining chairs as she firmly stated, "The both of you."

The chairs, like the rest of the used furniture cluttered the apartment rented by Sid Pohl, Tony Liniments, and Louis Liniments. Tony and Lew had started earning credits toward a medical degree at a local university while Sid worked as a maintenance technician at a heating, ventilation, and air conditioning repair company. Tony and Louis were seated on a couch near the two chairs. At the other end of the room a TV displayed a baseball game. The three boys had been watching the game when Vince and Jane arrived unannounced. Sid and Vince sat in their assigned chairs.

"You two boys leave the room," Jane pointed to a door that led to the kitchen and two bed rooms. "We want to be alone." Tony and Louis quickly arose, only too happy to oblige.

Sid slid to the front of his chair as he interjected, "Why do you have to talk down to everyone like you're their queen? You're in their apartment. They deserve some respect."

Jane quickly scanned the room while showing her distain and discomfort with a bent smile and wide eyes. Then she looked at the two standing brothers. "Well?"

"We understand, Mrs. Pohl," Tony stated without looking at her. He was looking at Sid, "We'll be out back practicing Lew's pitching."

As the brothers left the room, Sid sat back in his chair as he asked, "Just why can't I take their sister to her prom?"

"You're her cousin."

"Seems you're forgetting that I'm adopted."

"Everyone thinks you are."

"Doubt that! You've told everyone on the street since the twins were born that I'm not your real kid; the twins are your true children."

"She's beneath you."

"That argument doesn't work if I'm adopted. Beside's you're not concerned about my reputation. You're concerned about your reputation."

"That's not fair."

"Fair! You're speaking to me about being fair?"

Of Water

“We’re concerned.”

“You don’t give a damn about me. And what’s so lowly about being a doctor’s daughter?”

“It’s not John,” Jane stated in a stern and determined voice, “It’s Marie. She’s an alcoholic, just like her father, and his father. Her daughter will pick up the habit just as these boys will.”

Sid looked at Vince and laughed. “What do you know of them? Was your father a drunk?” Vince quietly looked at the ground, motionless. “Listen, kicking me out of the family works both ways. Why don’t you just move your snooty noses out that door? I’ll date who I want to date.”

“You’re too old to go to a prom.”

Sid laughed loudly as he threw his arms in the air, “Are you forgetting your first date with Queenie here?” Sid’s face went blank as he looked directly into Jane’s eyes, “I’m thinking of marrying her.”

Vince and Jane winced. Jane slipped so low in the ragged couch that it looked as if it was going to eat her. Vince quietly stated, “We better go. There’s no good done here today.” He rose and stretched out his hand toward his wife.

Sid stood, moved toward the door and opened it, “Can’t think of any good you ever did.”

As Jane left the apartment she whispered to Vince loud enough for Sid to hear “Their kids will be ashers.”

When his adopted parents left the apartment, he closed the door. Then a smile formed on Sid’s lips. His eyes had a look that would make many look for a hole to crawl into. “Working just as I planned. God, this is great.”

Sid made his way to the back of the apartment building where Louis was throwing fast balls into Tony’s glove. Before the brothers could see him, Sid replaced his wicked, determined smile with a serious look. When Tony saw Sid he stood up and removed his catcher’s mask. “How did it go?”

Sid shook his head, clenched his hands, and looked down, “Same as always.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Say, I’m going to go to your parents’ house. If my parents found out, then no doubt your parents found out too.” Sid sighed.

“Do you want us to come along?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I don’t think your parents will react the way mine did.”

Louis rolled his eyes back, “Don’t be so sure. You know how it’s been between our mothers our whole life.”

Of Water

Tony looked sideways at Louis, “And now our dads, too. Hope we never get that way when we’re old.”

“We won’t, not if I can help it.” Sid turned to leave. He looked back as he continued to walk. A smile formed on his face, “Of course if Lew keeps pitching like that he’ll grow famous and forget his friends and family.”

“I won’t let him.”

Louis tossed the ball at Tony, “Forget or pitch?”

Sid drove up to Marie Ann’s parents’ house and parked underneath one of the many tall green maple trees that lined the street. He shut off the car, but did not exit it. He examined the pristine house to see if anyone was looking out the window or moving around on one of the lawns. The house and its surroundings seemed dark and motionless. He decided to stay in his car a few moments to collect his thoughts. Occasionally, a person walking a dog or a child riding a bike made their way past him and down the street or the sidewalk.

“The objective here is to make Marie Ann believe her parents are being ridiculous and unkind. That won’t be too hard if I bring up Jane’s name. Marie will surely go through the roof, especially if she has had something to drink. If John’s home, he’ll ask me to leave out of shame for his wife. Most likely he won’t be home. He’ll be at the golf course, the hospital or the office.”

“Then, if I ask Marie Ann to come with me, she will. I’ll make it look like I’m her knight in shining armor, coming to save her from a revolting family life. It’s a good thing Tony and Lew didn’t object to me saying no to them wanting to come with me. It would be harder to convince Marie Ann that her family is a bunch of nuts if they were around.”

Sid smiled and got out of the car. He walked up the winding white cement sidewalk that led to the front door. He took a deep breath and rang the door bell. The door opened and his face turned ash white. Addie, Marie Ann’s aunt answered the door. Sid did not know how to reply when she asked, “Yes?” with a scowling look on her face.

“Sid, what do you want?” Addie opened the door half way and stood in the middle of the path into the house, keeping one hand on the door.

Sid shifted his eyes then smiled, “Addie, what are you doing here? When did you arrive in town? The mountains and ranches out west are too cold for you?”

“We’re warmer than some people, as I hear it.”

Sid smiled; something it was clear to Addie he was not used to doing. “Sorry to hear about Norm’s passing. Sorry I couldn’t make it to the funeral.” Addie said nothing, nor did she make way for Sid to enter the house. So Sid formed a wide smile as he asked, “Is Marie Ann here?”

An acute, warm voice sounded from behind the door, “Sid!” A second hand appeared on the door and opened it wider revealing Marie Ann and Kathy. The hand was Marie Ann’s. She crawled under Addie’s arm and over the door’s threshold, and put her arms around Sid’s neck.

Of Water

Marie Ann was short so she stood on her toes to embrace Sid. Then she lifted one of her legs as she forced her body against his. Sid swayed back, but his strong body kept them from falling over.

Marie Ann looked similar to her mother when she was a teenager. She had long dark shiny hair that bounced with a life of its own as she moved about. She always did her best to exhibit joy and excitement, something that her lush hair exemplified. Marie was on the cheerleading squad and was one of the girls expected to be elected the dance's queen. Everything on Marie was perfect; from her hair to her bright face, to her large breasts, to her long legs. The one thing that Marie Ann didn't have, that her mother always did was wide hips.

Addie retreated into the house with a sour look on her face and entered a restroom that was adjacent to the entrance. Marie Ann, Sid, and Kathy passed her and walked into the kitchen. Marie was seated at the kitchen table. Scattered on the table were some coins, a deck of cards, and two Rum and Cokes on ice.

Marie's composure changed at the sight of Sid. She tightened up as she asked, "What do you want?"

"Oh, stop it, Mother. Be nice." Marie Ann grabbed Sid's hand and ushered him to a couch in the next room. The family room contained a large screen TV that was being watched by Jay Hawthorne. Jay was watching a black and white western movie.

Sid leaned over and whispered into Marie Ann's ear, "Have you told your parents yet?"

"Told us what?" Marie stood on the threshold of the family room with one hand on the wall to steady her body. She tried to look serious, but instead looked drunk.

Marie Ann looked at her mother trying to get the nerve to tell her. The more she looked at her swaying mother, the more she pitied her.

"Well, spit it out, Missy."

"Marie, the cards are getting cold. I need to pay for the gas to get back to the mountains." Addie tried to break the moment.

Marie looked across her right shoulder, "In a minute! The bank is closed right now. Besides I'm winning and feeling guilty for taking all your money."

Jay, smelling a fight, rose from his chair. As he approached Marie, she asked, "Please excuse me, Mrs. Liniments. May I pass?"

Marie stepped to the side, "Certainly, young man."

"He's a fine young man, Sid. You could learn some manners from him. He'll amount to something. You wait and see. Perhaps the two of you could start a HVAC company out west."

Marie Ann stood up, "Oh, you would just love that wouldn't you, Mother. Get him out of my life. Well, let me tell you this; Sid and I are going to the prom together."

Marie moved toward her daughter. The mixed drinks she had been drinking were overpowering in smell to Marie Ann. "Over my dead body."

Marie Ann rolled her eyes. "Don't be so dramatic, Mother."

Marie stepped past her daughter, "And just what do your parents have to say about this?"

Sid calmly answered, "Jane says Marie Ann's beneath me; but..."

Marie cut off Sid as she yelled out to Addie, "Did you hear that, Addie? Well-head says she's better than us."

"What did you expect? Mountains can't move except by the lickin' of a river," was the loud answer from the next room.

Marie slurred a reply, "Who's the river? Surely not our brother! Seems she's got him all dammed up." She chuckled at her wit. "Ash has been falling from her mountain far too long into his stream if you ask me." Sid rose and clenched his fists.

"No one's asking you. Come on, Sid, let's leave," Marie Ann grabbed Sid's fist and pulled him out of the room. The two of them paused at the front door. "Laura, Kathy, and Jay, do you want to come?" Marie Ann yelled into the house.

Sid smiled at Marie Ann. Marie Ann thought it was love. Sid never felt better. His plans were working.

Chapter 9

Of All Things

Year 43

Sid and Marie Ann entered Sid's apartment and sat down on a couch. They were the only people in the living room of the apartment rented by Sid and Marie Ann's brothers, Tony and Louis. Marie Ann looked into Sid's dark eyes, "Can you believe it? Two years to the day has passed since our first date, the prom." Sid said nothing. His lips were tight and pale. He knew what was sure to follow.

Marie Ann's smile faded and her bright eyes turned down and grew wet. "Aw Sid, when are we going to get married? I'm almost finished with the associate's degree in accounting as you wanted me to do. I got a job at the Weller's Mill as you wanted. I moved out of my parents' house as you wanted. It's lonely in my apartment."

"You have your cousin as a roommate," Sid gently grabbed Marie Ann's chin and forced her to look him in the eyes again.

"It's like Robin Blackthorne doesn't even live there, Sid. She's always off with her mom, or at church, or at some religious retreat. Sid, I want to marry you and have your kids."

Of Water

“We don’t have to be married to have kids,” his brows sank and an assertive smile formed on his face.

Marie Ann sat up straight, took Sid’s hand from her chin, firmly held it, and looked at Sid, “You know where I stand on that issue.”

Sid released his hand from Marie Ann’s grip. He stood up and slowly walked away from her. With his back facing her, Sid took a deep breath, “Marriage, the subject of marriage again!” Sid’s arms pointed straight down as he made two fists, “You know where I stand financially. I can’t afford to support you. Where would we live?”

“Your parents have all that land. We could live on one of their small lots far away from them. You could go back to school. You could get a job with your relatives.”

Sid quickly turned to look at Marie Ann. His face was red. He had flunked out of college and he personally vowed to never speak to his parents unless it fit his plan. He said nothing at first. He took a few deep breaths and slowly released his fists and muscles. He slowly stated, “All right, we’ll get married.”

Marie Ann jumped up, hugged Sid, and kissed him repeatedly on the cheeks and mouth. Sid smiled at first. Then he stiffened, cuffed Marie Ann’s head and pulled her lips off his face.

“Oh Sid you’re wonderful.”

“There are a few things you’ll need to do to assure that our marriage will run smoothly.”

“Name it, Sid, name it,” Marie Ann quickly replied.

“You’ll have to finish school.”

“Almost there.”

“You’ll have to maintain a job.”

“Already am.”

“You’ll have to learn how to cook.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Right now your best is not palatable.”

“I’ll learn.”

Sid slowly nodded his head with his lips closed so tight that they were white. Then he continued, “I’m in charge. What I say is it; the subject, whatever it is, is final, no questions asked.”

“We’re already doing that.”

Of Water

“Really, what about sex?”

“You’ll get plenty of that when we’re married.”

“Good enough.”

“You take care of all house matters no matter where we live.”

“I’d prefer it that way.”

“Even the yard.”

“The yard too?”

Sid shook his finger at Marie Ann, “Any woman who marries me will take care of all house matters, including the lawn.”

Marie Ann stared at Sid’s determination. Then she looked down, “OK. Anything else?”

“One final thing,” Sid tilted his head back which caused his eyes to look down at her. “You’ll need to let go of your mother’s apron strings.”

“What?” Marie Ann looked up.

Sid placed his hand on her cheek, “You’ll have to break all contact with your family.”

Marie Ann sat down on the couch and looked toward the floor, “But why, Sid?”

“What I say goes and it’s final, no questions asked. That’s what you agreed to. Besides, you’ve stated countless times how you abhorred your mother’s drinking and your father’s absence. Do you want our kids to learn your family’s pathetic lifestyle?” Sid chuckled as he said “pathetic”.

“No.”

“So then we’re agreed?”

“No contact at all? What about the holidays? What about Tony and Louis? What about my aunt, uncles, and cousins?”

“No contact with your mother, father, and your brothers except for holidays. No contact with any of your relatives unless I say it’s okay. Agreed?”

As Sid spoke Marie Ann got up and walked to the other side of the room. She didn’t want Sid to see the tears in her eyes. “Agreed.”

Sid walked toward her, and placed his arms around her waist. “It’s settled then. We’ll marry next year.”

“Sid?”

Sid turned Marie Ann so she faced him. He wiped a tear from her cheek and kissed it. “What, girl?”

“Do you love me?”

“Of course, I do.”

“Will you always love me?”

“Yes.”

“There’ll never be another woman in your life?”

Sid smiled, “Not one; maybe two or three.” He cocked his head back, “But not all at once, one at a time.”

“Don’t kid with me, Sid. We marry, and then I’m the only one, right?”

“There has never been another girl in my life and there will never be another woman in my life.”

“And our children? You’ll make our children the most important thing in your life?”

“Of course. I know from both of our parents how to be a bad parent. Being a good parent will be easy. My top priority will be to make them proud, strong, and self reliant. They’ll know my love.” Sid put both hands on Marie Ann’s cheeks. “Our children will be molded by my gentle and loving hands.”

Marie Ann hugged Sid as she whispered, “I’m going to my apartment to prepare for the wedding.” Then she walked toward the front door. Sid walked to the open door that Marie Ann had exited. He smiled and waved as she pulled away.

“You sicken me.” Sid quickly turned around to face the voice that suddenly and loudly addressed him. “I knew you were always quick to a blow. But I thought it was a trait you were born with, and always tried to control. I never thought that it was a vicious self-imposed state. How could you impose such selfish burdens on my sister? You don’t love her. That’s not love.”

“Bug off. It’s none of your business.” Sid yelled back as he took a step toward Louis. Louis was in the entrance to the kitchen.

Louis stepped toward Sid and stated with vigor, “You’ll never marry my sister.”

Sid stepped so close to Louis that he could smell his breath. He pointed at Louis’ chest as he firmly stated, “You have no sway in the matter. Your sister and I agreed. She loves me and I love her. She’ll do as I say, and I’ll respect our marriage vows and raise our children in love

and respect.” Sid lowered his hand, “Now, isn’t that a better family life then either one of us received?”

“You made her believe that her life was miserable at home. It wasn’t, and you know it. I’ll visit my sister whenever I want to.”

Sid shoved his finger toward Louis a second time, “You come to our house and I’ll kick you out.”

Louis took a step away from Sid and lowered his voice, “Sid, we’ve been friends our whole life, and that in spite of the way our parents acted and felt toward each other.” Louis moved toward a front large window and looked out of it. “Perhaps what you’re doing now is what our parents did toward each other sometime in the past. Why repeat their mistakes? It didn’t work out for them.” Louis turned his head toward Sid, “Sid, how can you think that what you’re doing now is right?”

Sid moved to stand beside Louis. He lowered his voice, “What I’m doing is best for me and I don’t want to talk about it anymore with you.” Both men looked out the window, staring at cars driving by the apartment. “I’m moving out of the apartment this weekend Lew, and I don’t want you to help. I don’t want you to contact me anymore.” Sid started to walk towards the door.

Louis looked toward Sid, “Where you moving to?” Sid did not answer. Louis turned his whole body toward Sid, “Sid, what’s gotten into you lately?”

“Reason,” Sid stated as he left the apartment.

“What are you two arguing about?” Tony entered the room from the kitchen. He was wearing hospital scrubs and a lab coat. The smell of a hospital entered the room with him. Louis explained everything to his brother. Then they sat on the couch and stared at the wall. Neither said anything for the longest time.

Looking at the floor with wet eyes, Tony asked, “Where did our sister go?”

Also looking at the floor, Louis answered, “I don’t know, perhaps to her apartment. Sid might have followed her there.”

“Do you think she went to tell our parents?”

“I doubt it.” Louis got up and went into the kitchen. “He said she can’t contact then unless he gives the say so. I didn’t hear him say so. Why?”

Tony followed Louis and watched as his brother drank a glass of water. “We ‘ve got to get there first and tell them. I’m going to change and then we should go.”

Tony made his way to the bedroom that he and Louis shared. As Tony changed clothes, Louis stood in the doorway and asked, “How do you think they’ll respond?”

Tony grabbed his car keys and walked through the doorway past his brother. He touched him on the shoulder as he stated, “How do you think?”

Louis sighed and followed his brother out the back door. As both opened the car doors Louis asked, "What of Sid's family?"

"What of them?" Tony started the car and began backing out of the driveway. Louis lowered his window. The old compact car belched out fumes that poured into the window and stunk up the car.

"How do you think they'll react?"

"Just the way Sid wants them to react. I'm beginning to think that he's using our sister to make his parents' life miserable."

"Don't you mean 'adopted parents'? Isn't that how he refers to them?" Tony turned the radio on. Neither said anything until they began crossing the many bridges that were on the way to their parents' house. The rivers were almost empty. This year was one of the driest that any could remember.

"Do you think we could convince Marie Ann not to marry him?"

"You should have seen them. He has her acting like his lap puppy. How did she ever get like that? What does she see in him?"

"I don't know, perhaps Dad does. He might know what to do."

Tony turned the car into the driveway and turned off the engine. He gazed at the house while tightly gripping the steering wheel with both hands. His thumbs caressed the inside of the wheel. Slowly his brow slipped down and formed wrinkles on his balding forehead.

"What are you waiting for?" Louis turned his head to look at his brother. "What's wrong?"

Tony turned his head to look at Louis, still gripping the wheel, but his thumbs were not caressing it anymore. "Don't you notice something different about the house?" He reached down to turn off the radio.

Louis turned his head to survey the house and its grounds. "Yeah, now that you mention it. It doesn't look as neat and pristine as it was when all of us lived here." He surveyed the neighborhood. Most yards had multi-colored flowers, bright green level grass, and well trimmed bushes. Their parents' yard had no flowers, weeds sprinkled throughout the grass, and the bushes needed a good trimming. "What do you think it means?"

Tony reached to open the car door. "It means they're getting old and tired of living the suburban lifestyle," he continued as both men stepped out of the car, "Next thing you know they'll be living in a condo along the water front."

As the brothers walked up the winding sidewalk, Louis added, "That's what happens at fifty when the house is empty."

The brothers opened the large squeaking front door and walked into the house. "It's us. Your boys are home." Louis's voice echoed in the large entrance.

The brothers' eyes panned the large entrance as they made their way to the kitchen. The room gave them an uncomfortable feeling, like they didn't belong anymore. Just about the only way to get from one room to the next was to walk through the front entrance of their parents' house. After years of continually passing through the front entrance, several years of not living there anymore made it feel like the entrance was treating them as strangers.

"Tony! Lew!" Their mother entered the kitchen at the same time that they did. Her arms were out stretched. She grabbed each boy by the head. In turn each boy kissed their mother. She was followed by their father. They had been outside. He was followed by a man in dress pants and a leisure coat. The boys recognized the man. He was a local realtor.

"Our prediction is fulfilled." The brothers looked at each other with a half smile.

"Well, I best be going. Remember what we discussed; get the lawn cleaned up before I take pictures." The realtor shook John's hand.

John smiled as he looked at his boys, "My yard crew just arrived and I didn't even have to invite them. Talk about Providence."

The realtor's soft chuckle echoed in the entrance as he and John walked through it. "See you next week. I'll have the papers worked up so you can sign them." John opened the squeaky front door to let the realtor out. "Best fix the squeak." John waved to the realtor as he walked to his car parked at the street's curb. "Mind if I put a sign up before then?"

"Go right ahead." John finished his wave and closed the squeaky front door to the house. He looked at the hinges, slumped, and sighed. He turned to make his way back to the kitchen where his boys and wife were seated around the kitchen table. "Don't know if I'm up to all this cleaning and fixing work."

Tony and Louis looked at their father and then at each other. Their forearms were resting on the kitchen table. They were seated across from each other. Louis started, "Looks like it's a day of bad news all around."

His mother asked, "What do you mean? What bad news?" Marie placed her hands over one of Louis's hands.

Tony sat back in his chair. "Dad, you better sit down. There's no easy way to say this, so we'll just have to come out and say it." Tony waited for his father to sit down.

Water began pooling in Marie's eyes. She quietly asked, "Are you boys okay?"

Louis placed a warm, reassuring smile on his face. "Yes, we're not the problem. It's about Marie Ann. Sid proposed to Marie Ann and she accepted."

His mother quickly pulled her hands off Louis's hand and sat back in her chair. She loudly asked, "What? When?"

John was seated across from his wife. He leaned forward and placed his palms on the table. Quietly he responded, "Now Marie, this is not so bad. We knew it could happen. There's been little evidence that their being together would be bad for Marie Ann. Besides, they kept seeing each other in spite of what you did to discourage it." John sat back as he finished, "I still believe that the reason she moved out was because of our interfering."

"No, it wasn't me. It was him." Marie pointed up out of the way, to nothing particular. "That's that."

Before his wife could think of an insulting word, John spoke up. "If we would have let it go, perhaps she'd be seeing someone else by now."

"I don't believe so, Dad," Louis interjected. His father looked at him with doubt. Louis continued, "Today I heard them speaking; when he proposed, I heard it myself. He's been slowly manipulating her away from us. The worst part is she knows it." Louis slowly shook his head and looked at the table.

Tony finished the thought, "Even though it hurts her, she goes along with all his demands."

Marie vehemently stood up and pointed down at the table, "I knew it!" In a deeper voice and with her teeth tightly closed she continued, "I knew it. See how that woman raises her children! That's the way Wellers burn ash into their children. That's what she did to my brother."

John looked up at his wife and with both palms opened he asked, "Is it that they taught the boy to act this way?" Then he looked at each of his sons as he asked, "Or did neglect lead the boy to act this way?"

Marie spit out, "Neglect?" A brief silence followed; then she quickly looked at both her boys and her brows sank, "Why did you boys live with him?" Silence followed as the brothers looked at each other searching for words to say.

"He's right about being neglected, Mom. Ever since we were children," Louis was not able to finish his statement.

"The apparatus that caused that Weller boy to take my daughter away from me is of no concern. All I care about is how can I get her to think rationally and leave that 'asher'. He'll be the death of her for sure." Marie panned the three men at the table, "And don't look at me like I'm crazy. I've seen it all with my brother. I know more than anyone how those Wellers think and act. They're not moral like us."

John looked at his wife and warmly smiled. "You're right Marie. Your brother has slowly changed over the years." He motioned to the chair that Marie had been sitting in, "Please sit down. We need to think this through. Is Sid out to harm our daughter?" He looked at his sons as Marie sat down, "Perhaps not out and out, but if the boys are right then his actions show that he's putting himself before her. We know he has a quick, violent temper. Yet, has he ever harmed Marie Ann?" The other three slowly shook their heads no. "I've never seen him harm her either. I've never seen him even raise his voice at her." John slightly raised one finger as

he made the next statement, "However, I believe that once or twice he's given her a look that was saying, 'toe the line or else'." John rubbed his forehead as the other three looked at him. After a brief moment John sat back and puckered his lips before he stated, "I don't think there's anything we can do but show love toward them, pray for them, and trust in God."

Marie sat back, put her arms on her hips, and puffed air out her nose before she stated, "I'll pray, but I'm not just sitting around hoping my daughter is given permission to see me." She stared at John as she continued, "And children, by God as my witness, I'm going to do all I can to stop her from having Weller children."

"And just how are you going to do that?"

"I don't know yet; but I'll think of something."

Chapter 10

Trickle Down Effect

Year 47

"Dad," Louis began asking as he slowly pulled in his fishing line, "How's Mom doing?" Louis and John were fishing shin deep in briskly moving river water. Their leg boots were firmly planted on a slab of limestone in the middle of the wide river outside the condominium that John and Marie had been living in the last four years. The sun was almost a full disk on the eastern horizon. A bank of flat grey clouds was quickly moving in from the north toward the rising sun.

John took time to answer. He was about to cast his line in again when Louis asked the question. He stopped and pulled at the brim of the blue baseball cap he was wearing. The cap displayed a red and white T. He sighed before he answered. "Don't know," then he cast his line in. "She's fallen into a state of continual depression since the birth of Marie Ann and Sid's third child. I suppose no one can tell it but me; since she keeps so busy with her work." John watched his line move with the current as he answered. About a kilometer upstream a large group of men were also trying to catch Walleye during the late winter and early spring mating migration.

"I'm beginning to see a trend in you, son," John blinked his eyes as a rush of cold north air began whipping his face. The wind did not let up. "Every time they have another boy, you ask how your mother is doing."

"I haven't forgotten her vow when we told her Sid and Marie Ann were marrying, or what happened at the wedding."

John broke a brief silence with, "I'm rather enjoying my newly acquired retirement. Thanks for asking."

Louis smiled, "Good for you, Dad."

The conversation paused when Louis suddenly pulled back hard on his pole. He battled the fish at the end of his line for a few minutes until he successfully pulled it in. When Louis began

preparing to cast his line in again, John continued, "In some ways your mother's better now than she was before they married. I'm not sure if it was their marriage, or the job she started at the time, or because we moved, or because Addie stays out west, or a combination of all of them. Whatever the mechanism, your mother hardly ever drinks any more. I'm glad for that." John turned to look toward his son as he finished, "Louis, be sure that God is working for her good."

The cloud bank quickly moving across the sky had completely covered the sun. The temperature dropped several degrees. The cloud bank continued to move southward; replacing blue with grey. Soon the entire sky would be grey.

"How can you be sure of that? I hardly ever see Mom at church since Marie Ann moved in with Robin five years ago. It's like the only reason she attended church all those years was for our benefit." Louis shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

Small hard snowflakes began pelting Louis' and John's face. Both men looked toward the northern sky. "Well, I'm not going to stay out here any longer if these snow squalls keep coming."

"Sounds good to me," Louis responded, and he began pulling in his line. "We're almost at our limit anyway."

The men began making their way to the distant shore as John continued, "I'm sure that God is working for her benefit because I continually pray for her. I ask God to make Himself known to her. I believe that God is moving her closer and closer to Him." John looked at Louis, "I pray for my children, too."

Louis turned toward his father and made eye contact. "You pray a lot don't you, Dad?"

Louis looked for sure footing; then stepped out of the ankle deep water and onto one of many large limestone rocks piled up to form the river's bank. The river barely moved at the shore. Beyond the large limestone rocks was a wide mowed lawn. It contained trees ready to bloom, gardens sprouting tulips, two gazebos, and a row of four story condominiums. The condominiums were made from old warehouses. The building's walls consisted of large glass windows, most with large balconies hanging in front of them. Some of the windows were covered with closed elegant curtains. The curtains in other windows were open revealing neatly decorated rooms.

"Sure, I suppose. Depends on what a person considers a lot." John smiled at his son as he grabbed the hand that was offered to help him out of the river.

"I guess I have a confession to make. Ever since I was little, at times I heard you pray and envied the way you talk to God; so casual, like you and I are talking now. I always wanted to pray like that, but..." Louis looked for words as the men began making their way to one of the condominiums. The snow squall suddenly stopped, and the sun and blue sky peeked out from behind the grey cloud as it continued to race southward. Louis continued, "Well, I never felt comfortable doing it."

“A long time ago Father Hemmingway taught me that before a person can have a true conversation with God, they need to have a relationship with Him; one based on spirit and truth. A true relationship with God is only obtained through Jesus.” The men entered a door at the corner of one of the condo buildings.

“Don’t I have one already? I’ve been going to church most of my life.” Louis laid the day’s catch down on the kitchen counter as John began peeling away layers of clothing and hanging them up on hooks situated next to the door they had just walked in.

“If you’re uncomfortable when trying to talk to God, then perhaps you don’t.” Louis looked his father in the eyes and then began concentrating on removing layers of clothing. John smiled at his son and continued, “A relationship with God is not based on a person’s going to church. A relationship with God is a lifelong endeavor that starts with acknowledgement of sin, asking for forgiveness through Jesus, and a commitment to live a life that is pleasing to Him.” When John was down to jeans and a white T-shirt, he began cleaning the fish on a wood section of the kitchen counter.

Louis grabbed the fishing gear and walked to the opposite side of the kitchen, opened a door, disappeared for a few minutes, and then reappeared with empty hands. He then proceeded to an island in the middle of the kitchen which contained a gas fired grill. He turned on a coffee percolator sating at the grill, and looked at it as he responded, “Acknowledgement of sin? I’ll give you that I’m not perfect, but who is? Besides what is right and wrong? Life is what we make of it. Doesn’t it make sense that God takes that into consideration?”

John threw four fillets on the grill and turned it on as he responded, “Life is...”

John was interrupted, “Life is what happens while we’re busy making plans; as crappy as it can get sometimes.” Marie entered the kitchen wearing a long pink night gown and carrying a hair brush in her hands. Louis stood and the two embraced as she continued, “What are you two doing? Talking about life and God again, John?” She looked at the grill shaking her head as Louis sat down, “Walleye and eggs for breakfast?”

John smiled and winked at his wife, “The breakfast of champions.”

Marie smiled and snorted a laugh as she grabbed a coffee mug with one hand and the coffee percolator in the other, “Coffee is breakfast for everyone else.” She took a sip and then asked, “Will we make it in time for the baptism? We don’t want to keep everyone waiting for the new godfather, even though he might smell of fish.” Marie ruffled Louis’ hair with her free hand. “Father Hemmingway wouldn’t stand for us being late and stinking.”

“There’s time to eat, shower, and shave.”

“I think for once I’ll be waiting for you two instead of you waiting for me,” Marie responded with the coffee mug in her hand as she retreated to the room she had come from. From the room she entered came the statement, “Can’t stand the smell of fish in the morning. I feel sick to my stomach.”

Within an hour they were in a Lincoln, on their way to the baptism of Marie Ann and Sid’s third child. The two hour trip to John’s hometown, the location of Father Hemmingway’s

congregation, was occasionally broken by a statement from Marie, "It'll be so good seeing Marie Ann; it's been so long." "I wonder who the baby looks like." "It'll be strange stepping into the old farmhouse, after all those years of growing up in it. I wonder how Marie Ann's decorated it. I wonder how they got around renting it out from Vinnie and Jane. Wasn't the relationship between Sid and them strained? Maybe things are better between them and Vinnie gave them a break in the price. I mean how much money does a HVAC man make anyway?" "Wouldn't it be nice if Marie Ann and the children moved closer to us? I'd be willing to pay for a house or a condo for her and the kids if they'd move closer." "Is it all right, John, if we give her some money?" "It's amazing they wanted you to be the godfather, Lew. I knew you and Sid were close in your youth, but not recently, right? I guess they named you to save face; small hometown politics and all." "I still haven't recovered from this morning. I'm beginning to think it wasn't the fish that made me feel sick."

As they grew closer to the small town the cold wind from the north was slowly replaced by a warm breeze from the south. The constant sunlight made it feel more like spring and less like winter.

The threesome arrived early. No one else had arrived at the church. Marie and John decided to walk across the street to an old, well kept diner. It was the place where the local farmers met every morning to complain about the price of seed and grain, the weather, local politics, and discuss local sports. "Hope Dad will be in there spreading the bull as always," John said with a smile. "It's a good thing my parents' home is in town. I wouldn't want an eighty year old man driving to town every day."

"That was your reason for leaving early and driving so fast? It made me feel even sicker than I did this morning." Marie responded with a crooked smile and sour look.

Louis wanted to wait in the church, "I want to seek out Father Hemmingway to go over what I need to do."

Louis entered the church; a Gothic construction of red brick, large limestone blocks, tall, narrow stain glass windows, large copper plated wooden doors, and twin enormous steeples that were crowned with copper crosses. Halfway up each of the steeples' four sides were large glass clocks. Just inside the building was a long narrow foyer containing statues of saints and paintings and pictures of Verlassens patriarchs. Louis began reading the plaques beneath each statue and painting, "Didn't know we had such a vivacious past," he said to himself.

A voice from behind him answered, "Few people do, Lew." Father Hemmingway walked into the foyer. His grey hair was neatly combed. He was in his vestments. His hands were clasped behind his back, causing his large midsection to stick out further than normal. He pointed to a large black and white picture, "There's a picture of your great, great grandfather Pohl over here."

Louis moved next to Father Hemmingway and began examining the large framed picture. A large group of men, some with picks, saws, and shovels, stood in front of the church they were now in. "Which one?"

“Right here,” Father Hemmingway answered as he pointed to a tall powerful man. Louis’s ancestor was a head taller than most of the men around him. “The Pohls were powerful men, still are. He helped build this church. What they lacked in money, these men paid in sweat.”

Louis panned the picture with bright eyes as he asked, “Is my Liniments’ ancestor in here, too?”

“To find them you’ll have to come in here.” Father Hemmingway entered the sanctuary full of many rows of elegantly carved pews over which hung long narrow lights dangling from long copper chains. A faint scent of burning candles made one look for its source. Two rows of thirty meter high Greek columns supported a multi-arched ceiling painted with exquisite biblical scenes. Colorful stained glass windows were mounted in finely carved limestone blocks. The light penetrating the window gave a sacred glow. In between the windows were lifelike painted sculptures of the Stations of the Cross. The bottom of each displayed a small bronze plaque.

Father Hemmingway walked halfway down a wall, stopped at one of the stations, and pointed up. “Yep, this one right here.”

Lew stopped behind the priest, followed his long pointing finger up, and read the plaque out loud, “Donated by the family of Lewis and Martha Liniments.” Lew moved into one of the pews to get a better look at the station. The station’s platform arched out from the wall almost a full meter and was a bit longer where it contacted the wall. On top of the flat arched platform was a woman on her knees, crying into her hands; and a man standing on top of a rock, face near an opening in the rock face. A large round stone was rolled away from the opening. Inside the opening were rumpled sheets lying on top of a rock bed. The sheets were between two angels; one at the head of the bed and one at the foot. The man pointed away from the woman.

“It displays Mary Magdalene and the risen Jesus at the empty tomb. Jesus is saying, ‘Go tell my brothers I’m risen!’ The empty cave is the symbol of hope and life.”

Louis’s gaze moved from the station to Father Hemmingway. “Just this morning my father and I were talking about life. He stated that the death of Jesus is new life for us. Now you’re telling me it’s His resurrection.”

Father Hemmingway moved into the pew behind the one Louis was standing in and sat down. “Jesus *is* life; both His death and His resurrection make new life possible for us.” Raising his eyebrows and leaning forward he continued, “Jesus is the creator. He alone created life and that’s no small thing.” Father Hemmingway slid back into the pew. “Human life is different than other life. When God created Adam and Eve he made them physical *and* spiritual. They became living souls; meaning mind, body and spirit. They were the only ones at that time on earth to have that blend. None of the rest of the animal kingdom had it.”

Louis sat down and looked back toward the priest with one arm on the top of the pew back. “How can we know that to be true?”

“It’s not just Christianity that teaches this, most religions throughout history have taught this.” Father Hemmingway saw doubt in Louis’s eyes so he continued. “If you’re asking me to show proof...,” he paused. “Lew, most people outside of a few philosophers have had little problem

admitting that man has a physical body; and most people understand that a soul is made up our thoughts, wills, and emotions even though we haven't figured out just how they work." Father Hemmingway pointed upward, opened his eyes wide, and cocked his head to one side, "But the spirit? How can a person tell if he or she has a spirit?"

"Listen Lew, I have secrets and mysteries to tell you. For humans there are two types of spirits. Everyone is born with a spirit that is apart from God, and then there is the new spirit that a person gets when they accept Jesus as the creator God. This new spirit is the only of the two that can have a close relationship, or any relationship for that matter with God. "

"Okay, I think I'm following you."

"From the moment a person is born his or her physical body begins a slow trek to dying, and our souls are corrupted. Jesus' resurrection makes it possible for both to be changed. Our physical bodies will be replaced after our resurrections, our minds, wills, and emotions can be slowly renewed in this life, and we are given a new spirit when we believe in Jesus."

Louis nodded his head. Father Hemmingway sat up straight, took his hands off his lap; exposing his palms upright, "Lew, I'm firmly convinced that people who have the second kind of spirit are the only ones who can tell that they have a spirit. I suppose that's why most don't believe that we are spirit just as much as we are body and soul. They can't tell that they have one." He placed his palms back on his knees.

Louis puckered his lips before he stated, "So, I have the former spirit and you have the latter?"

Father Hemmingway flipped his palms up as if to speak then he paused. He covered his mouth and chin with a hand before he continued, "Listen, I haven't told many people this." He looked around the sanctuary, then in a low voice he continued, "I went into the seminary for the wrong reason, and I can assure you that I was unaware of my spirit as I went through seminary school. It was the old one. It might as well have been as far as I'm concerned now."

"Why did you go into the seminary?"

The priest sighed, "To hide, to run away, perhaps as a form of punishment." He slowly shook his head side to side, "When I was a senior in high school here in town, I did a terrible thing." He took a deep breath, "Many terrible things; but one stands out in particular. Only one person living knows, your aunt Ann. She's said she's forgiven me, but she's not yet truly healed. Then when I was a young priest, I used to believe that I was the reason she didn't come to church. But when she started to come to church and she shared her pain, I began realizing and accepting things. Searching for answers, I found the truths that I'm sharing with you today. As a young priest I repented and asked for forgiveness; both from Jesus and from her."

"Oh, I'm glad I found you two," Sid Pohl burst into the church. "Something terrible has happened to Marie. Where are your father and brother?"

Chapter 11

Turn off a Faucet

Year 47

Two automobiles raced down one lane roads. The fifteen minute ride was marked by ninety degree turns off a north-south road and onto an east-west road, and then back again several times. The skewered trip was the shortest distance to Sid and Marie Ann's home because the roads had to dance around the river that flowed between their home and John's hometown. Sid drove the first car. His passengers were Louis, John, and Doc Liniments. Tony drove the second car. Tony had spent the night at his grandfather's house and thus was in the diner with his father and grandfather when Sid and Louis entered the establishment.

"We were surprised when your mother showed up at the door," Sid stated as he slowed down the automobile and proceeded to turn left. The tires squealed. "We didn't expect her," he paused, "or anyone to show up at the house. We were nearly ready to leave for church."

John looked at Sid as he stated, "She wanted to see if you needed any help with the kids."

Sid accelerated the car as he ignored John's statement and continued his explanation, "She didn't look good. She even said she didn't feel good."

"She's been saying that for a couple of days now," John stated. His back sank into the seat as the car sped up. "She said it was stress. I believe depression had something to do with it too." Doc Liniments' and Louis's concentration bounced from Sid to John and back again.

Sid looked in his rear view mirror as he continued, "I told her to sit down. She seemed all irritated. I think the boys were stressing her out. Eventually, she sat down." Sid pulled the car to the side of the road to allow a medical emergency vehicle to pass. All its lights were flashing and its horn was blaring. All those in the automobile watched the ambulance speed away. Sid quickly accelerated the car. Mud flew from underneath the tires and could be smelled in the car.

"Did you call an ambulance?"

"No. I didn't think she needed one. I thought that it would be best to get you doctors to look at her instead." The old Pohl homestead came into view as they cleared a small hill at the river's edge. It was a mile down the road. In front of the house at the road's side cut sat the ambulance with its lights still flashing. "Marie Ann must have called them after I left the house. She was in such a panic when I left. It's hard to control her when she's like that. You know how women are."

Louis's face tensed up as he stated, "Not all women are like that. It depends on..."

"What does an unmarried man know about women?" Sid interjected.

Doc Liniments placed a hand on Louis's knee, displayed a boyish smile, and slightly shook his head no.

Sid pulled into the driveway and pushed hard on the brakes. He had parked next to John and Marie's automobile. The four men exited the car, three of which raced up the back stairs and into the house. Doc Liniments moved slower. Tony's car quickly stopped behind Sid's. Tony caught up to his grandfather at the foot of the stairs and helped him climb them. He opened

the back door for his grandfather and the two entered the house's kitchen where they smelled burning toast. Tony passed through the kitchen and into the dining room.

Two young boys sat at a small table in the middle of the kitchen. On the table between bowls, glasses, milk, and juice sat a car seat holding a sleeping newborn. Tears were on the cheeks of the oldest. The boy's great grandfather slowly sat on a chair situated between the two young lads. Smiling, he revealed his false teeth, as he asked, "Are you boys eating breakfast?"

The oldest, who was three, shook his head no. Pointing to a toaster on the counter behind him he stated, "Mom burnt it again."

"Oh, well," the old man puckered his lips and raised his eyebrows. Lines on his forehead deepened, "Perhaps I can fix that." He smiled again, slowly rose, replaced the burnt toast with fresh bread, turned back toward the boys, and smiled again. "We'll have toast in no time, young men." He then shuffled toward the entrance to the dining room and peered in. Behind him he heard the outside door open. He turned around to see Father Hemmingway enter the kitchen. Following the priest was Vinnie, Jane, Larry Weller and Larry's daughter.

"What's going on? What are you people doing here?" Larry asked as he walked toward the entrance to the living room. He tilted his head to the side as he tried to look past Doc Liniments.

Doc Liniments held his ground as a siren began to blast and an engine revved up and drove away from the house. "The medics are taking Marie to the hospital."

Father Hemmingway joined the two men who were at a face off underneath the living room doorway, "Don't you gentlemen think we should help the two boys eat?" He slowly bobbed his head to the right side, opened his eyes wide, and gestured toward the lads with his right hand. The two men looked toward the boys seated at the table.

The lads' eyes were wide open; their bodies stiff. "Is Grandma going to get a baby? That's what happened when we took Mommy to the hospital."

Some in the room smiled, others chuckled. Larry laughed out loud. The laughter was followed by a moment of silence. The toast popped up causing everyone to look at it. All those who had been in the living room entered the kitchen. People's gaze moved from Jane taking the toast out of the toaster to those entering the kitchen.

"How's Marie?" Vinnie asked. Real concern commanded his composure.

"Fine. We need to see what's been bothering her these last few days. Just a few tests, then she'll be fine."

Marie Ann looked at Sid, "I want to go to the hospital."

Sid looked Marie Ann in the eyes. His body was stiff as he stated, "The baptism, what of the baptism?"

Of Water

Father Hemmingway cleared his throat before he stated, "Seems everyone's here. We could have it here."

"In the kitchen? Among the burnt toast and coffee?" Jane blurted.

"Well, we could go into the living room."

"Baptisms are meant to be held in a church," Jane insisted. Her hands were on her hips.

Father Hemmingway smiled. "Jesus and John the Baptist always held theirs in a river."

"We aren't bringing the baby down to that cold muddy river."

Father Hemmingway continued to smile as he answered, "Of course not. We could have it in the living room. Seems to me everyone's present; the godparents, the parents, and the infant."

"Marie's not."

Jane nodded her head. "We're having it here."

The infant started to cry. Marie Ann looked at Sid again, "And then I'm going to the hospital?"

Everyone looked at Sid waiting for his approval. The infant's cry intensified. "Okay."

The boys had their hands over their ears, "Mommy, can you get a quieter baby while you're there? This one's too noisy."

Father Hemmingway started to pick up the infant and then put him back down. He cleared his throat, smiled, and looked at Marie Ann, "An infant should be clean before he's baptized."

After the ceremony John, Marie Ann, and Louis headed for the hospital. Tony brought his grandfather home because the day's excitement had worn him out. After a safe delivery Tony headed for the hospital. Vinnie called his siblings and then headed for the hospital. Jane and Sid stayed with the boys. Larry and his daughter went home.

A large regional hospital, St. Marie's Verlassens General Hospital, was a half hour drive from Sid and Marie Ann's house. It had been founded by a long since dead Verlassens priest. Tony was a family practice resident working out of the hospital. Louis was in medical R&D working towards a PhD at a medical center in their hometown. The hospital and medical center were part of the same medical group.

"Mom's been in here for days now, Tony. Can't you tell us anything?" Marie Ann asked. She was seated in a room in the hospital with her two brothers and father.

"Her kidneys and lymph glands are shutting down. Also, at times it seems that her lungs have filled up with fluids and then drain again. A general breakdown on the cellular level."

"Is she getting better or worse?"

“She’s not getting better.”

“How are you treating her?”

“We’re taking care of the symptoms; but until we know what’s causing the illness, we can’t,” Tony paused, “heal her.”

“What has been done in the past?”

“We don’t know of any cases in the past. This appears to be something new.”

“But I’ve heard that there are new cases popping up all the time.”

“There have been a few other cases.”

“Have any died?”

“Yes.”

“An epidemic then? What are Mother’s chances?”

“No, it’s not an epidemic; at least not yet, not officially. Unofficially, I’d say it will soon be an epidemic, if we can’t figure out what’s causing it.”

“What are her symptoms again?” John asked. Tony gave his father Marie’s charts.

“What is it?”

“This all sounds familiar.”

“You know of a case in the past?”

“Perhaps, you might want to check the case of your grandmother.”

“Which one?”

“Both.”

“I thought Grandma Liniments died of cancer. I don’t know what Grandma Pohl died of.”

John set the charts down. “Officially my mother died of cancer, but now I’m not so sure. Grandma Pohl’s case was never understood. We don’t know what she died of. It looks very similar. Your aunts and uncles allowed them to do limited testing. Perhaps their research will help.”

“Does this mean Mother has a better chance of a quick recovery?”

“We’ll do our best.”

Marie Ann stood as she firmly stated, “Well, I’m keeping hope. I’m going to visit her. Anyone coming?”

John was the first to respond, “I have been with her all morning. I’m going home now to wash up, eat, pay some bills, and run some errands. It’s good you’re here to take my place, Marie Ann.” John took a deep breath and then rose, “On the one hand I wish she was in the hospital back home. The drive would be shorter. On the other hand it’s reassuring knowing that my boys are here to take care of her.”

Louis rose and slowly shook his head as he responded, “I’ve got to get back to the lab. If we’re going to find a cure for this, I need to stay in there as long as I can endure. I’ll stop in after you leave.”

Tony was resting his butt on the back of a chair. He shifted his weight to his legs. He stated as he headed out the door with the rest of them, “I have other patients to see. Anyway it’ll be good if you spent some time alone with Mother.”

The boys gently embraced their sister. Then they shook hands and batted their father on the back with the other hand. Marie Ann gave a strong, long hug to her father and whispered something in his ear. Their father was the last to talk, “Let’s keep meeting like this; once a week.” Then the foursome went their separate ways.

Marie Ann wore a bright floral knee length dress and white tennis shoes. Dangling at the end of her arm was a paper shopping bag. She took a deep breath, walked down the hall, smiled at and greeted the nurses, some by name, as she passed the nursing station, and entered one of the many doors in the twisting hallway. Her mother had just finished her lunch. Both smiled as Marie Ann leaned over and hugged her. .

The back of the lone hospital bed was upright and situated to look out of a lone window capturing the view of a fork in a river and a parking lot four stories below. Marie’s hair was neatly styled, although it was the shortest that Marie Ann had ever seen it.

“ This food sure has improved since the last time I was in a hospital. That was to deliver you, dear.” She smiled as she continued, “In spite of all the improvements, it still tastes bad,” she chuckled.

Marie smiled back as she slowly shook her head side to side, “Glad to see you still have that off sense of humor.” She sat down in a stained wood and leather reclining chair located next to her mother’s hospital bed. The chair was facing the bed and window. She put the bag in her lap.

“What’s in the bag?” Marie leaned forward and raised her head as if to peer in the bag although it was impossible to see inside.

Marie Ann’s eyes lit up as she smiled and quickly rocked her torso side to side. She looked like a little kid that’s about to tell a joke. “Nothing gets past you! Guess.”

Marie sank back into the bed and crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't have X-ray vision and I certainly don't have time for games."

Marie Ann raised a finger, shook it, and spoke in a high pitched voice, "Now, now, a grim attitude will keep you from getting your present." She smiled.

Marie tightened her right cheek, moved her head to the right, as she raised her eyes to the right and then stated, "Bribing me into a positive attitude?" She sighed, looked into her daughter's bright eyes, and then smiled and leaned forward whispering, "It'll work every time." The two giggled. Marie started to cough violently. When the attack subsided she asked in a somber and quiet voice, "Now, what's in the bag?"

Marie Ann pulled a quilt out of the bag. Her smile was as bright as a sunny day as she unfolded it and held it up. Its thin double border was comprised of many different colored floral square rags. The large center was as white as new snow.

Marie's eyes opened wide as she threw her head back. She smiled as she stated, "Its lovely, dear. Umm," she raised her eye brows, "Do you expect me to finish it?"

Her daughter lowered the quilt into her lap as she began to laugh loudly. "No, silly. I know that you'd just as soon sell it and buy a *finished one*," Marie raised two fingers in each hand making the sign for quotation marks as she stated 'finished one,' "before you'd even think of picking up a needle." Marie Ann took a deep breath, "It's a signing quilt."

"A what?"

"A signing quilt." She pulled a black flow pen out of the bag. She began to write something in the white area. "See? Everyone who visits you can sign it. It'll give you something to read besides all those religious books that Dad's given you."

"Oh, heavens, " Marie Ann smiled and placed her hand over her daughter's hand. "What a thoughtful gift! Thanks." After a brief silence Marie continued, "Marie Ann, you're right. Nothing gets past a mother. I've been concerned for you."

"You've always been *concerned* for me."

"Seriously, something's bothering me and it's more than my illness. Is everything all right at home?"

"Yes."

"Don't lie to your dying mother."

"You're not dying, Mother."

"If you say so. Now, what's wrong? It's Sid, right?" Marie Ann looked down in silence.

Marie continued, "His authority over you becoming more than you can bear?"

Marie Ann quickly answered, "It's not like that."

"Then what's it like?"

"When we married I felt very comfortable under his protecting and loving umbrella." She stared out the window and into her recent past. "I preferred the comfort." She sighed and looked into her mother's eyes. "Slowly he changed. His love dissipated. Now all that is left is a protecting umbrella, and it's not protecting me from thundershowers and a scorching sun anymore. It's keeping water and sunlight from me. I'm slowly drying up and my soul's wilting away. He's rough and uncaring. He barks at me, ordering me around, and is always complaining about everything I do and don't do. I don't satisfy him anymore. He goes to bars where he chases skirts and flirts. He raises his fists towards me and he ignores the children." Marie Ann started to sob in her hands. "Mother, what can I do to restore my marriage?"

"Nothing."

Between sobs Marie Ann stated, "Don't say that, Mother! Don't say that."

"Marie Ann, I knew your soul, your mind and emotions of love and hope, were a part of your wedding. But frankly dear, your marriage was built on the wrong emotions and the wrong ideas of marriage. Furthermore, it wasn't built on God and His plans for marriage."

"What's that supposed to mean? When did you start putting God into your sentences?"

"The word God has always been a part of my vocabulary, mostly as a curse. Then, I suppose, it was during your wedding preparation. You know, I didn't want you to go through with it. But you were as stubborn as I was when I was your age. So I slowly began to accept that you were going to marry Sid. I felt hopeless and depressed. This started me down the river toward God. Your father was a great help."

"You and Dad are getting along now?"

"We always got along, dear, although it's more because of him than me."

"I always knew that."

"Yes, your father has always been good to me. For most of our marriage I've resented the fact that he was not around the house as much as I wanted. It's strange you know. On the one side of the river I wanted him to make as much money as he could make; and on the other side I didn't want him to be away from me to do it. I wanted to be the center of his world. I was impractical and selfish. A person can't have their feet on both sides of the river. I kind of knew that, but I didn't want to accept it. That led me to make a very foolish decision; and that decision led to another; and that to another."

"You mean the abortion?"

"How did you know? What else do you know?"

"There's more to it?"

"I really don't want to relive my failures, but yes, there's more. It's all way behind me and that is where it's going to stay. What I want to say to you is that at times, when one is down and out of the marriage, it takes the other to hold it up. For me it was your father. But this only works if that person knows and lives by what really makes a marriage work, and grow, and thrive. Lasting love and marriage doesn't just happen because they're good things. Maybe if we weren't sinful that would be true, but that's not the case. Because we all sin, we at times will hurt the ones we love, and so in those times, it takes effort to make a marriage work. There are times that at least one of you has to say, 'I'm going to stick with it in spite of...'. The one who makes that decision will have to sacrifice and take the pain caused by the other. Your father did it and I love him all the more for it too."

"So there is hope for Sid and me?"

"Only if there is a change in perspective, and I don't see that happening."

"I don't know, Mother. It all sounds so confusing."

"Perhaps you should talk to your father. He explains things better than I do."

Low voices filtering in from the hall blended with beeps and chirps from medical equipment and a ticking clock on the wall, echoing off the high ceiling in the heavily occupied hospital room. An unpleasant hospital odor; a combination of detergent, body odor, and stale dry air filled the room. Marie appeared uncomfortable as she lay asleep on the metal bed. Her hair was ruffled and her face hung on her skull. Her breathing was slow and infrequent. A multicolored quilt signed by many people covered her body. The quilt barely moved as she breathed.

John was seated in a small wood and leather recliner at the head of the bed. He would have been looking down at the floor if his eyes lids were open. A book was lying in his lap.

Seated in plastic and metal folding chairs next to him were Louis and a young lady Louis had been dating for the last several months. Louis gazed out of the window behind the bed's headboard. A river, a parking lot, the horizon, and the sky were his only views. In his lap and at a small end table next to him sat stacks of lab reports. The young lady was flipping through a magazine.

On the other side of the bed at a small round table sat Tony and his fiancée. Tony was in hospital garb looking through charts. His fiancée was working on a crossword puzzle. Marie Ann was also seated at the table. She was apprehensively staring at her mother. Occasionally she looked at the monitors behind her mother.

Everyone turned their attention to the door as a group of people entered the room; Kate, Vince and Jane, Al and his wife, and Addie. Marie Ann stood up and hugged Addie, "Oh, good, Addie, you made it. Thanks for picking her up at the airport."

The rest in the room greeted Addie with a hug. Addie's attention turned toward Marie. Tears formed in her eyes as she stated with a quiver in her voice, "Oh God, how is she?"

Tony placed an arm around Addie's shoulder, "Her vital signs are weak. Her breathing is weak and erratic. There's not much time."

"Oh, Marie."

Everyone stared down at Marie for a brief moment in silence until Kate spoke up, "Her river course is leading her into the next life. Soon she'll be with our Lord and all the saints."

John took his wife's hand as he continued the thought, "The Lord will take good care of her. She'll be much happier where her boat is taking her. Yet, I am at," he took a deep breath before continuing, "It pains me so to lose such a good friend and wife." He pulled a tissue from its box and blew his nose; others sniffled.

Marie's children and husband left the room and either stood in the hall or walked to a nearby waiting area, giving Marie's siblings and in-laws time to say their goodbyes. John and his children said nothing to each other. Their conversations were emptied hours ago.

Al was the first to speak up, "Well, Hippo Hips," he smiled. Marie's composure remained unchanged. His smile and shoulders dropped. "You always had a retort for that." He tried to smile, "Weeble Wobble. There, I said one for you."

Marie coughed without opening her eyes. It sounded more like a gurgle. A slurred and muffled, "I'm all right," followed.

"You've put up quite a fight, but I fear you're sailing out of this life," Al said, then wiped his cheeks, "I'll miss you, Sis." Al quickly exited the room; followed by his wife.

Kate put her hands on Marie. "Seems like you're the center of attention even now, Sis. Not the best way to get it, though. You never got that part right, did you?" She smiled. "I remember that day on the beach. You were worried that you would never have children. You ended up having three beautiful children. You've left a good legacy. You can bet that they'll take good care of John. You don't have to worry about that." Marie lay motionless; her eyes closed. "You always told me that you wanted to get to know Father. Well, you'll be meeting him and Mother soon." Kate moved up close to Marie's ear, "I'm sure she's forgiven you about that vase by now. Still, I wouldn't bring it up if I were you." Kate kissed her sister's cheek.

Kate's husband, Bob Kirk said, "See you soon, slugger. The time between now and forever is short." Then he and his wife left the room.

Addie, Vinnie and Jane were the last in the room. Addie sat on the leather and wood chair next to the bed. She took her sister's hand. "Do me a favor, sister? When you get to the other shore tell Norm, me and the kids said we miss him, but we're doing fine. The girls married good men. Jay's had his troubles. He's got that Hawthorne nature. But he's doing well in an import business now."

Addie took a deep breath that quivered when she exhaled. "Oh, we had good times didn't we, girl? I'll never forget that toga party." She smiled. "Oh, and I never cheated at cards no matter what you think. You'll see that soon enough. I'm just luckier than you," she sighed, "except

when it came to men. You could always get 'em 'with a wink and a wiggle', as you always told me. You don't know how I envied you when you said that."

Marie muddled a coughed again; followed by a barely tangible, "I'm all right."

Addie stopped moving. She looked towards her brother and sister-in-law. They were standing in the farthest corner doing their best to not look at Marie and Addie. Addie moved in so close to Marie's ear that her lips almost touched it. "Now you'll get to see the little one. Don't worry, she won't be angry. She'll be glad to finally meet you. Please believe me; you don't have to be afraid of meeting her."

Marie's eyes remained closed while her lips moved, looking like she was talking. However, air did not exit her mouth. Addie sat back in the chair and looked at Marie's lips trying to figure out if she was trying to tell her something.

After a moment Addie tightened her lips as she glared at her brother. Vinnie looked down. She then shifted her glance to Jane without moving her head. Jane's composure did not change. Addie looked at her sister again and stood up. Addie's breathing lost cadence, becoming slow, audible, and infrequent. Her erratic breathing mutated into a pout and sniffles, and finally sobs. Addie shuffled out of the room.

For a long time the only thing heard in the room were the beeps and chirps from medical equipment and the ticking clock. Sunlight penetrated the window illuminating floating dust particles and Marie's quilt. Vinnie's gaze shifted from the quilt to the river and the parking lot. Vinnie noticed a few people walking to their cars and a few others sitting on benches looking on the river. Vinnie longed to be among them.

After what seemed like hours to Vinnie, he took a deep breath and spoke to Marie. "We've gone through a lot, haven't we? Not all of it good. Actually, most of it not good." Vinnie stepped up to the foot of the bed and sat down in one of the folding chairs there. "If we could go back and do it all over again, I would try to make things better." He placed his forearms on the quilt, his elbows on the footboard, and looked at Marie for the first time. "I've often thought of that you know; how to make things go better between us. But I don't know how."

Vinnie paused and listened to a movement behind him. He did not turn around to look at his wife. He pulled his forearms off the quilt and gripped the footboard; sitting up straight as he did so. "Is anything different for other families? I've never told you about my in-laws."

Vinnie paused to listen for something behind him. He heard nothing. "This may surprise you, but, for the most part, they're nice people. I enjoy the close relationship with Larry; although it's mostly business with him. He wears his cards close to his chest. I feel sorry for him sometimes. I guess he's that way because he's been brow beaten by his mother and sister, Joyce. He doesn't know how and is afraid of making too close of a relationship with people. Jane tries to stick up for him, with little success."

Vinnie paused to listen behind him. Again, he heard nothing. "Anyway there's as much tension and infighting with them as there has been with us. I guess that's the way life is with relationships. We want things to go better with those we know, but most of the time we make things worse." Vinnie paused. "Well, at least that's true for you and me."

Vinnie crossed his arms over his chest and sighed, "Recently, I've tried hard to correct some of the errors I've made; like with Sid. That is why I've rented Ma's house out to him; quite cheaply too. I thought it would change my relationship with him; maybe even change his hard attitude. So far he hasn't changed much." Vinnie looked up, "No, he hasn't changed much at all. I guess maybe too much damage has been done. He's still bitter at Jane and me. Sometimes, I..."

Vinnie paused to listen behind him again. He thought he heard something, but he couldn't tell for sure. He refrained from turning around. He looked at Marie who lay unchanged. He wondered if she was listening to him. In a way he felt relieved. This would have been much harder if she had been awake.

He said to himself, "This would be easier if my wife weren't here." Vinnie tilted his head back slightly and took a deep breath. He slowly turned his head around; having to turn his torso to get a complete view behind him. "She's not here," he whispered, "When did she leave?"

He got up and looked out the door. She was not in the hall. He turned around and looked at his sister. He paused. Suddenly, Marie started a coughing fit; fluids gurgled in her throat. When it did not subside he yelled out into the hall, "Help! Someone, help." He ran to the bed and pushed a nurse panic button.

Within a few seconds one nurse entered the room, "You'll have to leave, sir."

Vinnie squeezed by a second nurse coming in the room as she entered it. Vinnie quickly jogged down the hall; his body tense. He didn't want to run due to a lifetime of being told not to run indoors. He entered a waiting room where most of his family and his wife were gathered. They were sharing stories of their past. "Marie's had a coughing fit, much worse than before. They told me to leave."

Louis, Tony, and John hurriedly left the room. A few minutes later Louis and Tony returned. "She's stopped coughing. She won't be with us much longer. Dad said he wanted five minutes with her. Then he said we should all come down."

Marie was pale, her breaths deep and infrequent. Her eyes were shut. The door to the hall was shut. John, the lone person in the room was seated in the chair, hunched over the bed, looking at his wife when he began, "Marie I've told you this many times before and I say it again, I love you. I've always loved you. Even a long time ago, when you cheated on me, yes I knew, there's no reason to be surprised."

John paused then continued, "Even then I loved you. And you knew that too, didn't you, back then, you knew that I knew, and you knew that I loved you. I never knew why you cheated. Well, superficially I knew why you cheated on me; you didn't like my being away from the home, you felt that I wasn't giving you the attention you deserved, you felt I was being selfish, and you resented being at home. You were always the outgoing type. But those weren't the real reasons why you cheated. The real reason was you came to the realization that even though you had gotten all you wanted, all you thought in your youth was making you sad and empty, you still were sad and empty. You had money, a new home, beautiful children, the man you wanted to marry, and status in life. You lived the opposite of what you did in your youth. Life was what you always wanted it to be; yet you weren't satisfied. So you sought satisfaction

in the arms of another man. You cheated on me and it hurt me. You don't know how hard it hurt me. Then people began dying on me. And then you had the abortion."

John sat back in his chair, "I hated that and I was angry. I never told you that. I never told you how hurt I was, how I hated what you did, how I was so angry." John looked down, "Not until now."

John leaned closer to the bed and his wife again. "But that was true for only a short while. God came into my life during that period and I learned what real love is. I learned what life really is. I learned to love you much better than I had loved you before. I prayed for you, and I trusted. Not you, I trusted God. And that was more than enough. It was hard to love unconditionally; many times it was hard. Yet, God was with me the whole time. He gave me life. He gave me strength. He gave me hope. After several years he answered my prayers and our marriage went down a pleasant and completely fulfilling road. You were brought into his fold."

John sighed, "And now you're going ahead of me. I don't know what I'll do now that you're going. We've spent so much time together. But God is with me, and you'll be with Him. And someday I'll be joining you. It's true we won't be married; no one is in heaven. That really doesn't matter in heaven. Yet, we'll be together and share much together. We'll be free from these fleshly bodies of sin and imperfection. Life will be so much better. The greatest thing is we'll have a perfect relationship with God. I'll love to share that with you for eternity."

John smiled, "I am so glad that you learned of and accepted the truths of God these last few years. It made our marriage wonderful."

John brushed his wife's hair with his hand as he continued, "Don't worry about the kids. I'll pray for them as I've always done; just as I prayed for you and hoped. So I'll keep praying for them."

A light knock came on the door. John answered, "Come in."

Everyone filed into the room, some stood around the bed. The small room was cramped. Time between Marie's breaths became longer and longer, weaker and weaker.

Suddenly Marie's eyes opened wide and her face came to life. Louis stated excitedly, "Her eyes are open!" Those who were not around the bed rushed to it.

Marie said nothing. No one said anything. The clock sounded like a drum. Marie looked at her husband a long time. Then her head slowly turned; looking at everyone standing around the bed. She said nothing. No one said anything. Marie kept turning her head at a steady pace, never once blinking her eye lids. When she reached the last person her eyes closed. Then there was silence; there was pure silence. Then Marie released the air in her lungs and her chest collapsed. The exhale seemed to last a minute.

Tony's fiancée blurted out, "Oh, her last breath. She's dead." Some of the ladies whimpered. Slowly one by one people left the room.

Someone stated, "Someone get the lead nurse."

Louis was the last in the room, looking at his mother's corpse. Marie took another breath that sounded irregular. Louis asked the nurse as she entered, "She's still breathing? Is she still alive?"

"No that's just the muscles relaxing; the brain is sending out a last few meaningless signals. Please leave the room for a few minutes. I have a few things to do before they take her out. You can come back in when I'm done if you want."

Louis looked at his mother. She looked different; not like his mother at all. "No. My mother's gone on. She's not here anymore." Tony left the room.

Chapter 12

Chemicals

Year 48

"No running!" Marie Ann yelled at her two oldest boys. She was seated in an aluminum framed plastic strapped reclining chair. A flowered cushion was on top of the chair's plastic straps. The back of the reclining chair was bent up, allowing her to watch her two oldest boys swim in a large blue watered subterranean pool to her right and her one year old splash in a shallow plastic wading pool in front of her. The smell of chlorine and flowers filled the air.

She placed a magazine on a small, short metal framed and round glass topped table next to her. She grabbed a glass of iced tea that was next to a bottle of suntan lotion, a book, and some magazines. After taking a drink she placed it back on the table and picked up the book. She wore a bright multi-colored, wide brimmed straw hat and a bright blue two piece swim suit.

In a sweet voice that parents often lovingly use with infants and toddlers, Marie Ann asked, "Having fun, Adam?" The little boy looked up at her and smiled as he moved his legs in the two inch deep water. He leaned forward and splashed the water with his hands and shook his head. Marie Ann smiled back at him before she opened the book to read it.

Mary and Marsha, Sid's twin sisters, were also at the pool. Mary was in the wading pool playing with Adam. She was wearing a flowered two colored swim suit. She had long straight thick, dark brown hair and dark eyes. She was short and plump enough to make her swimsuit seem too small.

Marsha was sleeping in a reclining chair next to Marie Ann. The small round table was between her and Marie Ann. Marsha had long straight bleached blond hair and dark eyes. She wore a pink one piece suit with a towel over her abdomen in an effort to hide the fact that she was nearly eight months pregnant.

After a few minutes of reading, Marie Ann put the book in her lap. She wiped her brow before looking into a cloudless, hazy late August sky. She looked at Mary before she spoke. "I must have been in the sun too long. I'm not feeling well."

"Why don't you go sit on the porch for a while? I'll watch the boys."

Of Water

They were at the farm of Vince and Jane. The swimming pool was between the house and a large white colored wooden shed that contained farming equipment. A porch lined the front and back of the house. The pool was on the side of the house. A flower garden was between the pool and the house.

“I think I will.”

Marie Ann began making her way down a straight red bricked sidewalk leading to the stairs that gave entrance to the covered back porch. As she approached the porch she began smelling barbecue chicken and burning hickory and oak. The smell that would normally make her mouth water instead began to make her stomach turn. The nauseating feeling grew with each step forward. Each step told her that her weight was increasing, no matter how illogical it seemed.

The voices of the men on the porch began to sound like buzzing bees. Her vision blurred, head began to pound, and her eyes became filled with water. She used both hands to clutch her head, knocking her hat off in the process. The pounding in her head grew in pain and intensity. Her stomach rolled. She doubled over; stepping off the bricked sidewalk with her right foot. The slight difference in height between the grass and the sidewalk made her believe she was falling to the right. She quickly tried to regain her balance by moving her left foot onto the grass. Instead, her foot landed half on the sidewalk and half on the grass. The posture that would only be a problem for her three small children became a problem for her. Shearing pain rose from her ankle up her leg, through her knee and into her thigh. When the pain reached her stomach she toppled over.

The fall to the hard sidewalk seemed to last forever. Everything began to fade, her pains, and all sounds and smells. As she fell, Marie Ann watched slab ants scurrying across the sidewalk. They slowly grew in size. They repulsed and frightened her. She wanted to turn her pale smooth face to the side, but her muscles did not cooperate. She noticed her shadow slowly darken the sidewalk and shade the ants. She felt satisfied that she could help the ants stay cool on such a hot summer day, but hoped that someone would knock the ants off her face when she hit the bricks.

Like flying rocks crack an automobile windshield, overwhelming pain instantly spread from her face to every cell in her body when she collided with the sidewalk.

Then, there was blackness. Yet, Marie Ann was aware of herself; it was as if she was daydreaming; unaware of where her body was because her mind had traveled somewhere else. Slowly her eyes focused as a light grew in intensity; slowly illuminating her surroundings as if the sun was rising at dawn.

Marie Ann looked around her; astonished at a garden filled with plants and trees of great beauty and full of pleasant smelling and tasting fruits, vegetables, spices, and herbs. The air was cool and moist; the ground soft and rich.

She walked toward the pleasant sound of a slow moving river. She reached a bank consisting of sand and small round pebbles. The water in the river was as clear as crystal; sparkling like a finely crafted diamond. A thin mist rose from the surface. Water droplets formed on the

leaves of the plants along the river and on her skin causing both her skin and the leaves to glisten.

Marie Ann looked upriver toward the headwaters. The river flowed down the face of a large rock plateau on which stood a tall building. The floors and walls of the building looked like smooth ivory; fluorescent with shades of emerald. At the center of the building Marie Ann could barely make out a throne that was surrounded by a light brighter and purer than the sun. Although the light did not burn her, she could not look at it for more than a brief moment due to a feeling of shame and inadequacy.

Marie Ann entered the slow moving river and walked in its cool healing water heading downstream. At first the river was ankle deep; further down it was knee deep; further down it was waist deep. This puzzled Marie Ann because it was fed by no visible tributaries. Eventually, Marie Ann was forced to tread neck deep in the river. She considered swimming to the shore; but its banks now seemed too far away. "Besides," she told herself, "the water makes me feel new and energetic."

The banks of the river had been consistently lined with tall lush trees bearing many types of fruits and flowers. The lush trees, however, stopped suddenly at a perfectly straight wall. The tall wall extended perpendicular to the river, starting at both river banks and traversed into the distance as far as Marie Ann could see.

The lush side of the wall was constructed of marble and ivory, periodically covered by flowers, fruits, and berry bearing vines. When Marie Ann's body was in between the walls that started on either bank, her skin tingled. Then suddenly a flashing light blinded her and her body rose higher out of the water exposing her chest.

After she floated past the in-between point, Marie Ann turned back to see what had caused the strange sensation. All she could see was a flashing light that emanated from a luminous twisting and turning sword.

The other side of the wall, the side Marie Ann was now floating past, was made of coarse black and grey cracked rock. Twisting thick vines bearing long thorns covered the wall endlessly. The ground on the other side of the wall consisted of sickly twisted trees; most bearing neither fruit nor flowers.

On one bank next to the thorny wall worked a man. On the opposite bank next to the thorny wall worked a woman. Each would have been naked if parts of their bodies were not covered by animal hide sown together by vines. Occasionally one would angrily yell to the other, but Marie Ann could not understand what they were saying, or what language they spoke.

The work the man and woman engaged in was identical. Without ceasing except to exchange coarse words, the couple filled buckets with ash that was piled up next to each bank and threw the ash into the water. They did not notice Marie Ann floating downstream. The ash discolored and thickened the water, causing it to give off a stench that reminded Marie Ann of the sulfur water that could still be pumped from old Verlassens wells.

The tainted water burned Marie Ann's skin. So she began to make her way to the shore. She decided to land on the bank that the woman worked on because she feared the man. And yet,

Of Water

because the woman's disposition also made her uneasy, Marie Ann decided to land quite a way downstream from her.

Wading in the thick acid water weakened Marie Ann. Concentration was needed to fight growing nausea. Crawling out of the water required all the strength she could muster. Regurgitating her stomach contents, she collapsed on the stony bank. Resting seemed like a good plan of action. Contemplating what she was experiencing made her long to be on the other side of the wall again.

"How can I get back?" she asked herself as she lay on the shore.

"Do you understand what you have just seen?"

Marie Ann quickly rose to her feet and looked in the direction of the voice; a glimmering being was approaching her. The identity looked human, but clearly was not. As the being walked toward her, it carried itself with dignity and grace. Marie Ann wondered if it was an angel.

"Do not be afraid The LORD God, the Creator of mankind sent me to you. I must show you more before it is too late."

"Am I dead? Was that heaven? Is this hell?"

"No, to all your questions."

"Then where am I?" Marie Ann motioned to the bleak landscape before her.

"This is a vision, an answer to questions you have asked; a chance for you to decide. You must decide soon. You do not have much time. You need to decide if you will believe what your parents have been telling you. You see the vision is gone now." The scene before Marie Ann faded. Then the angel explained to her what she had just experienced ending with, "Soon physical life will be taken from you. Physical life is the only time allotted for humans to decide. You need to decide before physical life ends. Now I must leave you."

Marie Ann regained partial consciousness. The smells told her that she was in a hospital even before she opened her eyes. She lay in a bed, weak, uncomfortable, and light-headed. She heard sharp noises. Slowly she came to realize that the recognizable voices were engaged in a vigorous debate. She slowly opened her eyes, but it was some time before she could discern her surroundings.

Eventually, she was able to confirm that a disconcerted Sid stood on one side of her bed; his arms crossed over his chest and his face hard as stone. He was staring at her brothers who were on the opposite side of the bed. Intravenous tubes hanging from several bottles feed unknown liquids into her arm. Marie Ann turned to look at her brothers. They looked stressed and tired.

Marie Ann's head moving caught Louis' eye. He forced a smile, "Welcome back."

"I'm going to die."

Of Water

The three men blinked, looked at Marie Ann, and then looked at each other. Sid barked, "What have you told her?"

"This is the first time she's been awake," Louis looked down at Marie Ann, "You are not going to die. We have new..."

"Enough, this is between me and her."

Before Sid could finish Marie Ann looked toward the ceiling and stated, "I want to go to heaven. That is what I've decided. My parents are right." The three men stared at Marie Ann.

"Listen, this is between me and her and her doctor. You two are not her doctors."

"Since when?"

Another doctor walked in the room. Louis and Tony looked at each other before Tony asked, "And you are?"

"Marie Ann's primary doctor," he walked up behind Sid with his arms clasped behind his back.

Sid placed his arm on the man's shoulder, "He'll be taking care of her. You two can go."

"Look! Mother and Grandmother are here, too," Marie Ann smiled. The four men looked at Marie Ann who was looking toward the end of the bed. Louis and Tony followed her gaze as she continued, "I have what they had."

"So you *have* been talking to her." Sid emphasized the "have."

"The drugs have made her delusional. They're to be stopped immediately. She doesn't need them."

"That is not for you to decide."

"What have you said to her?"

"We have said nothing to her. But she does need to know that she has a chance, a good chance. The new treatments show good..."

"Your new treatments have the potential for terrible side effects; she could be in a wheelchair the rest of her life, unable to recognize even her children, unable to care for herself. They have to decide." The new arrival was not permitted to finish.

Sid clenched both his hands and shouted, "Enough, Doctor!" The new arrival looked wide eyed at Sid, puckered his lips, but said nothing else. Sid grasped one of the new arrival's shoulders, "You've said enough." Sid released his grip from the doctor and took a deep breath. "It's not a debatable matter. Don't say any more to them. They're off the case. This is not their hospital. She is not their patient." Sid looked at Louis and Tony pushing his chin out. He pointed to the door, "OUT! NOW!"

Louis and Anthony took deep breaths and stood their ground, staring Sid down. Sid cocked his head back slightly before he calmly stated, "All right, I'll talk to you two later. But you have to leave the room now. If you don't, I'll have the head nurse call security." He picked up a corded remote that was lying on Marie Ann's bed and slowly moved his finger over the nurse call button.

Louis and Anthony looked at each other and then left the room. As they exited, Sid told the new arrival loud enough for them to hear, "I do not allow you to make contact with them at any time, understand?"

Then, Sid walked towards the door and shut it.

"I want her sedated," he smiled, "No pain, understand?"

"But she doesn't have any pain. This..."

"Sedated! Understand?" Sid clenched his teeth.

The doctor studied Sid's eyes before he answered, "Understood."

"You're a good friend. I'm sure glad I have been able to help you out," Sid smiled cockily, "Remember how I helped you out?" he paused and smiled, "Friend?"

"I do."

"Don't forget it." Sid stiffened, "And don't worry. I'm going to talk to my sisters, to get their legal advice." Sid placed a hand on each of the doctor's shoulders, "We're going to do this by the book. No mistakes."

Sid turned to leave the room and as he reached out to open the door, Marie Ann spoke up, "The mistake is that you're on the wrong side of the wall." Sid paused but did not turn around. Marie continued, "How long will you throw ash into the river?" The doctor studied Marie Ann's eyes. She was intently looking at Sid's back. "It'll kill you."

Without turning around Sid cleared his throat and then stated, "Doctor, she's babbling. We can't have her talking like that. Isn't there a way you can stop her from talking?"

"I can't risk too much sedation," the doctor stated as he pushed a few buttons on the IV regulator. He waited until Marie Ann's eyes closed before he continued, "You're brother-in-laws will no doubt claim malpractice." He rolled his eyes and rubbed his chin, "But a feeding tube," he nodded his head and smiled, "a feeding tube would keep her quiet and no one would suspect that that is its real purpose. I could arrange a meal that her body will reject and then order the feeding tube."

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Sid left the room, preceded down the hall with confident steps, and stopped before he entered a small room. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a brief moment, and then entered the room closing the door behind him. Inside sat his parents and sisters. He slowly walked over to them.

“How is she?”

Sid quietly sat down on a couch between his adopted mother and father. His twin sisters sat on matching chairs. Sid placed his forearms on his legs, and looked down at the floor. His mother placed her hand on his back, “Are you all right?”

Sid straightened up, swallowed hard, and looked deeply into her eyes, “You’ve recently told me that I’m a part of the family again.”

“You are family,” Vinnie spoke up.

Sid turned to look at him and then at his sisters, “Am I?” They nodded yes.

Sid indicated a slight smile and then licked his lips, “Then I’m going to need your help, the help that only a family can provide.”

“We’ll help you in any way we can.”

“I have a hard decision to make,” Sid took a deep breath and quivered slightly. He tried to force tears, but they would not come, “Marie Ann is dying.”

Tears formed in his sisters’ eyes, “She’s so young. Will this plague ever end? How can we help? Watch the boys?”

“Thanks, that would be a good start,” Sid smiled and took his mother’s hand. He licked his lips and swallowed hard again, “This thing could drag on so long. I don’t think the boys and I can handle it.” Sid turned to his father, “You’ve seen for yourself what this does, how long it lasts.”

Vinnie nodded yes as he softly stated, “It’s so long and drawn out.”

“Her doctor says it’s changed a lot since your sister passed away. There’s much pain involved.” He turned toward his mother with wide eyes and a twisted face, “I don’t think I can endure it, nor the boys.”

Vinnie asked, “You mean her brothers? They’re her doctors, right? They say the disease is getting worse?”

“Her brothers are not here. None of her family is here. I’ve tried to get a hold of them.” Sid looked at his father, “Dad, could you go and try to get a hold of her father for me?”

“Sure, anything.”

Sid waited until Vinnie left the room. Then he looked at the three remaining people in the room. He let the room remain silent for a while, wanting to make his next words have their most emotional impact. Then he looked at his sisters, “Would you be willing to give legal advice to her doctor?”

“You mean her brothers?”

“No. Her doctor’s with her now. I don’t know where they are, what their thoughts are,” he paused and then slowly stated, “and I don’t want to know.”

His sisters looked at their mother. She slightly squinted her eyes and tilted her head towards Sid before she asked, “What do you have in mind, Sid?”

“I want what’s best for the boys. They,” he paused, “and I can’t go through a long drawn out affair. I want to hasten her parting. I want her to die humanly, quickly, and legally. Will you help?”

“The doctor?” his mother started to ask.

Sid cut her off, “The doctor is in full agreement.”

His mother looked at Sid and then her two daughters. After what seemed to Sid like hours Jane stated, “It is the right thing to do.”

Chapter 13

Bye Bye Love

Year 49

Beep. Beep. Beep. The cadence of the medical equipment irritated John. He wiped a tear from his cheek as he looked down at his daughter. She looked placid to him. “How can this be happening? Why?” he spat out to no man. He was talking with his Maker.

Vince stopped at the entrance of the hospital room when he overheard John’s words. He did not know if he should enter. “Should I give him time to deal with his emotions and faith, or come to his side to offer comfort?” he asked himself. He chose the former, but could not resist listening to his past best friend.

“It should be me. I can handle it. I don’t have much to live for like she does. She has her children,” John paused, “her husband, a full life ahead of her.” John grabbed his bald forehead and wiped the sweat away as he continued, “She tries so hard to be a good person. She’s come a long way in understanding the truth. She’s so close to accepting.” John sat down in a chair next to the bed.

Vince slowly backed into the hallway as he thought, “John’s not questioning his faith, he’s pleading for her.” A sharp pain entered his chest.

John continued unaware that Vince was listening to his prayer, “Will you take her before she accepts? Why not take me instead?” He paused and straightened his back. After a brief moment he sighed. “No, you’re right. I’m wrong. As you, my Lord, said, ‘your will be done.’”

Vince quickly retreated down the hall without noticing that he passed Louis and Tony. They did not notice Vince because they were engaged in conversation.

John was awkwardly brushing his daughter's hair when Louis and Tony arrived at the door. They stopped at the threshold and Tony asked, "Father, is it all right if we enter?"

John answered without stopping at his attempt to straighten his daughter's hair, "Sure." He turned toward them and smiled, "And if you can help with the brush, it would be much appreciated." He pointed to the rather large bald spot on top of his head, "It's been a while since I had to deal with hair, and it's been even longer since I brushed her hair. The last time she was in maybe first or second grade."

As the boys entered John continued, "I wonder why no one's bothered brushing her hair." He looked around the room as he said, "I've been here for nearly an hour and you boys are the first family I've seen come near the room. Have either of you seen Sid or his parents?"

The brothers shook their heads no as Tony answered, "We haven't been in the room since Sid kicked us out."

John stopped brushing and looked at Tony and Louis, "What? He can't kick out her doctor."

Tony went to a small table that contained Marie Ann's medical records while Louis stood at the foot of the bed. Louis was the one who answered, "Tony's not her doctor any more. Sid threatened to call security. Dad, I'm not sure what's happening here, but I don't like it."

John looked in the direction of Tony and then resumed brushing his daughter's hair, "That wasn't in here when I arrived. When the nurse brought it to record her progress I asked her to leave it. She was hesitant; until I told her that I used to be a doctor and that I'm her father. I haven't had a chance to look at it yet. What does it tell us?"

Tony flipped through a few more pages before he answered, "She has it all right. For the most part, the doctor's dealing with it the way we have since the outbreak last year. Yet, with the recent work that Lew's group has been conducting, we know he could be doing more." Tony stopped looking through the book.

Louis continued the conversation, "Dad, we've been trying to get a hold of her doctor, but he's not returning our calls."

Outside the room and down the hall was a nursing station that contained room monitors. All the rooms in this area of the hospital had cameras to allow the nurses and the doctors to peer into the patients' rooms without leaving the station. Marie Ann's doctor approached the one displaying Marie Ann's room. Concern crossed his face when he recognized the room's occupants and what they were doing. He turned to the lead nurse, "Where's the chart for room 725?"

She quickly looked around the station and then turned to a young nurse standing inside the station with questioning eyes. The other nurse answered, "Not here, Doctor. It's in the room."

"Why? It's supposed to be down here except when you're in the patient's room filling it in. Why is it in there?"

“Another,” the young nurse stuttered, “I mean her...” she was not permitted to finish by the doctor.

He raised his voice, “What? Get it right now! Do you expect me to run around the hospital to look for every patient’s chart?” He sternly looked at all the nurses at the station as he continued, “Every chart is to remain at the station per protocol.” The younger nurses lowered their eyes. The older glared at the young nurse who had made the mistake.

As the young nurse started to leave for her station the doctor added, “And give her a bath and change her sheets.” He knew that this would vacate the room. The doctor left the station quickly, making his way to the room that he hoped contained Sid.

When John, Tony and Louis were leaving Marie Ann’s room, Louis smiled as he stated, “I’m going back to the office. I’m expecting some test results. They should be in by now. If all goes well, Marie Ann may be the first to be cured.” Louis had always had a quick pace compared to others. He went ahead of this brother and father and disappeared around a corner.

John turned to Tony, “I’m heading back to the condo. I have a few phone calls to make. Kate, Al, and Addie need to know. They’ll probably visit her together. That’s often their way. I’m sure glad Addie moved back to town after your mother passed away. Too bad about Jay.”

“I have my own patients to get back to. I’ve always hated the long drive between our places. Dad, why don’t you move back to your hometown?”

“Maybe after this is all over I will. It will make seeing Marie Ann’s children easier. And as God is my witness, when she pulls through I’m going to pay more attention to her and her sons.” John tightly pressed his lips together.

“I don’t know if it’s right for us to be here. You heard what Sid said. He doesn’t want her to have any visitors,” Al stated as he and his two sisters ate in the hospital cafeteria. He then proceeded to take a bite of a tuna sandwich.

Kate pointed a spoon in Al’s direction. It bounced as she responded, “John insisted that we come. I’ve always respected the man, which is more than I can say about Sid. The boy’s always been up to no good.”

Addie set down a cup of ice water, “Listen to you two. This visit is for Marie Ann, not for Sid or John.”

“Sid says she’s been out of it since she was taken to the hospital. What good can we do for her if she’s out of it?” Al took the last bite of his sandwich.

“A person can perceive things even if they’re unconscious.” Kate dipped her spoon into a cup of soup, raised it to her mouth, blew at it, and slurped at its content. “Besides, I need to see her for myself. I don’t believe anything that boy says.”

Of Water

“Vinnie says he’s changed,” Al took the last spoonful of fruit cocktail out of a small cup and shoved it into his mouth.

“I’ll reserve my judgment for now,” Kate waved around the spoon in her hand like she was wielding a sword.

“Are you two finished eating?” Addie took another drink of water. “I want to get up there soon. I don’t have much time left. I need to get back to work.”

Kate looked into her cup of soup to make sure it was empty. She proceeded to place the spoon on the cafeteria tray and stood up. The other two followed her lead. Together, the three disposed of their trays and began to make their way silently up to her room.

The two Pohl aunts and one Pohl uncle entered Marie Ann’s dim room. Marie Ann was lying still. The room was too dark to discern her face. Kate made her way to the window stating, “It’s not healthy keeping the sun out.”

Kate partly opened the blinds and Addie took in a deep breath. “She’s awake.”

“And smiling. Hi, dear.”

“It’s hard to tell with that big tube in her mouth,” Al bent over to get a closer look at Marie Ann’s face. “Why all the lines? What are they giving her?”

“How should I know?”

“How are you feeling, dear?” Marie Ann moved her eyes toward Kate as she spoke.

“To bad you can’t talk.”

“When your mother was in the hospital, she didn’t have a tube in her mouth, nor all these lines.” Addie shook her head, “It’s a shame what they’re putting you through, dear.”

“Your father told us to come. Hope you don’t mind.” Kate took Marie Ann’s hand. “Sid seemed to indicate you wanted to be alone.” Marie Ann’s eye brows dipped a little.

“Oh my, she’s awake,” a young nurse entered the room. “Please let me get by,” she stated as she walked past the siblings. The nurse made a few adjustments to the lines leading to Marie Ann’s arm. Marie Ann slowly closed her eyes. The nurse turned to address the three siblings who were standing near the door. “Who are you?”

“We’re family; her aunts and uncle.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to leave. She needs her rest.” The nurse closed the window blinds.

“Of course,” Al stated as he took his sisters by the arms and led them out of the room. When they were in the hall, he grunted, “See. I told you.”

“This just isn’t right. What harm would it have been for us to stay in the room?” Kate jerked her hand free of Al’s.

Addie did the same, “And why does she need to be put to sleep? She didn’t look like she was in any pain. In fact, she seemed to enjoy company. It wasn’t this way for Marie,” Addie stopped. “I have a mind to sneak back in.”

Al grabbed his sister’s arm and tugged on it, “You most certainly will not. They’re watching us.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Have either of you spoken to Vinnie lately?” Kate started walking toward an elevator. The other two followed. They both replied no. “Let’s give him a call. See if he wants to have a late supper with us tonight.”

Al agreed, “But not too late.”

“Oh my, look at the time. I should start heading back to work. Sounds like a good idea.”

The three siblings went their separate ways.

Louis was hunched over a cluttered desk in a small office adjacent to several labs and other identical offices. It was late in the evening and only a few others were in the large research center. He was slowly flipping through a report when he stopped to study a chart. He looked up, rubbed the back of his neck, and took a deep breath. He looked at the report again, put it down, and leaned back in his chair. He took another deep breath, rubbed his eyes, grabbed a can on his desk, took the last sip of Schaeffer’s Lime Soda, and threw it away.

“Lord, please help me find a common thread. Please give me wisdom and clarity to sort through all that I have been studying. My sister’s depending on me. Many are depending on the work done in this office.”

He stared at the crushed soda can as it lay in the trash next to his desk. The can was on top of a small white empty pizza box with red lettering, Ashley’s Pizza – free delivery. “Ashley’s Lime,” he moved his lips without speaking. Louis’ stomach rolled and rumbled. He put his hand on his gut and stated, “They cause problems in more ways than one.”

Louis leaned over the desk again and quickly searched through the many reports there. Eventually he grabbed a report, looked at the index, and then turned to a page in the middle of the report. He nodded and smiled slightly. He picked up the first report without putting down the second.

He sat up straight, held the two charts next to each other and said, “Could be.” He laid the two reports down next to each other.

Louis made his chair roll back by shoving down hard with his feet. He spun the chair around as it quickly rolled across the hard floor. The chair suddenly stopped when he slammed his hands on a row of cabinets. He opened one of the doors in a filing cabinet, ran his fingers

through a few of the files until he found the one he was looking for. It was labeled "Mary Pohl". He pulled it out, opened it, found the chart that looked like the other two, and held it up. He rolled the chair back underneath his desk and laid the chart down next to the other two.

Louis smiled as he nodded his head hard and said loudly, "Yes, it could be; tephra silicon, biotite and hornblende combined with silica in the form of chert," he raised a finger and his eyebrows, "and add a little sulfide."

"Antigens are usually polysaccharides and proteins. But if they go haywire there's no generation of antibodies and no immune response." Sounding like an old black and white Count Dracula actor he continued, "It's all in the blood. And it looks like A is the victim." He let out an eerie laugh.

He clasped his hands together and placed them on the back of his head, "This could be the catalyst and the way to a cure. Thank you Lord."

His smile remained as he said to himself, "Wait till Uncle Al hears that his stories of ash water from hell are not far from the truth." He tilted his head to the side, raised his eyebrows, and shrugged his shoulders, "That is if you add in a little of our limestone and sulfur water."

Louis picked up the phone on his desk and proceeded to dial a number. He let the phone on the other end ring for almost a minute before he turned to his left to look at a round, black and white clock hanging on the office wall. "Later than I thought and it's Friday night. Probably out on the town."

He hung up the phone and sat back in his chair, "Better run a few tests first."

Louis left his office and entered a lab. He walked toward a wall cabinet with glass doors and took out a few empty glass beakers. He set the beakers on a table in the middle of the lab. He then walked toward another wall in the room, pulled several labeled containers off the shelves, and put them next to the empty beakers. Then he filled up each beaker with a different compound.

When he was finished he put them on a wheeled table and rolled it out of the lab and into a bio hazard room. "Now for some blood." He walked to a refrigerated room and looked around. Louis's chest sank as he said, "All out."

He sighed, "Guess I'll have to use my own." He made his way to another room, drew some of his own blood, and then returned to the bio hazard room.

After several hours Louis finished setting up several chemical and biological experiments. He sat down on a tall chair. "Now, wait a few hours." He looked at a clock on the wall. "That puts me back in here at around 3 am."

He rubbed a short hair late night beard on his chin, "What to do till then?" He smiled, "Visit my sister. No one will be there." He looked down, "Ha, every time I go there no one's there. You'd think Sid would be in there all the time. Sometimes you can never tell about a person."

Louis sighed, "Well, anyway, that'll give me time alone with her."

Louis removed his lab clothing and placed them in the proper container. While doing so he stated, "Whoa! A little light needed. Better watch my footing." He yawned, "Need some caffeine too."

Louis returned to his office, grabbed his keys and a light jacket, and made his way to the lunch room. One wall was lined with vending machines. He loaded one of the machine with money and pushed some of its buttons.

As Louis waited for the machine to deliver he put a hand to his head. It was sweaty and warm. His stomach rolled again. He put his other hand on his stomach. The machine finished its vending. Louis leaned over to collect his purchase. As he did so he became dizzy and passed out. His head hit the edge of a table as he fell.

"How have the boys been doing?" Addie asked, and then proceeded to stab a fork in a chicken breast, slice a piece off with a knife, and pull it off with the fork.

Vinnie swallowed some roast beef before he answered, "Sid's taking good care of them. He's been given family personal leave; so he's doing his best to be with them. He's quite a good father, ya know."

"I'd think that Marie Ann would be his first priority. Can't someone else watch the boys so he can spend some more time at the hospital? Maybe Marsha and Mary can help him?" Kate responded. She took a drink of water, but kept her gaze fixed on Vinnie.

Jane moved her fork through her salad as she answered, "Sure, they're helping too. Mary sometimes stays the night. She loves the boys. With Marsha being almost due, she can only help so much. But it's really up to Sid to be the source of strength for the boys. They shouldn't lose both parents."

Addie stopped eating and sat up straight, "What do you mean, lose?"

Jane stopped stirring her salad and forced a smile as she talked down to Addie, "I mean, dear, Mommy can't be at home; so Daddy must be at home. Of course, it's probably hard for you to understand since both the father and mother needs to work in your families." Vinnie looked down at his plate, hurriedly picked up a slice of roast beef, and shoved it into his mouth. Al looked at Vinnie and tightened his lip.

Jane noticed the effect her words had on everyone so she added, "No ill meant, just trying to explain the Weller lifestyle." She smiled and rotated her wrist as she spoke, causing her fork to point upward.

"None taken," Addie replied. She smiled as she continued with a smug voice, "Ya see because our children are so strong, healthy, and bright; well, they mature so much quicker than other kids their age so we are able to leave them at the house, all alone knowing they can take care of themselves."

Of Water

Jane lost her smile and she lowered her fork into her salad. Al cleared his throat to try to hide a smile. Vinnie took a drink of beer and motioned to the waitress for more. Kate turned toward Addie and quickly gave her a concerned look. Addie looked back at Kate and added, "No ill meant, just trying to explain the Pohl lifestyle."

Jane looked down at her salad and softly and sternly replied, barely moving her lips, "I'm sure."

A brief moment passed as everyone took a bite to eat except Jane. She took a drink of ice water and then continued to play with her salad. The waitress dropped off Vinnie's beer and then asked, "Anything else?" Everyone quietly shook their heads no without looking at her or each other.

Kate was the first to speak. She carefully studied Vinnie and Jane before she spoke, "I hope you don't mind, but we visited Marie Ann today."

Vinnie stopped chewing and swallowed hard. His face turned white. Jane had been studying her salad, then quickly looked up after Kate's revelation. Sweat drops appearing on her skin made her feel uncomfortable. She looked at Kate, then Vinnie, and back to Kate. Vinnie took a drink of his beer while Jane replied, "I'm sorry, I thought you knew. Sid doesn't want her to have visitors. She needs her rest; peace and quiet."

"Sorry, we didn't mean to impose." Kate replied and then took a long drink of water. Jane did not take her eyes off of Kate; as if she knew more was coming.

Kate opened her eyes wider, "She was awake." Then she let a slight pause hang as she opened her eyes wider, "And looking quite well."

Jane tried to remain calm as she looked for words to say. She looked at Vinnie. All she could say is "Oh, how was she?"

Addie quickly moved in for the kill, "She was attentive and seemed quite pleased we were there. The room was so dark when we entered, so we opened the blinds and her face lit up. She may have a serious disease, but her spirits are good. Good news, huh?" Addie smiled and added, "What was she like when you two saw her last?"

Al moved forward as he added, "When was that?"

Jane swallowed hard, "Just the other day."

She was about to continue when Vinnie put his hand on his wife's hand and asked, "How do you feel, dear? You haven't eaten a bit and you look hot."

Jane turned toward her husband and lovingly smiled toward him, "I'm still not feeling good, Vin. In fact, I feel worse. It's so hot in here and my stomach is still upset." She looked at each of Vinnie's siblings as she stated, "The company isn't too enjoyable either."

There was a brief silence as Kate, Al, and Addie sank back into their chairs. Then Vinnie stood up and softly and slowly said, "Perhaps we should leave. He looked at his siblings as he

warmly stated, "The meal's on us." His siblings started to object but he quenched it by waving at them, "No, really, it's no problem."

He picked up the bill with one hand and reached out to his wife with the other. Jane slowly rose without looking at Vinnie's siblings. She went to take his hand, but collapsed before their hands met. She hit the floor hard. Al stood up as Vinnie bent down towards his wife, Addie took a deep breath with wide eyes, and Kate put her hand over her opened mouth.

Chapter 14

Be Quiet

Year 49

Kate, Addie, and Al sat in a hospital waiting room among many strangers. Children were coughing, babies were crying, a TV blared, some engaged in idle conversation, and one person was softly praying. Body odor was prevalent and despair was palatable. The furniture was tattered, the paint on the wall was stained, and the black and white tiled floor was well worn. Opening the lobby door, located next to the waiting room would either let in a rush of cool autumn air or exhaust laden air depending on whether or not a car was in front of the hospital.

Kate's head was hanging low and her eyes were shut. Addie was next to her huddled in a newspaper she was reading. Al seated across from them, put an arm behind his back, let out a loud breath and began whining, "We've been waiting so long. These chairs are killing my back. I hate hospitals; they're so inhuman. Why doesn't Vinnie give us an update? It's getting late. The wife will start worrying. What time is it?"

No one answered. Al stood up still bracing his back as he continued, "I'm going to find a phone and call," he did not finish his sentence. He leaned forward and squinted slightly. "Hey, isn't that Sid?"

Kate woke up with a jerk and looked in the direction of the lobby entrance. Addie lowered her paper also looking toward the entrance. Sid, neatly dressed, was nearly jogging as he entered the hospital and made his way past the reception desk. He turned a corner and went out of sight, making his way down a hall that led to a dead end where there were four elevators.

Kate closed her eyes again and Addie reinstated the wall of newspaper as she stated, "Well, maybe we'll hear something soon."

Al resumed his journey to a pay phone. He was two steps into his mission when he suddenly stopped, "Hey, that's Mary, Vinnie's girl, with Marie Ann's two oldest boys. That's odd." Mary, neatly dressed, was pushing the second oldest in a stroller with one hand and holding the oldest hand with the other. They were following the path that Sid had made.

Al quizzically looked back toward his two sisters. Addie shrugged her shoulders. Kate said, "Look." A thin Marsha, also neatly dressed, entered the lobby carrying the nearly one year old Adam. She was accompanied by her husband who was carrying his infant son. They followed her sister and nephews.

Kate and Addie looked toward the new arrivals. Al waved. The band of seven did not see the Pohl siblings. They were steadfast in their objective.

Al turned around and asked Kate, "Do you think I should see what's happening?"

Kate responded, "Best leave them alone with Jane and Vinnie. They'll get us when they're good and ready." Kate stood up, "Why don't you make your phone call?"

Addie looked at Kate, "Do you want to get a cup of coffee and go to the restroom?" Kate nodded yes. Addie continued, "And then why waste this time?" She looked at Al, "Let's meet back here in half an hour and go visit Marie Ann together."

"What if they come with news about Jane?"

"After that I'm going to find out how she is whether they tell me or not. If Jane's okay and Vinnie doesn't tell me, then I'm going home and get a good night's rest. I'll visit tomorrow." Kate and Al agreed.

After forty-five minutes Kate and Addie rejoined their brother. Al stood and greeted them, "You're late." The sisters did not respond.

The three made their way past the reception desk and down the hall that led to the four elevators. They were old; the metal corners were dented, and the doors were scratched.

They patiently waited for one of the doors of an elevators to open. After a brief wait one of the doors slowly opened revealing Marsha, who was still carrying Marie Ann and Sid's youngest, and her husband, who was still carrying their infant. They stood still, eyes wide, not exiting the elevator until an elevator buzzer began to ring.

"Well?"

Marsha and her husband exited the elevator but did not move from its entrance. The door began to close behind them. Al cleared his throat, but the two continued to block the elevator. Al leaned to the side to look beyond Marsha to watch the doors as they closed. It shut and a low hum was heard. He twisted his lips as he looked up at numbers that were punched in a steel plate. The numbers began to illuminate in progressively higher values. Al lowered his gaze and forced a sigh, "It's has been a long night for all of us. I don't particularly like standing in hallways waiting for elevators." Al took a few steps to the right and pushed the elevators' up button. Some people arrived at the elevator and began waiting for an elevator car to arrive.

Marsha replied, "Where were you going?"

"To see Marie Ann. Do you mind if I hold the boy?"

Marsha and her husband exchanged glances and then returned their eyes to the Pohl siblings. No one moved for a brief second. A bell signalling another elevator had arrived sounded, the doors opened, and a group of people exited.

Marsha nodded yes and slightly held out her arms as Kate moved in to take Adam. When the boy was safely in Kate's arms Addie leaned over and stated, "He looks like his mother."

Al leaned in and nodded in agreement. The elevator doors closed and a hum was heard. Al looked up, noticed the other people had taken the elevator, puckered his lips in disapproval, and pushed the elevators button again.

"Marie Ann's not up for visitors."

"So we've heard," Addie straightened up and glared at Marsha. More people arrived and began to wait for an elevator car.

"How is your mother?" Al asked. A bell chimed again. Al frowned and turned to watch another pair of doors open. People began to exit the elevator.

He started to jostle to the elevator when Marsha responded. He turned toward her as she replied "Fine, why do you ask?"

The new arrivals looked at Al and noticed he was occupied, so they entered the elevator. Its doors closed and a low hum was heard. Al looked toward the just closed elevator doors, clinched his teeth, and said, "Damn it." Al started to move towards the buttons.

"Don't push the button again."

Al ignored Addie. He pushed the button again and looked up at all four of the illuminated lights above each of the elevator doors. A group of short people arrived at the elevators. Al looked at the people and sternly said, "We're next." A few in the group gave a funny look to Al.

"We were with Vinnie and your mother when she collapsed."

"What?" A bell chimed.

"Your mother collapsed at the restaurant." An elevator door opened revealing an empty cabinet. The group looked at Al.

Kate continued, "Didn't you know? Isn't that why you're here?"

Al looked at his sisters who did not move. The door started to close. A short man put his arm in between the closing doors causing them to stop and reopen. His group looked at Al as he asked, "Well?"

With a raised and slightly high pitched voice Al turned towards his sisters and asked, "Well?"

Addie replied to the man, "Forgive him, he was this way since he was a boy."

Al watched as the group started to enter the elevator. When they were all about in Al sternly said, "I'm going up," and started to enter the elevator.

"Wait, she's," Marsha was cut off.

"I'm going up." The doors closed with Al inside. The last thing he heard was part of a question Marsha was asking, "When did she."

The elevator rose slowly. Eventually, it reached the seventh floor. Al quickly stepped off the elevator and made his way past the nurses' station with sure steps. Two young nurses at the station watched him make his way down the hall, whispering to each other as he passed. He turned into Marie Ann's room and stopped. He took a step backwards into the hall and looked at the room number. He took another step back and looked either way down the hall.

He noticed two young nurses at the station looking at him. He walked to them and pointed towards Marie Ann's room, "My niece's room, 725, is empty. Where is she?"

"She's not here?"

"I can see that. Where is she?"

"We don't know."

Al twisted his lips. He looked at a middle aged nurse; emphasizing well, he asked her, "Well, can't you look?"

She picked up a chart and stated, "She's not here."

"That's been well established. What room did you move her to?"

"You don't understand sir. She's been released from the hospital."

"What? To where?"

"I don't know sir. They don't tell us those things."

Al looked at her and the other nurses at the station until he decided that they wouldn't tell him anything even if they knew. He made his way back down the hall towards the elevator. He pushed the elevator button and waited. "I hate waiting for elevators."

The door opened. His two sisters stepped out. Al crossed his arms over his chest, "Well, it's about time."

"We had to be nice to them. They didn't know that Jane was here."

The door to the elevator closed and a hum was heard. Al looked up at the numbers. "Damn it." He hit the down button.

"Would you stop swearing?" Kate said sternly.

Addie added, "And stop playing around with the elevators. You're going to break 'em."

"This always happens to me. It's like they hate me."

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Kate and Addie started to make her way down the hall. Al followed stating, “Don’t bother.” The elevator bell rang. Al stopped and turned around to look at the door.

Kate and Addie continued to walk while turning their heads around. Kate asked, “What?”

Al turned to look at Kate. In a loud and agitated voice he stated, “Don’t bother, she’s not here.” Al heard a hum. He dropped his shoulders, sighed, and went back to the elevator and slammed the down button. “Let’s go down to the reception desk and find out where she is.”

Kate and Addie returned to Al, “What do you mean she’s not here? Where is she?”

“I don’t know.” The elevator doors opened and Al quickly stepped in.

Addie looked into the elevator. She pointed towards the nursing station, “We can ask the nurses at the station.”

The doors started to close. Al pushed the hold-door-open button with great force. A buzzer sounded. “They don’t know anything. I already asked them. Now if you don’t get into the elevator I’ll close the doors.”

Kate and Addie stepped into the elevator, Al released the hold button, and the alarm stopped. The doors did not close. Al slammed the door close button. Kate and Addie were on either side of Al, just behind him. They turned to look at him when he slammed the door close button. The elevator doors closed and it started to make its way down. Al stared at the numbers above the door. Slowly the illuminated buttons decreased in value.

Al did not take his gaze off the numbers as he stated, “It’s been a long day and now Marie Ann’s missing.”

“Missing, what do you mean?”

“The nurses at the station say she’s not at this hospital.”

“She was this morning.”

Al raised his voice, “I know that. I was here, remember? Alzheimer acting up Addie?” The elevator stopped with a jerk. Both two and one were lit. Al started to repeatedly push the one button.

“See, now you broke it.”

“I did not.”

“Did to.”

“Did not.”

Addie pulled Al's hand away from the button, "Did to."

"Would you two grow up? There are serious things going on here. Why would they release Marie Ann?"

"Either she's getting better or their transferring her to another hospital. Perhaps Tony's her doctor again."

"I think it's something more sinister. I think Sid's going to put her down."

"What? That's illegal! You're over reacting."

"Am I? Don't you think Sid would do it?"

"How could he?"

"It would explain why Tony's not her doctor anymore, why they keep her drugged up, why they have a big tube in her mouth, why they tell everyone to stay away, and why they've been acting so cagey."

"Vinnie's our brother. He wouldn't do that. He wouldn't keep us out."

"If you hadn't noticed, he doesn't wear the pants in his family. Remember the way it was at the restaurant?"

Al hit the panic button. No one said anything for a while. Al shouted a few times, "Anyone out there? We're stuck."

After what seemed like an hour, the elevator jerked almost knocking the three off their feet. The elevator dropped and the doors opened slightly. A crowbar poked through the door and pried the doors open. The crowbar was pulled out and fingers appeared through the crack between the two doors. The doors opened on the first floor revealing a man wearing a tool belt. "Sorry about that people. Someone's been playing around with the elevators. They're old and quite sensitive to repeated commands." Addie looked at Al with a "I told you so" look.

The three siblings made their way to the reception desk. A lady in her early fifties greeted them. Kate asked where Marie Ann Weller had been released to. The lady explained the information was not available. The siblings slowly walked away from the desk considering what they should do. It was decided that they should contact John, Louis, and Tony and then go home because it was almost midnight. At that time John, Tony, Tony's fiancée, and Louis' girlfriend walked through the main entrance.

"How's he doing?"

"How's who doing?"

"Louis, who else?"

Of Water

“What’s wrong with Louis?”

“You mean you’re not here because Louis passed out?”

“No, when did that happen?”

“Tonight. Why then are you here, to see Marie Ann?”

“Actually, we came here with Vinnie. We were eating with Vinnie and Jane, when Jane collapsed. We tried to get a hold of you, but couldn’t.”

“How is she?”

“We don’t know. There’s something we need to talk to you about that’s more important. Sid’s checked Marie Ann out of the hospital and we can’t find out where she is. At least no one at the hospital can tell us where she is. We’re pretty sure that Vinnie, Jane, and their children know, but they’ve kept it from us.”

“Lord, what a night.” John turned to Tony, “See if you can find out where your sister is. I’ll see about what happened to Louis.” He turned to Kate, Addie and Al, “You three have been through a lot tonight. Why don’t you go home and get a good night’s rest. We’ll contact you tomorrow morning, and let you know what we find.”

Kate hugged John, “The Lord be with you, John.” The rest of them embraced each other and then parted ways.

The Pohl siblings were making their way through the parking lot on their way to Al’s car when they came upon Sid. He was getting out of his car.

“Where have you taken Marie Ann, Sid?”

Sid looked in their direction. No emotions could be seen in his composure. He did not reply. He started to walk past them.

“How’s your mother?”

Sid walked past them without acknowledging their presence.

“On behalf of Marie Ann’s mother who is not here, please, I beg you, spare her life. Don’t do this, Sid. It’s wrong.”

Sid stopped for a moment; then resumed his pace.

Addie yelled out, “It’s murder!”

Sid stopped and turned around, he clenched his fist, and his face was red. “Your religious beliefs are pathetic; you’re laughable fools who know nothing about mercy and love.”

“Let’s talk about what God has to say.”

Sid took a few steps towards the siblings. He took a deep breath and released his fists. His face remained red. "I don't want to know what your God says. I want to know what you and her family's legal intentions are."

"God says," Kate began.

Addie cut her off, "He doesn't believe in God. You'll be tossing pearls to a pig."

Al spoke up, "Legal action? It's Friday night. Who can get hold of a lawyer on the weekend? Even if we did we couldn't get to a judge until Monday. And, to boot, we don't know where she is." Al raised a finger as he continued, "But at least now we know that you intend to end her life."

Addie yelled, "You're a murderer! A murderer!"

Sid smiled, "You see why I despise you religious fanatics? You've got no control of your emotions. You act out of compulsion, not the intellect." Sid pointed to his head.

"I know this, Sid Pohl God says abortion is a sin, God says genocide is a sin, God says euthanasia is a sin; God says mercy killing is a sin. They're all sin. You're sinning and that makes you an enemy of God. If you don't repent, Sid, you'll go to hell. Spare her life. If you don't want her in your life anymore, we'll take care of her. Her father will take care of her. Think of her father, Sid."

Sid turned away from the three, "I'm an enemy of your God, the God of fools. Contact me, the boys, or Marie Ann and I'll have you all arrested and thrown in jail." Sid left the parking garage and entered the hospital. Kate, Al, and Addie entered Al's car and drove home.

Chapter 15

Unwanted Execution

Year 49

Louis' girlfriend, Phyllis, and John made their way to the reception desk as John's brother and sisters in law left the hospital; and as Tony made his way toward the elevators. Phyllis was a pretty young lady with blond hair that contained light red highlights. She was average weight and just over five foot tall. She had brown eyes and rosy cheeks. Her complexion was so soft and pleasant that she didn't need to wear cosmetics or perfume.

John turned toward Phyllis with a warm smile, "Try not to worry, dear. I would love to see your shy smile again. Louis has been working hard to find a cure. Just the other day he was telling me that his team has made great progress. Have faith that he will get well." Phyllis forced a smile as she nodded slightly.

John turned toward the receptionist and cleared his throat to get her attention. "Could you please tell me where Louis Liniments is? He should have been admitted a few hours ago."

The receptionist typed in his name before answering, "He's in room 735."

Phyllis asked, "That's the floor where the hospital's putting all those infected?"

"If you mean the Verlassens breakout, then yes. Anything else?"

"Can you please tell me where Jane Pohl is?"

The receptionist typed the keyboard again, "She's in room 736, across the hall from Louis."

"So it would be a good indication that she's infected too."

"Yes. Anything else?"

"No, thank you." John and Phyllis made their way toward the elevator as Sid entered the main lobby. They did not see Sid. He, however, saw them. He paused and then turned to enter the waiting area. He picked up a newspaper that was lying in a chair and barricaded himself behind it. After he was sure John was gone, he made his way to the receptionist to see what they had talked to her about.

John and Phyllis were the only two people in the elevator as it slowly made a jerky ascent to the seventh floor. John turned to Phyllis who was looking at the floor. "This may be awkward." Phyllis looked up at John as he continued, "Let's walk right past Marie Ann's room without looking in it. If we run into Vinnie or any of his family, let's pretend that we don't know she's not in the hospital. Let's just give them kind greetings and then stay in Louis' room."

"Don't you want to know where your daughter is?"

"Of course, but if my in-laws are correct, they won't tell us even if they know. Let's leave finding Marie Ann up to Tony. There's no need to have an incident in the hospital. We can keep our calm. I doubt Sid and his sisters will be able to." Phyllis nodded in agreement.

John and Phyllis stuck to their plan. No one was in the seventh floor hallway as they walked down it. However, without turning his head he used his eyes to peer into Marie Ann's room. An elderly man was in it, which meant Marie Ann had been out of the room for at least twenty-four hours.

Just before the two turned to go into Louis' room John glanced into Jane's room. Vinnie was her only visitor. John remembered his time sitting beside his wife's bed only a year ago. He felt compassion for his past friend, but decided to stick to the plan he stated in the elevator.

Louis was in his bed and conscious. A large piece of gauze was affixed to his head with medical tape. He smiled as John and Phyllis entered. "Hi."

Phyllis rushed up to Louis and gave him a long hug and kisses. Her voice quivered as she replied, "Hi, yourself." She sniffled and wiped tears from her eyes. "I promised myself I wouldn't do this."

Louis brushed her hair with his hand. "It's all right. It's all right. There's no need for the water fountain. I'm going to be all right."

“But so many people have died. How can you say you’re going to be all right?”

“I think I’ve found a cure, or at least a way to a cure.”

Phyllis’ shy smile returned as she sat down in a chair next to Louis’ bed, “Oh, that’s wonderful, Louis.” Louis proceeded to explain to his father and girlfriend what he had discovered and the tests that he had started. “I’m sure that they’ll be sifting through the results,” he looked at the clock on the wall, “the first thing this morning. I’ve left a message for my manager explaining everything. They should be coming up with a plan of action soon.”

“I hope it’s soon enough for your sister. That is, if we can find her.”

John explained to his son what had been transpiring in the last twenty-four hours. He revealed that Tony was looking for her. After he was finished Louis started to explain in scientific detail what he had discovered. Since Phyllis was a lab technician and his father had been a doctor, the conversation was understood by all. After a while John grew tired, fell out of the conversation, and fell asleep. Shortly after, Phyllis climbed into Louis’ hospital bed and they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

At 6:00 am a nurse carrying a medical log walked up to Louis’ room, not entering, stopping at the doorway’s threshold. John was seated in a chair snoring. He was hunched over a short movable table, his head resting on a pillow. Louis was sleeping to one side of his bed, and Phyllis was curled up at the foot of the bed, a light cover placed over her.

The nurse smiled and cleared her throat to gently waken everyone. After everyone was aroused the nurse asked John and Phyllis to leave the room.

“John, I need to get going anyway. I want to take a shower before I go to the lab and help them process Louis’ work. Do you want me to give you a ride home?”

“No, you get going. I’ll find another way home, perhaps Tony can take me.”

Just as she was about to leave, Tony entered the room. He was hunched over, and his eyes were red and baggie. His shirt was wrinkled; his hair tangled. His voice was rough and dry as he talked, “Dad, I’ve contacted every place I could think of. I’ve talked to all the people I know in the medical field in this area.” He shook his head and started to quiver, “I don’t know where she is.” They all looked to the room down the hall. It was empty.

“Where is the woman who was in that room last night?” John asked the nurse as he stepped into the hall.

“We moved her last night. I’m not at liberty to say where.”

Two days later a young man and a middle aged woman entered a dark room. Both were wearing white medical gowns and lab coats. The woman turned on a light as she stated, “This is the only type of case that I hate about this job.”

“What’s different about this one?”

“Almost all of the cases you’ll get is to either assist those who cannot help themselves or make life as comfortable as possible for those who are dying and/or have an incurable illness. We feed them, give them medication, change their sheets, give them baths, talk with them; many will become friends. Those cases are always long term. They are here for months and even years. They are the reason that I chose the medical field. I wanted to make a positive impact in people’s lives.”

“How is her case different?”

“We’re putting her to death before her time.”

“What? How? Is this legal?”

“You would think that it’s not legal; but there’s enough loop holes in the law that it can be done. All that we do is make sure they don’t get nutrition, not even liquids. The only thing that goes in is pain killers or sedatives. In some ways the law makes it rather easy for a doctor to do this. If a doctor is assured that he won’t be sued, and if the doctor doesn’t have any scruples, poof,” she snapped her fingers, “the person starves to death.”

“What about the Hippocratic oath; to aid and assist?”

“You mean hypocrite’s oath. As soon as doctors say it they go into a room and sign a bunch of legal documents freeing them from the oath they just stated.”

“So, a doctor can do this to anyone?”

“No, only someone under his or her care, someone who has a serious illness.”

“Terminal?”

“Doesn’t have to be.”

“What about a person’s loved ones? Isn’t her doctor afraid of them?”

“Who do you think wants this done?”

“Isn’t that assisted suicide?”

“No, look at her wrists and her ankles. They’re strapped down and her skin is red from struggling to get out. This young woman wants to live. In fact, in this case she’s not in pain and we still have to keep her sedated. She must have started to come out of it a few times, cried out for help, and tried to get free.”

“If I hear someone crying out to get free, I’ll help them.”

Of Water

“Not unless you want to lose your job, be sued, or even be jailed. We have no legal right to override a doctor’s decision. You can be well assured that when these things are done they have all the legal loop holes covered.”

“So you’re saying her husband, father, or mother, someone she trusted, wants her dead?”

“Sad, isn’t it.”

“Well, that’s why I have a durable medical power of attorney.”

“Those things won’t help you one bit. All they do is assure that the doctor will never be sued. A doctor’s opinion is higher than the patients, or even the one you appoint to make the big decisions.”

“Well, I trust my parents will not do this to me.”

“You trust them now, but people change.”

“How long can a person survive without liquids?”

“Depends on your health and the weather. In her case I believe she was in a hospital receiving IVs for awhile. So maybe a week, no more than two, after the IV was taken out. A normal person on a cool day in the street needs water at least once in a forty-eight hour period.”

“She’s going to die before the day’s done?”

“Afraid so. Oh, and don’t say anything to anyone about her, not even our peers. And make sure you lock the door; we’re the only ones allowed in here.” The two finished looking Marie Ann over, turned off the light, left the room, locking the door on the way out.

The next day Marie Ann died alone in a dark room. Many people came to her funeral and supported Sid in many ways. Many gave a lot of money to a fund he set up called, “Marie Ann’s boys.” The people who knew what happened could do nothing to save Marie Ann. They never discovered where Sid had hidden her. They considered legal actions, but discovered from other similar cases, the courts would not stop Marie Ann from being put to death. Louis and Tony tried to explain to others what was happening, but no one believed that such a thing could happen in a free law abiding, democratic land.

Louis’ research led to a cure on the day the above conversation took place. Marie Ann was the last of fifty-two who died of the Verlassens outbreak; although many wondered how many more died before the medical community knew what it was. Seventy people including Jane Weller and Louis recovered with little or no side effects. All those who were ever diagnosed had ties to the land of the Verlassens, also called the Black Forest and the Black Swamp.

Sid did all he could to keep his boys from seeing John, Tony, and Louis. Vinnie was so tormented in spirit that he eventually became an alcoholic and committed suicide. Less than a year after Marie Ann died, John had a massive heart attack. Many said he died of a broken heart. Shortly before he died Sid received a letter saying he forgave him and prayed for his salvation.

Chapter 16

The Meaning of Life

Year 50 & 51

“Dad, I’m glad that you decided to move back to your hometown. You know so many people there and it’s a slower pace of life,” Louis paused. “Tony and Joan will be right next door. If you need anything they’ll be able to help you.” Louis slowly walked behind his aged father as they talked. Both carried a box of John’s personal items and placed them in the back of John’s car. “Phyllis and I will miss you though. I’ve always enjoyed catching and eating fish with you in the early morning.” Louis put his arm on his dad’s shoulder. Early morning spring song birds sang happy melodies as the rising sun slowly warmed the cool misty air.

“Well, I’ll be sure to come back to the condo and stay the night just so we can fish and catch up.”

“It’s sure nice of you to turn it over to us, Johnny,” Phyllis put the last box in his car.

“Like I’ve said, ‘It’s a wedding present,’ as long as the door’s always open so I can see your youngun’s,” John put on one of his boyish smiles as Phyllis blushed.

“Not for a while.”

“Well, don’t make it too long. With Tony saying the same thing and Sid not letting me near his boys I won’t be able to see any grandchildren before I die. Now that you and Tony are married you’re always too busy playing honeymoon to spend time with your lonely old man.”

Louis hugged his father as he spoke, “I don’t want you talking about dying. If it takes having children to keep you with us a little longer, then we’ll have them. Besides I’m sure that your plans to get to see Marie Ann’s boys will pan out.”

Phyllis and John embraced, “I’ll take that as a one year promise of children.”

A few of John’s neighbors came out of their condos to exchange goodbyes. After fifteen minutes John entered his car and backed it out of the driveway as the small gathering of well wishers gave their last goodbyes.

Two hours later John parked his car against the curb in front of his new residence, a small aged white-sided gabled bungalow. Tony and Joan exited their red brick ranch house and proceeded to help John move his items into his new home.

“Dad, I’m glad you’ve decided to move next door. I was beginning to think that Lew was the favorite,” Tony walked out of John’s house, stopped on the small porch and surveyed the neighborhood. The homes were a mixture of styles and ages. The curbed streets were lined with aged maple trees; some throwing their helicopter seeds in the wind. Men and women worked their lawns, changing the neighborhood’s appearance from winter to spring as their children chased dogs. Other people walked the sidewalks or rode bicycles on the wide streets. Tony and John exchanged waves as people passed.

John walked up next to him as he put his hand on his son's shoulder, "No favorites, at least not yet. Whoever has grandchildren first will be my favorite," John put on his best boyish smile and winked at Joan who was walking up the porch stairs, carrying the last box. Joan blushed.

"That would make Marie Ann your favorite."

"There's a new race. And ya best get to it. Lew's already promised me a grandson within a year."

Tony looked at his father and smiled, "Then the race is on." Tony's smile disappeared. He took a deep breath as he continued, "Speaking of Marie Ann, just what do you have planned that will make it possible for you to see her boys? I doubt Sid and his family will let you near them."

John sat down in a wicker chair. "I don't have plans. I trust God will open Sid's heart toward me; and if not Sid's, then Vinnie's"

Tony sat down in a two seated wicker recliner. "You put too much faith in God moving the hearts of wicked people. The times have changed for the worse in this small town. People have changed a lot since you lived here." Joan brought out three glasses of lemonade, handed one each to John and Tony, and then took a seat next to her husband.

"Things look the same to me," John took a drink. "And even if they have changed, it would neither surprise nor discourage me. As Jesus said, 'Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.'"

The conversation moved away from family to Tony's practice and to small town politics. The day ended with a meal prepared by Joan, and John spending his first night in his new home. The weeks and months that followed, Sid did all he could to keep his boys from seeing John.

John walked from tent to tent and attraction to attraction at the annual late summer church social. Songs filled the air; first a polka, then a new popular one, followed by a golden oldie. Occasionally a booth tenant would call out, "Roasted peanuts, .

"Ice cream, and swirly."

"Fudge, cakes, and pies."

"Take a chance,"

"Bingo."

"Beer here."

"Pony rides." Yet, the most common sounds were conversations, laughter, kids' screaming, and babies crying.

John talked with old acquaintances and bought a few knickknacks. His conversations always included a comment on the weather. If it wasn't for a small white cirrus cloud the entire sky would have been bright blue. There was no breeze. The day was sure to be a hot one.

Of Water

John wore tan golfing shorts, a baseball cap, and a bright blue polo shirt. His attire often prompted questions on his golf game as if he thought that dressing that way would enable him to win the church social's Putt-Putt Hole-in-One contest.

John was convinced by several ladies at the Women's Auxiliary tent to buy a brightly colored afghan. He didn't really need it, but he enjoyed the attention the women gave him. Several asked if he would speak at their next meeting. Two widows wanted to know if he would mind stopping by their house to try one of their new recipes. John accepted both ladies' invitations as long as they wouldn't mind him bringing a bottle of wine.

At noon the church bells tolled and John entered a line in order to buy a cheeseburger, a pickle slice, some fries, and a slice of homemade apple pie. He sat at the edge of the tent, surveying the crowd as he slowly consumed his meal. He smiled when he saw one of the three persons he was hoping to run into.

John waved until he caught the attention of Marie Ann and Sid's oldest, now an eight-year old. The boy's green eyes and dark hair made him look a lot like John in his youth. The boy had been wandering from tent to tent with one of his friends. They were dressed in white tennis shoes, jean shorts, T-shirts proclaiming pride in the town mascot, and baseball caps.

John smiled at the boys as they approached him. He asked, "Havin' fun, boys?" Neither boy answered. They just looked at each other.

John quickly looked into the crowd and then redirected his attention to the boys as the other answered in a loud high pitched voice, "Yes, sir, Doc Liniments."

John's grandson used a toy cane to hit an empty paper cup as the other boy continued to answer with excitement and joy, "We jumped in the balloon, rode a horse, and threw softballs at the clown's head. I got all mine in his mouth; and won a Popsicle. Then we tossed rings at canes. He won that one with a dinosaur on the end."

The boy pointed at John's grandson, who was doing his best not to make eye contact with John. He was leaning forward; using the end of his cane to smash ants into the blacktop. The boy ended, "Now we're all out of money."

John reached out smiling as he asked, "May I see your cane, Nathan?"

Nathan stood up straight and looked at John eye to eye for the first time. He stretched out the cane to his grandfather without stepping forward. He did not smile at John; nor say anything. He looked intently into his eyes.

John continued to smile, took the cane into his hands, and looked at it. "My, this sure is a good cane." He looked at Nathan as he continued, "Bet you're proud of it."

Nathan smiled and nodded his head yes.

For the first time John noticed Sid at the beer tent. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a bill. "I'll give you some more money to spend as long as you make three promises to me."

Both boys' eyes lit up as they quickly answered with a, "Yes, Sir," and a, "We will." Nathan took a step forward; stretching his hand forward to take the bill.

John pulled it back a little, "First, you can't tell anyone that I gave you this money. Second, I want you boys to come by my house during the parade and show me what you won with this money. Third, try to bring your brothers with you, Nathan."

Nathan's smile disappeared and he lowered his arms and his head, "I'm not allowed to go into your house, Grandpa."

John choked up when the boy addressed him as grandpa. He smiled and brushed the boy's hair back. "You won't have to go into my house. I'll be in my yard watching the parade with all my neighbors. You can join all of us. And I'll give you something that will help you enjoy the parade more. How does that sound?"

Nathan looked at his friend who shrugged his shoulders, "Sounds okay to me."

Nathan looked at his grandfather, smiled, and answered in a high pitched voice, "Okay, Doc."

John handed his grandson the money and the boys dashed off into the crowd. He looked toward the beer tent to see Sid talking to a scantily dressed woman who was drinking with him. Then John looked up and silently said, "Thank you, Lord."

He finished eating and made his way to two more booths. At one he bought a gallon of lemonade and a box of cookies. At another he bought four pairs of toy binoculars. The trip home was more work than he wanted. He carried three bags of goods. "Good thing I asked the ladies to bring the afghan to my house later."

When he reached his house, John set the bags on the porch and moved the wicker chairs between the street curb and the sidewalk. Tony and Joan walked down the street from the church social and attempted to sit in the empty wicker chairs. John waved his hand over the chairs as he protested, "Would you mind bringing your own chairs out? I'm expecting some company."

Tony put his hands on his hips, smiled sheepishly, raised his eyebrow and nodded, "Oh, expecting some lady friends, are we? Can we even sit with you? Maybe you want to be alone."

John looked at the root of a maple tree and twisted his lips before he answered, "That might be a good thing in case something goes wrong. Don't get me wrong, I'd love your company, but wait to see who's coming before you join us."

Tony looked at his wife and shrugged his shoulders. They made their way to their house while John brought the goods he purchased at the church social from the porch to the wicker chairs. He then proceeded to enter the house, fill a pitcher with ice, and make his way back to the wicker chairs. He filled a plastic glass with ice and lemonade. He sat back in the middle chair and began looking in the direction the parade was to come from. Occasionally he would look the other way down the street, moving his head and eyes in an attempt to see around and past people who were slowly filling both sides of the street.

Eventually a state trooper's car with its lights flashing turned a corner and slowly made its way down the street. Occasionally a hand would appear out the window and candy would fly from it. Behind the trooper's car was a convertible with its top down. In the back sat the mayor and his wife, and their children were in the front seat. The mayor's family was followed by the town's high school marching band.

The parade's slow movement down the street gave John time to scan the crowd for his grandsons.. Suddenly a smile and glow lit his countenance. Wrinkles disappeared and his eyes lit up as he stood and frantically waved in the direction of four boys that made their way down the sidewalk.

"Boys, over here!" Nathan was pushing a stroller. Behind him were his friend and his brother, Mike.

"Grandpa, I brought them just like you said. What's the surprise?" Just then candy flew from the police car. Nathan, Mike, and Nathan's friend ran into the street and scooped up as much candy as they could stuff into their pockets. Other children hurriedly scurried on the pavement hoping to get all the candy for themselves. Then, as quickly as the children entered the streets they exited it in order to make way for the approaching marching band.

The boys stuffed their mouths full of an assortment of hard candy as John pulled his promised gifts out of the bag he had carried. The boy's eyes lit up. Taking a binocular each slurred either a "Thank you," or a "Wow."

The boys either sat on the grass or on a wicker chair, playing with their binoculars and watching the parade as it slowly passed by. John poured each a glass of lemonade. Then he removed Adam from the stroller and placed the toddler on his knees.

Eventually a troop of horses passed John's house and Adam started to shake. He was about to cry when John turned the infant's face toward his own face and gave him a cookie. The boy returned John's smile, "You like cookies don't you, youngun'?"

"Pa pa, coo -koo" the boy responded.

The horses were followed by the town's police department, consisting of three men and two squad cars; the town's ambulance; and the fire department's pride, a one hundred- year- old pumper in full working condition. Oil, gas and exhaust from the noisy behemoth scented the air. "Pugda, pugda, pugda, pugda," echoed off the houses in rhythm until the fire chief operating it pulled back on the throttle. Then it let out a loud sneeze, "Cha, cha, cha, crack, bang, pop." Everyone jumped and smiled.

A slight gap separated the pumper and the next group in the parade, a collection of clowns. They wore bright colored, loosely fitting clothing, wild florescent wigs, silly face paint, and oversized shoes. One rode a unicycle acting as if he was about to fall over.

Another clown drove a small multi-colored car. Its doors and hoods opened and closed on their own, tossing candy in the air as it did so. The car pulled a small cart. A few clowns were on stilts. The rest mingled with the crowd passing out gag gifts that they retrieved from the small car while others played practical jokes on the bystanders.

Nathan stood up when he saw the clowns approaching. He spit out his candy and ran behind John's chair. "Mike, quick! Hide!" he pointed to his sibling. He raised his voice, "You hear me? I said hide, young man. You don't want them to see you."

Mike had covered his ears when the pumper began blasting. His ears were still covered when Nathan began to yell at him. When Nathan realized that his brother was not going to move he ran out from behind the chair and grabbed his brother by the shirt in an attempt to drag him behind the wicker chairs.

Two clowns noticed the boys and ran up to them. One pointed a finger at Nathan and shook it as she spoke, "Nathan and Mike, what are you doing here?"

Nathan released his brother's shirt and fell backward landing on ground with an audible thump. Mike popped up. John quickly stood knocking his wicker chair backward. "Don't be harsh on the boys. I enticed them."

"Listen, mister, we've had enough. Tomorrow the first thing Mary and I are going to do is take out a restraining order against you."

Marsha took Adam from John's arms, "Don't bother opposing it. We know all the judges.

When we're through you'll never be allowed within one hundred yards of 'em," said Mary.

"But, Auntie," Nathan started to say.

"Didn't we tell you to stay away from this alcoholic? He's a bad man. Look at the shanty he lives in. Don't trust him, ever."

Mike's binoculars were hanging from his neck. He pulled them away as he spoke, "But he gave..."

He was not allowed to finish, "No!" Mary tore the plastic binoculars from the boys' necks and threw them to the ground. The sisters took the boys by the hands and placed them in the clown's cart.

John dropped in the wicker chair, his hands draped over its sides. He watched his grandchildren slowly move away from him. Nathan watched the street and Mike cried. Adam cried out with an arm outstretched, "Pa pa, coo-ko."

The clowns turned a corner and John saw his grandsons no more. He stood up and slowly shuffled toward his home, leaving the chairs, stroller, lemonade, and binoculars next to the curb. He placed an arm on the railing and heavily relied on its support as he slowly took one step at a time. He shuffled up to the door, opened it, and entered the house. The screen door slammed behind him and he quietly closed the front door with both hands.

John proceeded to the kitchen and sat at a square wood table looking out the window into his back yard. After an unknown period of time he rose from the table, opened a door that was part of an in wall chest, and pulled out two pieces of paper, a pen, and two envelopes.

John returned to the table and began writing. When he finished, he addressed one envelope to Vinnie Pohl and another to Sid Pohl. He stuffed each envelope with a one page letter, sealed them, and placed stamps on them.

John returned to his front door and opened it. The parade was long gone. The streets and sidewalks were cluttered with candy wrappers, paper cups, and an assortment of other junk. Cars parked on the curbs were lit by the street lamps. In the direction of the church social the faint sound of a band filtered through the air.

John stepped out the door and almost tripped over a sack that was placed next to it. Tears flowed down his cheeks. He placed the letters in his mail box and reached into the bag, pulling a brightly multi-colored afghan from the bag. The center of the afghan contained a red cross. Paralleling the center cross at regular intervals were other crosses, each portraying the next color of the rainbow.

John shivered as a warm summer breeze came off the street. He pulled the afghan over and around his shoulders. He turned and reentered his house. The screen door slammed behind him. John stopped and pulled the afghan tighter as he began to sob. His shiver turned into a shake. He grasped his door and the doorjamb to steady his body. He grasped his chest as he took another step forward.

On a glass top coffee table before him were pictures of his wife and children. Each child was also in a separate frame. John reached out toward the picture of his daughter. In doing so he tumbled to the floor. His large body smashed into the coffee table. Glass and wood chips flew randomly in the air. The picture of his daughter punctured his left chest. John convulsed for a while and then lay still. The red cross on the afghan was centered on his back and arms. His head and his socks were the only exposed parts of his body. The front door slowly closed. A trickle of blood stained the picture of his daughter.

Chapter 17

The Watering Hole

Year 51

arie and Marie Ann are back,” Vince Pohl yelled from his back porch; tilting his head back towards the screen door. He was seated in an antique rustic wood rocking chair; consisting of a high slit back, well worn wooden arm rests, and long creaking rails. He wore jean overalls, a plaid shirt, a baseball cap advertising Parker Seed Co., and leather boots. A slowly burning cigar stub was clamped between two of his right hand fingers. He was surveying his well shaded back yard. No one answered.

Vince looked at the deer again, “And don’t bother saying so; I know they’re just a doe and a fawn. And I haven’t been drinkin’ at all today.” In a whisper he added, “At least not as much as you think.” No one answered.

Vince looked from side to side and then pulled a flask from his overalls’ chest pocket, opened the small cap, and took a drink. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, replaced the cap, and returned it to his pocket.

The long shadows of the two deer stretched half way to the porch. They were slowly making their way across the very edge of Vince's back lawn, where it met the river. At times the deer would stop to eat, at times they surveyed the area, and at times they would look at Vince. Vince stood and slowly walked to the end of the porch; watching the deer as they approached the road and bridge that led to the home where he was raised; the home where his son-in-law and grandchildren now lived.

Vince pulled a custom rectangular silver lighter from one of his pockets, raised the cigar to his mouth, flicked up a flame, puffed until sweet smelling smoke flowed in front of his face, and then returned the lighter to his pocket. A slight early autumn warm breeze slowly moved the smoke to the east.

"No. I'm not goin' to get my gun out. I haven't hunted for several years now. You know that. Why bring it up? I've seen enough death. More death than a man," Vince hacked and then continued in a lower tone, "more than a man should have to see." He started to go down the porch's stairs as he finished, "Hasn't there been enough death attached to this home?" No one answered.

Vince shielded his eyes from the orange-red setting sun as he watched the two deer stop at the tree lined road. He looked back at his home. "Oh, very funny. You're such a funny old woman, Jane." Vince twisted his face in an attempt to look like what he believed Jane looked like and then repeated, "You've seen enough life, too." He mocked, and then looked back at the deer still at the intersection of the river and the road. "I'm fifty-nine and that isn't that old, ya know," Vince snorted. No one answered.

"Are you forgettin' you're a year..." he started to say. He noticed the deer jump up on the road and then disappear from his view. He changed his train of thought, "I'm going to follow 'em. See if they bring me to the buck. John's gotta be out there somewhere." No one answered.

Vince started to slowly and quietly make his way to the place where the deer crossed the road. Very few cars traveled down the county road and only one had made its way past his house this day. A slow-rising man-made earthen ramp caused the road to rise three meters in elevation before and after it crossed the river. The ramp hid the deer from his view when they crossed the road. Vince quietly stated to himself, "I wish they wouldn't have gone to the other side of the road. Ya know what's over there. I don't like going over there. It reminds me," his voice trailed off but his lips kept moving.

Vince grasped a sapling to assist him in climbing the steep road bank. When he reached the road at the top he surveyed the land opposite his back yard, taking another drink from his flask and a drag from the cigar. A wrought iron arch was the only entrance to a long and high rusty wrought iron fence. The arch contained Algerian letters that read, **VERLASSENS WEST END CEMETERY.**

A limestone path just wide enough to accept one car started at the road; perpendicular to it. It passed under the arch before it began a progression through the large shaded cemetery. The path was straight; perpendicular to alternating rows of gravestones, chest high hedges, and large oak trees.

Vince tilted his head from side to side; looking into the cemetery. The fence made it the only place the deer could have gone. They were not to be seen. He took a deep breath and then proceeded into the cemetery. The path slowly sloped down just after it left the road until it reached the same flat elevation as his backyard. Vince walked in the middle of the path in order to keep his boots free from mud puddles in the tire ruts. The stones beneath his feet crunched with each step.

The further into the cemetery Vince walked, the newer the gravestones; although varying in height, all were less than a meter high. "Someday soon I'll join all of my ancestors and family here."

A short way in, the path split forming a boulevard. At regular intervals in the boulevard were limestone grave markers taller than a man; square and wide at the base, narrowing at regular intervals until they ended in a square stone spire. "The priests always get the tallest gravestones; overshadowing us even in death."

After the second boulevard grave marker, Vince spotted the two deer next to the river; between a row of newer marble gravestones and a hedge row. "Figures that they would end up goin' down this aisle."

Vince made his way down the aisle reading the names on the markers out loud.

"Mrs. Mary and Mr. Gerome Pohl. Hi, Mom and Dad. I'll be joinin' you soon."

"Mrs. Lisa and Mr. Marshal Liniments, good ol' Doc."

"Mrs. Patricia and Paul Weller, probably wailin' in hell."

"Mrs. Marie Ann and Mr. John Liniments." Vince placed his hand on his chest pocket, "I still have it, old friend."

"Mrs. Marie Weller, beloved wife and mother. Finally got your gravestone, Marie. Looks like Sid doesn't plan on joining you. His name's not on it. Strange looking stone too. The man's always makin' a statement to fool the world, isn't he?"

"Mrs. Catherine and Mr. Robert Kirk. Hope you're making a case for your brother, Sis."

"Ms. Joyce Weller. I always knew that no one would ever marry a sour puss like you."

"Adeline and Norman better be backin' up Kate in my case."

"Brother Al, I'm glad we patched things up before your departure."

Vince stopped before he walked past the last grave in the aisle. It read, "Mrs. Jane and Vincent Pohl." Vince took another drink from this flask and a drag from his cigar stub. Then he stated, "Wife of mine, I."

“Crack.” Vince was interrupted by a gunshot somewhere in the woods that lined the back of the cemetery. The doe and the fawn darted into the river, not stopping their escape when they reached the far bank.

Vince raised a fist and looked into the woods not seeing the hunter he yelled at, “Don’t you know it’s illegal to hunt in the cemetery? Don’t you have any respect for the dead let alone the livin’ visitin’ their loved ones? And I own all the land around this area; don’t allow any huntin’ on my land, I don’t. Besides gun hunting doesn’t start for several weeks yet. Dammit, git on back home and offin’ my land, you poachers. I’ll call the sheriff.”

Vince silently stared into the woods. After a few minutes he heard an engine start and then fade away. Vince looked back down at all the graves. He made his way back down the aisle, across the first limestone path, and stopped at the square limestone spire. It was Father Hemmingway’s grave marker.

He studied the spire’s ornamentals; reading two statements on either side of the spire, “Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.’”

“On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’”

“I sure could use a drink of that water.”

Vince made his way back to the road, stood in the middle of it, and looked toward the bridge. The doe and the fawn were standing in the middle of the road looking at him, beckoning him to follow. “Not done with me yet, are you?” The doe turned toward the entrance of the abandoned Weller quarry and entered it, briefly stopping before it disappeared behind the tall lush trees along the road to shoot a glance back at Vince.

“You still haven’t shown me where the buck, John, is.”

With one leap the fawn disappeared from sight.

Vince walked to the middle of the bridge, leaned against its silver painted crossed tie rods and looked down into the clear river water, noticing a rainbow trout positioned against a strong current. The trout did not advance upstream or downstream. It swayed just enough to ensure its position would remain constant to the rocky bottom.

Vince smiled, “Showing off, Al? Trying to tell me you don’t need me to save you? Well, I guess you don’t need my help anymore. You’ve become quite a swimmer.” The trout darted up stream.

Vince walked to the entrance of the quarry. If it wasn’t for the weeds in the drive and a new gate, the entrance would be hidden. A sign planted in the middle of the drive read in bold red letters, “WARNING. The Surgeon General has determined that fish from this quarry and river have been known to contain substances that contribute to Verlassens’ Outbreak and even death.”

Vince grabbed the sign; violently shaking it side to side until its post was freed from the ground. As it broke free he shouted, "It wasn't these fish that caused their deaths,." He grabbed the post opposite the sign and hurled it toward the dilapidated quarry office. The sign spun until it collided with the building with an awful crash.

Vince looked up and yelled, "They did and I assisted. I let it happen. I did nothing to stop them. I knew what they had planned and I did not tell you, John. I was wrong." He placed his hands over his pocket and with a quieter voice he stated, "You were right. I was wrong. I let them murder your daughter and kept you from seeing your grandchildren. In spite of my weakness," he paused, "you forgave me."

"Forgive me, Lord, forgive my sin. Let me drink from your watering hole," Vince cuffed his hands over his face, falling to his knees and sobbed. A peace that passes understanding overcame him.

After a brief moment a new crash coming from the direction of the office drew Vince away from communion. He sniffed the air. A musky-smell repulsed him. In the waning light of dusk and the reflected light of a full moon he noticed movement on the ground around the building. He stood and stripped bark from a Birch tree and wrapped it around a dry rotted branch. He pulled the flask from his pocket, poured some of its contents onto the bark, and using his silver lighter ignited it.

Vince slowly walked toward the small building which was heavily entangled in poison oak vines. On the ground surrounding the building either venomous Cottonmouth or Northern Water Snake slithered about. "No, not in my backyard, not in their fishing ground you're not. You're not going to poison my grandchildren."

Vince emptied the contents of this flask on the building and touched it with his torch. Flames quickly engulfed the building and the surrounding dry grass. After being assured that the surrounding moist sandy soil would contain the fire, he moved to the edge of the quarry and sat with his back against a large willow tree that half overhung the quarry and half overhung the bank.

As Vince watched the building slowly disintegrate, a barn owl called out from the tree above him. Vince turned his attention to the owl, "Approved of my decision, Kate? Your preachin' always annoyed me. Now I'm grateful." He tapped his chest pocket, "Your words and John's." Another hoot and the bird's wings began to whoosh overhead and fade with distance.

Vince remained transfixed on the burning building until his eye lids grew heavy. His vision blurred and he fell asleep.

A noise awoke him. He looked in the direction it had come from. The moon had set and the fire had been diminished to fluorescent red embers. The embers and the Milky Way were the only illumination allowing Vince to see who had visited him. He saw nothing and looked to the east. Soon the light of the sun would invade the world of night. Not soon enough to assist in figuring out who his new company was. He turned his view towards the commotion, skewing his head without making any noise.

Of Water

The crunching noise gave away the fact that an animal or two was feasting. It was coming from the area that for many years had been the location of the quarry's office. Eventually a masked marauder and her offspring looked in his direction.

"Eating the dead snakes and their eggs, Addie?" The raccoons continued their consumption.

"I was wandering when you were going to show up. Figures you and your son are feasting on the dead, the dying, and the unborn snakes." He smiled as he continued, "I should probably make my way to my bed. The fire's controlled and confined. But it's a cool night and the ground is soft." Vince relocated in order to see the night sky. He lay on his back and stretched out.

He enjoyed a meteor shower cutting through the Milky Way. The meteors appeared to radiate from the constellation Lyra, the Harp. Vince imagined heaven was playing a lullaby. Soon he fell asleep again.

"Papa, what are you doin' here?"

Vince opened his eye lids. The morning sun had risen. His eyes focused enough to see two pairs of small feet and ten wiggling toes. He had turned to his side sometime during the early morning hours. He rolled onto his back and looked into four blue eyes. Vince smiled at his grandsons as he answered, "Last evening I burned down the old quarry office. I needed to stay long enough to ensure that nothing else went up in flames. Guess I just fell asleep."

The boys turned around. All they could see was a small stream of white smoke ascending into a clear blue sky. They returned their attention to Vince. "We're going fishin'."

"Explains why you have them rods. Mind if I join you?" The boys acknowledged with a quick headshake. The three sat down next to the quarry bank.

"Why did you burn down that building, Papa?" the youngest asked as he attempted to cast his line into the quarry. The line fell a meter away from the bank. "Shoot."

"It was high time someone got rid of that nuisance. Snakes had made it their home." Vince placed his hand on the back of the youngest. "Do you need help castin'?"

The boy answered with a quick headshake and a smile. As Vince took the boy's rod the young lad pointed toward the river, "Look, Papa, a buck on the other side of the river."

Vince looked toward the cemetery and smiled, "At last, old pal. I haven't forgotten." He turned to his grandsons, "You know boys, me and my brothers and sisters used to fish here all the time when we were your age?"

"Ya did? You have brothers and sisters? We didn't know that. We don't know much about your family, Papa."

"Well, let me tell you about them. I especially want to tell you about your Papa Liniments. He wrote me a letter once. I have it here in my pocket. Let me read it to ya."

The end
Look for book 2, Of Seeds, of this Trilogy