

SET FREE BY THE SEA

A Novel

Ken Westbrook

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Dedicated
to
those who suffer from addiction

May God bless you and set you free.

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Chapter 1

Luke focused on the congested traffic, listened to his wife Lisa on the phone, and yet was aware of every jostle and tilt of his eighty-thousand-pound, eighteen-wheeler cruising at seventy-five miles an hour on I-95.

Her demand for a *chat* caused him concern. She was unhappy about something. He ran a list of things through his mind: church attendance, budget, relations with her family, his drinking beer, his long cross-country hauls. Any could cause her to be upset.

Screeeeech, baaaaaam. About 200 yards ahead Luke saw vehicles change lanes, careen, collide, stop, slide off the road, and pile up.

He dropped his cell phone, grabbed the steering wheel with both hands, stood on the brakes, felt the big rig convulse, and stopped inches before it joined the pile. Wow, he thought, the antilock brakes did their job. Cars were crushed like bugs on his windshield, steam hissed, tires spun suspended in midair, windows were shattered, and people screamed.

He heard his wife's shrill voice from the phone, "What happened? Luke, talk to me. Please talk to me, Luke, Luke."

He found the phone on the floor of the truck and yelled, "I'm okay."

"Thank God you are alive," Lisa said, "it sounded like you were in a wreck or something?"

"No, but almost."

“Lisa, I’ve got to call 911, I know people are injured—maybe dead.” Luke took a deep breath, “It looks like I’ll be a couple of hours late getting home than I promised.”

Three hours later, he rubbed his eyes, stretched, arched his back, slowed his tractor-trailer rig, and steered off the asphalt onto a sand road a few miles north of Macclenny, Florida. Lisa had indicated she needed to *chat*. Luke knew it was more than a *chat*; it meant fireworks. How appropriate this being the Fourth of July weekend. He knew her catalog of complaints: too little money, his time away from the family, his occasional beer, his lack of church attendance, and the lack of respect she perceived he had for her family. He also knew that her perceptions were dead wrong on all issues. He loved her beyond measure, loved Aaron, respected her family, and hated every minute away. Money was tight, but a few more miles on the road and it would be better. If she would listen, he was eager to explain, and it was imperative that she understand.

He had managed to avoid the wreck on Interstate 95, but he feared doing so with Lisa might prove more challenging.

The brakes hissed, and he killed the engine. The truck rested near the 10-year-old minivan parked in the side yard of the 14 by 70 foot rented mobile home nestled beneath a clump of skinny pine trees.

Aaron, his blond five-year-old son, ran down the steps of the front deck, his face lit up like a firecracker. He stopped, reached a hand to the sky, and yanked it down. Luke pulled on the air horn cord a couple of times. Aaron covered his ears and giggled. Lisa, who had appeared on the deck, turned her head and covered an ear with her hand.

Luke reached for his travel bag, swung the door wide, dropped to the recently mowed grass, and with one beefy arm, scooped Aaron up to his right shoulder.

Luke tickled Aaron in the ribs, “Glad daddy’s home?”

“Yes, Sir,” he squealed and hung on.

“You’ve been a good boy, I hope?”

“Yes, Sir. I have, but Mommy and me missed you...a lot.”

“Well, I’m home now. I can’t wait to see some videos of your T-ball games.”

Lisa stood on the deck, arms crossed; she wore her blond hair in her signature ponytail and was dressed in white jeans and pullover short sleeve, green blouse.

He carried Aaron on his right shoulder with his travel bag in his left hand and navigated the steps to the deck, balancing like a tightrope walker.

“I thought you were going to be two hours late,” Lisa said.

Luke eased Aaron down and dropped his bag to the deck, reached out both arms lifted Lisa, and held her tight. “Sorry, it took longer for them to clear the wreckage than I had anticipated. Forgive me?” He attempted to kiss her on the lips, but she turned away, and he kissed her on the forehead.

She turned back toward him, “I forgive you, I guess.” She did not resist the second attempt at a kiss on the lips, and it lingered. Luke soaked in her warmth, smell, and softness. He wanted to memorize the moment.

“I’m glad you didn’t wind up in the wreck.”

“Yeah, me too,” he lowered her to the deck, “wow, you smell great.”

“You smell like you need a shower. And that stubble has to go.”

Luke sniffed and smirked, “Can’t deny that. Shower and shave coming up.”

“The steaks are on the counter at room temperature, just like you ordered. The baked potatoes have been ready for an hour. They may be mushy and cold by now, but I can nuke em.”

“What’s with the grass? The yard smells like a hay field.”

“I couldn’t get the mower started. It got a little snaky.”

“Well, how did you get it cut?”

“I told Joyce; the word got around the church, and George came by yesterday and used his commercial riding mower to cut it. I didn’t have time to rake it.”

“Okay, who’s this George fellow?” Luke said, “Anybody I know?”

“You’d know him if you went to church.”

He frowned.

“He’s the deacon who lost his wife to cancer last year. He owns that big ranch near I-10.”

“So, he’s out on the prowl?”

“Luke,” she made a face at him. “You have an evil mind; he’s almost old enough to be my dad.”

“Sorry. I guess 18 days on the road can twist a person’s psyche.”

Aaron wrapped himself around one of Luke’s legs and latched on. “Let’s go daddy.”

Luke picked up his bag, rubbed Aaron’s head, and hobbled inside with his son attached. “I brought you something.” He dropped his travel bag, “Open it, and you’ll find it.”

Aaron opened the bag, found the truck, and started pushing it across the floor, making honking noises.

“Another truck?” Lisa said.

“Hey, this one is special.” Luke knelt beside his son, “It’s a Freightliner just like mine, sleeper and all. It even has the trailer.”

“I guess he can add it to his collection,” Lisa said. “You want him to grow up and be a truck driver just like you. Admit it.”

“Sweetie, my aspiration for Aaron far exceeds being a truck driver.”

She sat at the kitchen bar, “We’ve been married for six years.” She turned to face him, “and I still don’t understand who you are.”

Luke sat beside her, “What’d I say that brought that on?”

“I need a dictionary to talk to you.” She paused. “When you use words like *aspiration* and *far exceed* reminds me that I don’t know anything about you. I don’t know where you come from. I don’t know anything about your family. You are not like folks around here.”

Luke thought I guess I can tell her one more time. “It’s the same as I’ve told you before. My parents were killed in a house fire when I was sixteen. They had no brothers or sisters, and I’m an only child. I grew up in the northeast, came to Florida as a foster child, and met you when I enrolled in high school. My grandparents were dead by the time I was born.”

“I’ve heard that before,” she said.

“That’s about all I can tell you.”

“The point I was making is that you talk different.”

“The proper word is *differently*,” Luke winced. “I’m sorry. There I go again.”

“That’s exactly what I mean. You’re more educated than I am. You don’t talk like people in these parts. You breezed through high school and never cracked a book.”

“Well, I promise to learn, use more colloquial expressions, and stop making corrections. Will that help?”

“It’d help if I knew what *co-lo-quial* meant.”

He put his arms around her and squeezed her tight, “It means I love you more than anything in the whole wide world and that I’ll do anything I can possibly do to please you.”

“There you go talking down to me. I know it don’t mean that.”

“You’re right. It doesn’t. But I meant every word of it. I dearly love you and Aaron.”

She sniffed him, “Then I think it’s time you take that shower. And please shave.”

He gave her a peck on the lips, “I’ll do just that and then throw those steaks on the grill, have a beer, and we can hit the sack.”

“So you stopped by that Billy Bob’s beer joint?”

“Sweetie, it’s not a beer joint; it’s Billy Bob’s Bar and Restaurant,” Luke said.

“Do people actually eat at that place?”

“I suppose he could rustle up a burger if you insisted on it; but they are best known for their country-style craft beer.”

“So, it’s just a place where alcoholics can fill up?”

“Honey, just because a guy drinks a bottle of beer occasionally doesn’t mean he’s an alcoholic.”

“You don’t drink on the road?”

“You know very well that I never drink on the road; it’s too dangerous, too much at stake.”

“So you admit it’s dangerous?”

“What can happen here? I’m not doing anything that requires me to have absolute control of my faculties.”

Lisa leaned over and kissed him on the lips, “Can we have that *chat* tomorrow?”

“I promise. Now, let me get that shower first and put the steaks on the grill.”

Chapter 2

Luke woke up, smelled coffee, rolled out of bed in his pajama bottoms, and staggered into the kitchen. Lisa was wearing skinny jeans and a yellow pullover top that clung to her slim body; her blond hair hung in ringlets to her shoulders. She gripped her coffee mug with both hands and rested her elbows on the bar. Today we have that chat, Lisa said to herself.

“Wow,” Luke grinned, “you look great this morning.”

He sat beside her, leaned over, and kissed her on the cheek, “What time is it?”

Lisa pointed to the stove clock.

“Eight-thirty, hard to believe it.” He yawned, stretched his arms, and arched his back. “That long drive and steak dinner did me in.”

“The beer...don’t forget the beer. It’s a sedative, you know.”

“Never heard that before.” He rubbed his face. “Whatever —I got a great night’s sleep.”

She took a sip of coffee, “You were asleep as soon as your head hit the pillow. I was hoping for a bit of cuddle time.”

“Sorry about that. I wanted something more myself.”

Lisa placed her cup on the counter, “Are you ready for that chat?”

“Let me get some breakfast, a mug of coffee, and then my run,” Luke said. “After that, I’ll get a shower, clear my face of this sandpaper, and maybe by that time, the cobwebs in my brain will clear.”

“Do you still run when you’re on the road?”

“Yep, and that reminds me, my running shoes have worn through the sole. Can you pick me up a new pair?”

“I’ll put it on the wish list.”

“Make sure Aaron is awake and fed by the time I get back from the run. We can play catch and have some quality time. It’ll also improve his T-ball performance.”

“Trying to get out of that chat?”

He smiled, “We will have that chat, just be patient,” and waved as he ran out the door.

Lisa sat at the desk, opened the slimline laptop, and pressed the on button. She entered her password and started the spreadsheet. Lord help me, she prayed.

“Lisa, it’s been a long time since I told you how much I appreciate you for keeping the books. You are good at it, and it frees me up to do my job better.”

“You can butter me up all you want,” Lisa rolled her eyes, “but I’m ready for you to take this job back any time you want. You are better at it than me.”

Luke held up his hands. “No, absolutely not; I use all of my free time hunting for hauling assignments.”

Lisa clicked on a chart, “Here’s what I wanted to show you.”

She pointed to the crisp blue background and the green and red lines.

“Let’s see, the green is for the income, and the red is for the expenses. Am I correct?” Luke said.

“Of course,” she said, “but the point is they’ve crossed many times in the past twelve months.”

“Okay, sometimes we spend more in a week or month than we have coming in.” He leaned back in his chair. “Where do we stand at the moment?”

“We are barely making a profit, and the credit card balance is growing. I’m three months behind paying our medical insurance, and we’re behind in a couple of other smaller things as well.”

“Ouch,” Luke said, “but the past three week’s receivables haven’t been applied yet. It should be above \$10,000.”

Lisa typed in that amount as income, and the chart responded. “That helps.”

“It helps a lot.” Luke smiled, put his arm around her, and squeezed. “See, we are above water again. So, when the money comes in, make the medical insurance payments the number one priority.”

“This don’t bother you?”

“Sweetie, I understand,” Luke said, “you’d like to see the lines swing way apart and stay that way. So would I; but that’s not reality now; the business is still maturing. All businesses have ups and downs. In business, you have to take a long view of things.”

“So, help me here. What’s the long view? Are we ever going to stay above water?” There was a quiver in her voice.

“Well, our truck payments are about \$1,500 a month, and we are growing equity.”

“Correction, that’s \$1,600 a month.”

“The point is, in two years, it will be paid for, and presto, that payment will move from expenses to income.”

“If you subtract the depreciation, it ain’t that good.”

“Sweetie, depreciation is for tax purposes. Believe me. That truck’s worth more than what we have invested in it. I bet it has a million miles left in those bones, and with a little more investment, it could keep on going after that.”

“Tell me about maintenance.” She clicked on the expense spreadsheet that displayed a pie chart. “They’re gonna sink us.”

“I know it doesn’t look great. But, ninety percent of those expenses rarely occur. At this point, the truck has a new set of tires and new brakes, and the engine is in great shape. It’s good for another 150,000 miles before another major expense. The regular expenses, fuel, oil, filters, insurance, taxes, and a few odds and ends will not sink us.”

“It not only don’t look good,” she took a deep breath; “It ain’t working.” Finally, I’ve said it; she said to herself. It’s off my chest. God, please don’t let this upset him.

Luke shook slowly shook his head. “Every business has a difficult time getting started,” he said, “but when you stick with it and work out the problems, the payoff in the future can be fantastic.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “Sweetie, please hang with me for a while.”

“We’re hanging by our fingernails,” she sniffed. “And how long do I...we...wait?”

“I’m working as hard as I can.”

“I know that sweetheart. I’m not blaming you,” Lisa said.

“So, what do you suggest?”

Lisa stood, walked away, and took a deep breath. She felt like a clumsy schoolgirl in front of her six-foot two-inch 210-pound husband,

but she blurted out what had been building up inside, “Let’s sell the truck and call it quits.”

“No, no, no, that’s not going to happen.” He stood up and shook his head, “Do you understand?”

“You could still drive a truck. My dad could get you on with the paper mill hauling pulpwood to Fernandina Beach. He’s made a living at it and it’d pay more than we are making now.”

Luke stood, put his hands on her tiny shoulders, turned her body, and directed her to a stool at the kitchen bar. “With all due respect for your dad, and your brother-in-law for that matter, I have higher ambitions for you and for Aaron than living out our lives in a tin box under a pine tree in Baker County, Florida.”

Lisa began to whimper, “There’s nothing wrong with that. It’d be fine with me. My folks do all right; they get by. They are happy—satisfied.”

“Sweetie, listen to me for a moment.” He took a deep breath, lifted her chin with his index finger, and wiped a tear from her face. “I’m not willing to settle for what your family has settled for. There is a big world out there. There’s a lifestyle far beyond your experience. Some people live in large houses with swimming pools, manicured landscapes, garages with remote controls, and sprinkler systems for their grass. They take vacations, fly to Europe or Hawaii, and eat out at fine-dining restaurants. I see people on the road traveling in half-a-million-dollar motor homes. I have hauled yachts from south Florida to Maine.” He paused, “Get the picture?”

“So, what does that have to do with us?”

“Okay, here’s the bottom line. My responsibility—my love for you—requires that I provide for you and Aaron to the best of my ability. That requires sacrifice in the present to reap rewards in the future. If a person works hard, is willing to sacrifice, and uses his brain instead of his brawn, he can soar to great heights. Wealth and riches are out there for those who want to earn it. My goal is for us to have a large piece of the economic pie.”

“And you think you can do that with an old truck?”

“Have you read my business plan? It lays it all out. In two years, this truck we have ours. Then I will buy another and employ someone to drive it. When we pay for it, we’ll do it again. In 10 years, we’ll own a trucking company with six or more trucks.”

“You really believe that?”

“Yes, more than that, the bank believed me and gave me the loan based on the plan.”

“The Bible says that we are to lay up treasure in heaven, not the earth.”

“I’ve got no problem with giving to the church, and the more I get my hands on, the more we can *lay up in heaven*.” He smiled.

“I’m not sure that’s the right interpretation of that Scripture.”

“Sweetie, if I’m half as successful as I think I can be, someday I...we...can give more to the church in a year than your folks have given in a lifetime.”

“There’s more ways to give than money.” Lisa stiffened. “My folks serve the Lord in many different ways.”

“Well, that’s the way I understand things, and I’m going for it with all the gusto I can muster.”

“So, I’ve got to give you up to the open road for another ten years, and Aaron and I will see you maybe twice a month?”

“No. When we get three trucks, I’ll stop driving and move into management. My job will be to scrounge up business, dispatch trucks, and run the business from an office in the house. I’ll be home all the time. And when the company is mature, we’ll sell it and look for the next and best investment opportunity to move up.”

“That is the trouble with our marriage. You want to take chances, become a rich big shot, and I’m happy with much less: a steady income, a loving husband who stays home with me and Aaron and goes to church. That’s all I want.”

“I wouldn’t use the word *big shot*,” he smirked.

“What word would you use?”

In a slow and deliberate voice, he said, “I’d use the word...*tycoon*, a person of consequence. I want to live a life that makes a difference, a life of success.”

“I don’t care what you call it, I don’t care where we live, and with you away all the time, I’m not sure I’m living at all.” She rubbed a tear with the back of her right hand, “I’m tired of sharing my husband with a mistress—that blasted truck.”

“Sweetie, it’s a matter of sacrificing today for a much better tomorrow.”

She stood up, “That’s just peachy. Meanwhile, I’m stuck in this tin box, as you call it, with a five-year-old son who cries himself to sleep at night wanting his daddy.” She went to the bedroom and slammed the door with a bang.

Luke knocked on the bedroom door, “May I come in?” He waited, but there was silence. He pushed the door open and saw Lisa lying face down across the bed, sobbing softly. I hope I can make this better, he thought. He eased the door shut, lay down beside her, and draped his arm over her.

She turned away, “I hate to be such a crybaby.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I know life’s not ideal for you. I promise you that it’ll get better—better than you can imagine.”

“I don’t understand how.”

Luke said, “Let me make you a deal.”

Lisa rolled over, and they faced each other.

Luke touched her nose, “You can make any change that you think wise in our financial situation to reduce the expenses. But there’s one exception, you cannot sell our truck or refinance it under any circumstances. Without that truck, we’d have to go on government assistance, and for me, that is an anathema.”

“Do mean that?”

He nodded. “You can sell the pickup truck, the boat and trailer, and cancel the satellite TV...whatever.”

“You trust me that much?”

“Hey, we are partners,” he leaned forward and kissed her on the lips, “it’s time I treated you as a full business partner.”

She smiled and gave him a kiss.

“Remember, the big rig is sacrosanct—we must not lose it—under any circumstances. You got that?”

“Got it,” she said with a halfway smile.

Luke’s smartphone chimed.

“I thought I had turned that thing off,” he picked it up and looked at the screen. “I’d better answer this.”

He touched the screen a few times, “That’ll take care of you, buddy until I get back into the truck.”

“Who’s Buddy?” Lisa said.

“Oh, it’s my phone. I couldn’t do without it. It’s got all my contacts, calendar, and locations.”

“And the call just now—a hauling job?”

“Yes, a client. It was a text; he wanted confirmation regarding a pick up two days from now.”

“What’d you say?”

“I just tapped the *confirmed* button,” Luke placed the phone on the table beside the bed. “I’ve turned it off until I get back into the truck and head to his depot. For now, I’m all yours.”

“I love the sound of that,” she smiled. “I can’t wait till it’s true every day of the week.”

“Nor can I,” he leaned over and kissed her; she fell into his arms.

“Do you think you can take shorter trips and be home more?”

“With this sort of attention, I’ll make a concerted effort.”

Chapter 3

Noise from the kitchen roused Luke. Half-awake, he reached for Lisa, but she wasn't there. He dragged himself to the kitchen, "It's the Fourth of July, for goodness sake, what's so important?"

"Didn't I tell you that my family is coming over?" Lisa said.

"As a matter of fact, you didn't tell me."

"About 5:00 this afternoon," she said, "that gives us enough time to get things cleaned up and the backyard set."

Well, there goes my plans, Luke said to himself. "So, what exactly do you want me to do?"

"We need a temporary table set up in the backyard. Everybody's bringing folding chairs," Lisa said. "Oh yes, and we need a small fire pit for the children to make some s'mores."

"Is that it?"

"Well, you could help me vacuum the house, pressure clean the deck and rake the grass away from the fire pit in the backyard. I think I can handle everything else."

"Food—what about the food?" Luke said.

"Oh yeah, I volunteered you to cook the burgers and hotdogs. Momma's bringing baked beans and coleslaw, and Sis is bringing chips and a veggie plate."

Chips and a veggie plate, Luke thought. Joyce always takes the easy way out, just buy it at the store. "Entertainment, has anybody thought about that?"

"We all decided just to sit around and visit. But I think Daddy is bringing some sparklers for the kids to have about sundown. The kids always have the sandbox, the kiddie pool, and kickball. They'll entertain themselves."

Luke heard a car stop, and he stepped out onto the deck and noticed that Lisa's mom and dad had arrived. I bet they brought an agenda along with the food, can't wait to hear what it is.

Bertha Jones squeezed out of the passenger side of the mini-sized pickup truck, wiped her plump face with a handkerchief, and pulled at her dress as if it were stuck to her. She turned, bent over, reached back in, retrieved a container in each hand, nudged the door shut with her hip, and waddled toward the mobile home. "Hi, Luke," she yelled with a chuckle. "You don't look too bad for a long road trip."

Sammy Jones shut the passenger door, reached into the back of the pickup, and retrieved two extra-large folding chairs, the kind folks take to children's ballgames. He was wearing faded denim bib overalls. His stomach protruded to the point that Luke wondered how he could drive the small pickup without his belly rubbing against the steering wheel.

"May I assist you?" Luke said.

Bertha handed him her containers, then struggled her way up the steps to the deck and caught her breath. "Can't wait till it's time to eat. I bet y'all will like these baked beans. They're my specialty, I put a lot of bacon and barbeque sauce in 'em." She took the container of beans, which left Luke holding the coleslaw. He opened the door and held it open while she entered, followed by her husband, Sammy.

As soon as Luke placed the coleslaw on the kitchen bar, he heard the blare of a car horn.

"That'd be Joyce and Carlos," Bertha said, "they were right behind us."

The car was a fire-engine red Ford Mustang convertible with the top down. Joyce Ramos had her black hair tied up in a messy ponytail with a broad blue ribbon. She wore a white sleeveless top with a low neckline, red shorts, and sunglasses pushed up on her head. Luke spotted a cross tattoo on her right shoulder. The empty tomb must be on the other, he mused. She turned, and sure enough, there it was. I'll bet there's a hissing snake hidden somewhere, the biggest hypocrite in the church.

Carlos got out on the driver's side, reached over, and lifted their two girls one at a time from the back seat.

Joyce retrieved a picnic basket, "Hi there, traveling man." She waved.

“Y’all come on in,” Luke said in the most southern drawl he could muster as he invited them with a wave of his arm.

The six adults and three children jammed into the tiny living room adjoined by the equally tiny kitchen. There was an incessant stumbling over furniture, reaching to embrace one another as if greeting lost relatives. Bertha gave each grandchild a smothering embrace; they twisted away as soon as possible.

“Please, could I have everybody’s attention?” Lisa said, “Just stand where you are for a moment and I’ll give some instructions.”

“Shucks,” Joyce said, “I thought you were going to announce that you’re expecting.” She was the only one who chuckled.

Lisa glared at her for a moment and said, “The burgers and hotdogs are hot off the grill, we’ll arrange everything else in a jiffy, and we can eat,” Lisa said.

The men chatted, the ladies arranged the food, and the cousins listened to Aaron brag about his new truck.

“If I could interrupt one more time,” Lisa said, “let’s bow our heads, and I’ll...”

“May I?” Luke said.

Lisa nodded.

Luke bowed his head, “Let’s all join our hands together.” He reached out and took Lisa’s hand, and the others followed the example. “Father in Heaven, we thank you for your blessings upon this family and how You have blessed our country. We thank You that we were born in America; we thank You for this food and receive it as a gift of Your love and grace. May we never take the freedoms that we enjoy for granted. We realize that they were obtained at great sacrifice and maintained at a high cost. Help us to take advantage of the tremendous freedoms and opportunities afforded to us by our country and to achieve our best. Amen.”

In the backyard, the food and jugs of iced tea sat precariously on a makeshift table of plywood and two-by-four plank; the men sat in a cluster as did the women. The children ran hither and yon, yelled, and jumped in and out of the kiddie pool. The sun was beginning to set; it was quiet except for birds calling to each other in the distance and the roar of an occasional car from the nearby road. Bertha pulled at her dress and

wiped her face with a handkerchief. Joyce lay back in her folding chair, fanned herself with a paper plate, and rested her bare feet on a wooden box. Sammy whittled on a stick of wood and produced a pile of shavings. This family is content in their element, but I'm not, Luke said to himself.

"Hey man," Carlos held half of a burger in his hand dripping juice and said with a heavy accent, "how'd you learn to make burgers like this? They're the best I've ever had."

"I doctor them with a New England secret sauce," Luke smiled.

"I'm from Mexico; you're from New England. Man, we're from different worlds, yet what tastes good to you also tastes good to me."

"I didn't say I was from New England."

"But you said..."

"I said I used a New England secret sauce, and you just jumped to a false conclusion."

"Where are you from then?"

"I'm from the Northeast; technically, it's not the same as New England." Luke stood with his empty paper plate in hand, "You're from Mexico, and exactly where does not interest me. You shouldn't care exactly where I'm from in the Northeast. Can we agree on that?" He smiled and walked to the trashcan, dumped his plate, and opened the back door of the mobile home.

"Luke, where're you going?" Bertha said.

"To get a beer," he smiled, "I'll get one for you too."

"You know we don't drink that stuff."

"You can always change your mind. It's a free country. Remember, it's the Fourth of July." As the door closed behind him, Luke heard Bertha, "The Bible says, 'Be not drunk with wine.' It's the devil's brew, you know."

"I love him like my own son, but there's something strange about that man," Bertha said. To herself, she thought but did not dare say out loud, I'll bet he's difficult to live with.

"We called him the mystery man in high school," Joyce said.

"I've heard that before, but why?"

"Brilliant beyond belief, he owned his own car in the twelfth grade, lived as a foster child with the Cunningham family, and had spending

money all the time.” She took a deep breath, “Most of all, no one knew anything about his past, not even the teachers. The school accepted him without a transcript midterm during his junior year. You know, you can’t make up a story like that.”

Joyce paused, “And that engagement ring he gave Sis, I’m still jealous. I doubt there’s another that big in all of Baker County.”

“That’s my husband y’all are talking about,” Lisa said.

“Did he tell you that the ring was like a funeral insurance policy?” Joyce sneered.

“No,” Lisa said. “He said that if got killed on the road, I could sell the ring and would have more than enough to bury him.”

“Whatever,” Joyce said, “but you’ll have to admit he is...I’ll just say it. He’s weird...mysterious... different.”

“He’s just from another culture, up north, a Yankee,” Lisa said. “Your Carlos comes from a different culture. He talks with an accent and sometimes chops up the English language, but I don’t think he’s mysterious.”

“Of course not; he’s perfectly willing to talk about himself, his family, and where he’s from. I know all I want to know about him,” she glanced at Carlos. “And he fits right in with the family.”

“Luke tries to fit in. Y’all need to give him a chance.”

The backdoor squeaked open and the conversation stopped.

Bertha saw the bottle of beer in his hand and said to herself, I don’t like what I see but if Lisa can put up with him I guess I can too.

Luke walked toward the 10 x 10 sheet metal toolshed in the backyard and motioned to his father-in-law to join him. “You might be able to help me with the lawn mower. Lisa said she couldn’t get it started.” He took a sip from the bottle in his right hand and set it on the ground. With both hands, he spread the flimsy, rusting sheet metal doors and pulled the riding mower out.

“Well, get on it and try to fire it up,” Sammy said.

Luke mounted it, made sure the blade was disengaged, and set the brake. He turned the key, and the starter let out a brief grind and stopped.

“There’s your problem right there,” Sammy said, “the battery is dead; you need a new’un.”

“Don’t you think we should try to charge it?”

“Not worth the effort; once they’re that bad off, they’re dead.” Sammy looked around, “Got any tools? I’ll take it loose.”

Luke pointed to a toolbox near a can of gasoline.

“I’ll take the battery with me and get Lisa a new’un next week,” Sammy said. “Does she need any gas?”

Luke lifted the can of gasoline, “Feels about half full to me.”

“I’ll bring more when I come back with the new battery.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back on the road tomorrow. I really do appreciate it.”

“You got time to show me your truck?”

Luke reached for his beer, motioned with his head, and they both walked to the side yard. Why does he want to see my truck? Luke thought.

“Old, but nice, really nice,” Sammy said. “You’ve been on the road so much I don’t recall having seen it up close and personal like. Musta cost a pretty penny?”

“What can I say? I’m blessed to have it even if it does have a couple of hundred thousand miles on it and a big mortgage.”

“I suspect the payments are pricy.”

“The higher the payments, the sooner it’s paid for.”

“Yeah, but that can make things tight in the meantime.”

Sammy wiped his hand across the door, “I like your sign. *L and L Trucking LLC*. What does that stand for?”

“The first L stands for Luke, the second for Lisa, and the LLC stands for Limited Liability Company.”

“Sounds like you have big plans.”

“Mr. Jones, are you trying to make a point?”

“Well, son, I really wish you great success. But if you ever decide to change your mind, if things don’t work out exactly as you planned, well, I think I could get you a job hauling pulpwood.”

“You and Lisa have been talking behind my back, right?”

“Now, don’t take offense.” He scratched his balding head. “As a matter of fact, she did talk to me about a few things, but be assured she’s got your best interest at heart.”

They've conspired against me. Her whole family knows our business, and they're here to change my mind—that's their agenda, Luke said to himself.

"You could be home every night, weekends, and holidays. The pay ain't nothing to brag about, but it's regular. The company owns the truck, they deal with all the regulations, maintenance, and legal stuff; all you gotta do is show up and drive. No stress, no fuss, no risk, and..."

"Little future," Luke said, "it's the same thing over and over like working in a factory."

"I've done it for 30 years." He rubbed the back of his neck. "They've got machines to cut and stack the trees, but until they get robots that can drive a truck, you've got a job."

"Maybe they do have robots to drive the trucks," Luke said.

"What do you mean?"

Luke lifted his beer to his mouth and drained it. "Mr. Jones, if I recall correctly, it's a free country. You can work the way you choose, and I'll work the way I choose. And if I ever need your help, I'll be the one talking to you, not Lisa." He tossed the bottle against a pine tree.

"So your mind is made up?"

"It's not so much that my mind is made up; it's that we are wired differently. I see the mountain, and I want to get to the top. You see the same thing but are satisfied with sitting in the valley."

"So your way is best?"

"I didn't say that. One way is not better than the other; it's just that we are different. I see my destiny in a different way. It's risky to climb the mountain, but for me, I have no choice. I've got to climb."

Chapter 4

Lisa looked toward Luke. “Honey, the sun’s going down, and my folks will be leaving soon. Can you get the fire going so the kids can enjoy the s’mores? After that, Daddy can help them with the sparklers.” Luke was pleased that the celebration was coming to an end and he’d have some time alone with Lisa before leaving on a two-week trip.

Luke gathered up some wood shavings Mr. Jones had made and stuffed them beneath three large pieces of wood in the fire pit. He lit the shavings and stepped back. Let’s see if this will get it going, he thought.

“That ain’t gonna work,” Mr. Jones said. “And if it did, it’d take too long. You don’t know how to start a fire.”

Luke headed toward the metal toolshed, “If you want it to get going in a hurry, I think I can make that happen.” Luke noticed that his words came out a little slurred and that his balance was a little uncertain.

He walked back to the fire pit, holding the gasoline can with the lid removed, and held it about three feet above the wood.

“Don’t do that,” Mr. Jones yelled, stood, and motioned everybody back. “He’s gonna get us all killed.”

Luke stopped, “Okay, just in case—I’ll wait—you can get back before I pour this on.”

“There’s still some smoke. The shavings may not be out.” Mr. Jones bent over for a closer look, “It’s too dark to see anything for sure.”

“Is everybody ready? Here goes our Fourth of July fireworks.”

The gasoline sloshed from the spout and splattered on the wood.

Pffffffft. Whoosh. Boom.

The fire exploded upward. Luke recoiled, stumbled, dropped the can of gasoline, and fell flat. The can hit the ground with a thud and the fuel inside gushed upward and through the opening. More fire. The can fell

on its side; the remaining gasoline gurgled out, ran along the ground toward his legs, and exploded into a fireball.

“Lord what have I done to myself,” Luke screamed.

Luke tried to get up, stumbled, fell, rolled on the ground, and he screamed for help. The fire engulfed his legs, he fought back with his hands, and they caught fire. He started to cough and gag and continued to roll; he flailed about, beat the ground with his hands, and screamed for help. The searing pain was beyond anything he could have ever imagined. He tried to stand, and the flames engulfed his body. He staggered about and fell to the ground again.

Lisa ran to Luke, she tried to fan the flames away, but that made it worse. She looked up, hoping somebody would be there to make it all go away. She saw Carlos run to the water spigot and grab the corroded handle. He gave it a quick twist. It broke off in his hand. What else can go wrong?

Lisa moaned, “Oh, no.”

Carlos ran to the makeshift table, picked up a jug of iced tea, and doused it on Luke’s body. The steam hissed, and Luke jerked back. The fire flared up again.

Lisa saw her daddy run to the toolshed and return with what looked like pliers. He applied them to the spigot stem, and turned hard, but it slipped. He applied both hands to the pliers and tried again. It broke loose, and water filled the hose. He picked up the nozzle—corroded shut—the water dribbled.

Lisa knelt next to Luke. She felt her face contort, her throat freeze. She tried to swallow but couldn’t. Lord, what is going to happen to my husband?

Luke curled up into a ball and screamed, “Somebody do something. I’m dying.”

Lisa’s body trembled.

Carlos nudged Joyce, and she gathered up Aaron and her children and took them inside.

Bertha knelt in prayer, “Oh dear Lord, Oh dear Lord, Oh dear Lord.”

Lisa’s daddy pulled out his pocket knife and folded the hose over the blade near the nozzle. He gave it a quick yank. Water gushed out at full force, and he doused Luke’s body. The fire died.

Luke lay on the ground, not moving. Lisa wondered if he was dead.

“Will someone call 911?” she screamed.

She heard Carlos, “I’m on it. I’ll stay on the phone. They’ll need directions.”

Lisa’s eyes streamed tears. She saw his skin hanging from his arms and legs, his pants burned, legs charred. The blistered skin oozed blood through the charred tissues. Lord, don’t let him die, please, dear Lord.

Grass clippings had stuck to some of his wounds. Lisa reached slowly, touched a blade, and started to remove it. Luke moaned. She jerked back, leaving the blade of grass still glued to his body.

What can I do?

Lisa had never seen anybody in such a terrible condition, not in the worst horror movie. She could not believe that Luke, the love of her life and the father of her son, lay so still, so quiet, and yet so injured. How could he just lay there? What was going on? When would help come? She wanted to hold his hand, but they were charred, and she knew it would hurt him. There was no place to touch him. Lord, I’m so helpless.

She knelt and sobbed.

From inside the mobile home, Aaron looked out the window “Is my daddy alright?”

Joyce led Aaron away from the window and into her lap in a rocking chair. She motioned her two children and indicated that they should sit on the floor at her feet. The kids don’t need to see this, she said to herself.

“Honey, your daddy is going to be alright.”

“Why is Mommy and Nana crying?”

“They’re sad.”

“Why?”

“Your daddy is hurting, and they hurt for him.”

“I hurt for him too,” he whimpered.

Sammy knelt at Luke’s feet, started unlacing his shoes, and jerked back. Wow, still too hot he thought. He applied more water and removed the shoes.

The smell of burning flesh was horrible. Tears streamed down everyone's faces.

Carlos picked up the green water hose and started dousing the grass, which had rekindled.

"I feel so helpless—absolutely helpless," Lisa's dad said.

Bertha sobbed, "We all do, poor Luke. Lord, bless him."

This is going to be very bad for my baby girl, Sammy thought.

Lisa knelt by Luke's head and whispered, "Honey, It's gonna be alright. The ambulance will be here soon."

"It'll be about 10 minutes before the ambulance gets here," Carlos yelled. "I'll drive to the highway and make sure they don't pass us."

Luke's body did not move.

Chapter 5

Lisa heard the siren and ran to meet it. Thank you, Dear God, finally...they're here.

The ambulance came to a sliding stop on the grass in the front yard. The driver turned off the lights and siren and swung the doors open. Two men jumped out, lugged large red bags, and yelled, "Where's the guy?"

Carlos yelled, "Back here, behind the house."

The family stood back, wrung their hands, and watched. Joyce watched from a window inside the mobile home.

One man knelt near Luke's right shoulder. The other squatted and examined his body, starting at his feet. "Sir, can you tell me your name?" Silence. "How long has he been unresponsive?"

"Maybe 10, 15 minutes," Lisa said, "his name is Luke—Luke Buchannan."

The man at his feet yelled, "This man is in shock." He reached for a folding chair, raised Luke's legs, and placed his feet in the chair. "Jeb, start an IV."

"Okay, but I've got to find an entry point first."

He glanced over the body, "The only place I can see is the external jugular. Use an eighteen-gauge needle; the skin's pretty tough there."

Jeb said, "Got it." He moved closer to Luke's head, reached and pulled his bag closer, flipped it open, grabbed some packages, ripped them open, rocked Luke's head to one side and examined his neck, then rolled it back and examined the other side. "Does our patient have any allergies?"

Lisa shook her head.

"I can't hear you."

"No," Lisa said.

"Is he an alcoholic?"

"No."

“Kidney disease, seizures, or other medical problems?”

“No, nothing. He runs two miles a day, perfect health,” Lisa said with a quiver in her voice. “He’s in great shape.”

Luke moaned and coughed. A trickle of blood dribbled from his mouth.

Jeb looked at Lisa, “Are you his wife?”

She nodded, “Yes, my name is Lisa.”

He began to scrub Luke’s neck with a pad, “Lisa, I’m going to insert an IV in the left side of his neck.”

Lisa gasped, “In his neck, are you kidding?”

“His arms and legs are out of the question. This is the best, trust me.”

Lisa felt faint and sat in a folding chair but could not take her eyes off her husband. Her heart was breaking with pain she’d never felt before.

Jeb took a needle with a short plastic tube attached; he laid it on Luke’s neck near a bulging vein. A quick shove, and it was in. He put a strip of tape under the needle and another over it. He retrieved the IV bag, let some fluid drip from the attached tubing, connected it to the needle device, made a loop, and taped the loop to his neck. He held the IV bag up and motioned for Lisa to come and hold it.

I can’t do this Lisa thought, but she reached slowly and held it.

“Charles, do you have vitals?”

“Heart rate 160, respiration 40, lungs sound congested with wheezing, and they rattle,” Charles said. “I’m afraid he inhaled some hot gases and burned his lungs.”

“Thought so, too; I saw blood in his mouth,” Jeb said.

Lisa said softly, “That’s bad, ain’t it?”

“Yes, mam.” He looked at Jeb. “Do you have the morphine ready?”

“Yes, while I inject, you get the gurney.” Jeb inserted the needle in a Y-shaped junction in the tubing near the IV injection site. “Oh, call for the helicopter ASAP.”

“Helicopter? What’s that all about?” Lisa began to cry.

“Mam, your husband has to go to the burn center in Gainesville. He’s in grave condition.”

“Is he going to die?”

“Not if I can help it. My job is to stabilize him and get him to the burn center STAT.”

“A helicopter is coming here?”

“Not enough space here. We’ll use the parking lot at the church down the road,” Jeb said. “It’ll work fine.”

Jeb looked up; Charles was coming with the gurney.

“We could transport him to Gainesville ourselves, but it’d take at least an hour. The helicopter can have him there in about 20 minutes. They’ll be in contact with the burn center and will begin in-flight treatment.”

A little blood oozed from the corner of Luke’s mouth.

“Charles, O2,” Jeb said.

Charles took a small green cylinder from the gurney, turned the knob on top, laced the clear plastic tube around Luke’s head, and positioned two protrusions into his nose. He placed a clip on his ear lobe and looked at a box in his hand. “Seventy-five percent. That’s way too low.”

“How are we going to load this guy?” Jeb said.

“What do you mean?”

“Where do we grab him? He’s burned everywhere.”

Charles pointed to Carlos and Sammy, “Hey, you guys, we could use your help here.”

Lisa saw confusion on their faces.

“Jeb, you get his feet, I’ll put my hands under his shoulders. You guys get on each side, place your hands under his hips, and on the count of three, we’ll lift him to the gurney.”

“Charles said, “One, two, three...lift.”

Luke screamed and twisted his body.

“Wow, that’s a good sign,” Jeb said, “he’s still with us.”

They covered his body with a silver plastic sheet.

From inside the mobile home, Aaron could see what was happening.

“Where are they taking my daddy?”

“Honey, come away from the window.”

“Where are they taking him?”

“They are taking him to the hospital where they can help him get better.” Joyce tried to speak with a slow pace and a controlled tone.

Aaron ran to the other side of the mobile home and peered out the window. “They are putting him in a red van.”

“Aaron.” Joyce squatted and put her arms around him. “It’s a special van for hurt people; it’s how they get him to the hospital.”

Aaron watched as the ambulance drove away. “Is my daddy going to die?”

“No, honey; your daddy is not going to die. He’ll be home soon—I’m sure.”

They should be taking him to an insane asylum, Joyce told herself that was a stupid thing for Luke to do.

The sun was about gone, and the ambulance parked in the church parking lot. Bertha, Joyce, and the kids stayed home. Sammy followed the directions of the paramedics, left his headlights on, and parked his truck at the landing zone. Everybody looked for the lights of the helicopter. Jeb checked his watch. Sammy prayed, Lord, please hurry.

“What’s holding things up?” Lisa moaned. “I can’t stand this much longer.”

Luke began to groan and twist his body.

“He’s waking up,” Lisa said.

“His O2 is much better, breathing a little slower; the morphine is doing its job,” Charles said.

Jeb looked at his watch, “They should have been here by now.”

“How do they know which church parking lot to use? There’re two or three along this road,” Sammy said.

“We could have been halfway there by now,” Jeb fumed.

Lisa looked toward Jeb and whimpered. “Can I go in the helicopter with him?”

“Probably not; that’s most unusual,” Jeb said, “they’ll need all the room possible to take care of Mr. Buchanan. He’s the first priority; you’d just be in the way.”

“I hear something,” Carlos yelled. “It’s the helicopter.”

Jeb and Charles pushed the gurney and ran along beside it. If they had not held the silver blanket down, the wind from the whirling blades would have blown it away. They handed Luke off to the guys on the helicopter and backed away; the engines revved, and it lifted off.

Lisa staggered to the edge of the parking lot, doubled over, and retched. She sobbed so hard that her body shook.

Jeb lifted her up, "Looks like we have another case to treat."

Sammy lowered the tailgate of his little pickup truck and motioned Jeb to place her on it. Jeb placed a blanket in the bed of the truck. "You can lay on this if you wish." He lifted her feet and placed them on the side of the truck bed, "This ought to help."

Charles brought his bag, opened a bottle, and gave Lisa a pill, "Take this; it's anti-nausea medicine." He handed her a cup of water.

A car drove up and stopped, "Who's that?" Jeb said.

Sammy walked toward the car, "Pastor Ron, how'd you know?"

"Joyce called," He whispered. "How's Lisa?"

Sammy whispered back, "Not good, I'm afraid. She just got some medicine."

"How bad is it?" Pastor Ron said.

Sammy looked at the ground, "I ain't no doctor, but even I know it's really bad."

Pastor Ron walked to the truck, "Lisa, how are you doing?"

She started to whimper and rubbed her eyes, "It's Luke. He's hurt real bad."

"I know—Joyce filled me in," he said. "He's in the best medical hands possible. He'll be alright."

"I'm counting on that."

"But now, I'm concerned for you," he said. "What can we do for you?"

"Pray, please pray, and ask the church to pray."

Pastor Ron held her hand and prayed.

Lisa looked at Sammy, her dad, "Daddy, I'm ready. Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"Gainesville—the burn center," Lisa said with determination in her voice.

"Are you sure?" Sammy said.

She nodded.

"Well, let's go back to your place and let them know. You can send Aaron home with your momma or Joyce," Sammy said. "You'll hafta pack a bag."

"We can use my van and let momma go home in your truck," Lisa said.

Sammy thought this is gonna be harder for my baby girl than she can possibly know.

Chapter 6

Lisa adjusted her seat back and stared at the ceiling of the van. Sammy thought she must be in some kind of emotional shock. Maybe the pills she got at the church parking lot will make her drowsy. I'll let her rest, and maybe she'll drift off for a brief nap before we get there.

Lisa still stared at the ceiling and spoke in a whispered voice, "Dad, thanks for driving. I don't know if I could do it."

Sammy stared straight ahead. "I don't mind, Baby Girl. It's the least I can do."

"You haven't called me that in years."

"You'll always be my baby girl."

"I wish I could crawl up into your lap like I used to and cry myself to sleep. This whole thing is so horrible. I can't figure it out."

"Just take it a day at a time." Sammy had a catch in his throat. "We'll get through it."

"Things were going so great. I can't figure out what got into him. He's so careful, such a control freak—so organized. He planned everything in detail."

"To be honest, what got into him was too much alcohol."

"He only had one beer; you know he's not an alcoholic."

"I didn't say he was. On this occasion, he had a bit too much."

"He doesn't drink on the road, only when he's home, and then not too much."

He did today, Sammy thought.

Sammy wanted to ease the stress. "He's basically a good man; we've all got a fault here or there."

"He loves me and Aaron. I know that for sure. He works himself to death. He's ambitious. He wants the best for us."

"Baby Girl, you don't have to defend him to me."

“I know you and Mamma didn’t want me to marry him. You wanted me to marry some local guy, somebody from a family that you knew, somebody in church. Right?”

“We never said that,” Sammy snapped.

“You didn’t have to say it. Luke knew it, and I knew it. So, I guess we were both a little rebellious.”

“Once you made up your mind, we were okay with it. Ain’t that right?”

“Well, he still thinks the family or the church does not completely accept him.”

“How’s that?”

“If he drove a pulpwood truck and was home every night, he’d be more like you—more accepted.”

“I spoke to him about that possibility, and he accused us of talking behind his back.”

“Oh, no,” Lisa grimaced.

“I think he took offense.”

“I’m sure he did,” Lisa said. “I think he’s trying to prove himself.”

“What does that mean? Prove what, and to who?” Sammy said.

“I don’t know; maybe to himself, to the family, to the church. He’s always felt like an outsider...always the new guy.”

“Well, he’s hard to figure out. That’s for sure.”

“In high school, he went out for the football team. I think he did it to prove he was as much of a man as the local guys. It was obvious that he was new to the game, but he put his whole heart into it.”

“Maybe there’s something in his past that drives him.”

“Could be, he never talks about his past, parents, school, anything.”

Her dad parked the van on the third level of the parking garage. Lisa stepped out of the truck and heard the wail of an ambulance echo in the distance. Her breathing increased, her heart pounded, and her stomach ached when she thought of seeing him in a hospital bed and what they might have done to him. She searched for a word to describe her feelings. What word would Luke use...*fear*, *dread*? No, he’d say something like *apprehensive* or maybe *anguish*.

Her daddy glanced at his watch. “It’s 9:32; he must’ve been here close to two hours.”

They took the parking lot elevator to the street level.

Lisa pushed the door open, felt the warm, humid air, and saw a misty glow around each streetlight.

Her dad pointed to the stripes painted on the crosswalk and the emergency sign across the street. “They’d know where he is.”

The lady at the information desk typed *Luke Buchanan* into the computer. “He’s just been transferred to the burn center.” She spoke like a computer, “Go down this hallway to a bank of elevators on the right, go to the third floor, and follow the signs.”

“Thanks.” Lisa clutched her dad’s arm and followed his lead.

The elevator stopped, and they heard a ding. Lisa wrapped her arm around herself and shivered. I don’t know if I can do this or not, she thought. Dear God, let him be all right.

Her dad pulled her along. They followed the signs and proceeded down the hall. Lisa saw but paid no attention to the coming and going of nurses and hospital personnel in the hallway.

They stopped at a nursing station, “We’re here to see Luke Buchanan.” her dad said.

“Are you family?”

“I’m the father-in-law,” her dad said, “this is my daughter, Lisa. She’s his wife.”

“Could you wait just a moment?” The lady picked up the phone.

“I don’t wanna wait. Please, I want to see my husband.”

“Please mam, there’s some information that we need to get from you.”

“Hi,” the lady spoke into the phone, “the family of Luke Buchanan is here.”

She looked at Lisa, “Someone will be with you in a moment. Would you and your father please wait in the conference room? It’s just down the hall, I’ll show you.”

Lisa gripped her dad’s arm and felt faint but managed as they made their way to the conference room.

“Dear Lord, let the news be good,” Lisa prayed in a whisper.

The door opened, and Lisa jumped, startled. A young man with olive skin dressed in light blue pants and a smock reached out his hand. “Hi, I’m Doctor Raj Solanki.”

Lisa stood, shook his hand, and sat down immediately.

He looked at Lisa, “I assume you are his wife.”

Lisa nodded.

He knelt by her chair. “Your husband has been seriously injured. And before you see him, I need to prepare you and discuss his condition. I know you want to see him immediately, so I’ve arranged for a staffer to get medical history and insurance information from you after you’ve seen him.”

Lisa nodded, and her dad sat beside her with his arm around her.

“First, Mr. Buchannan suffered some lung damage. You may have known about that.”

Lisa nodded her head and wiped a tear.

“So, we have sedated him and placed him on a ventilator.”

“What’s that?” her dad said.

“It’s a device that does most of the breathing for him.”

“Can’t he breathe on his own?” Lisa said with alarm.

“Yes, but because of the lung damage, he has to cough up a lot of mucus, dead tissue, and fluids that leak into his lungs. The cough is painful to his lungs and airways, but it also makes his chest walls contract violently. Other muscles in his body contract and intensify the pain in his external injuries.”

Lisa took a deep breath. Oh, dear Lord, she thought.

“So,” Doctor Raj continued, “although we don’t know how severe his lung injuries are, we felt it best to sedate him and place him on the ventilator.”

“I’m ready to see him,” Lisa said, “can we go now?”

“Soon.” He placed his hand on her arm. “But you must know a few other things. The ventilator is connected to a tube inserted into his windpipe.”

“That sounds uncomfortable,” her dad said.

“Yes, it causes significant discomfort. But, he is highly sedated and is unaware of it.”

“He can’t talk?” Lisa said.

“Correct, because of the sedation and because of the tube down his throat.”

Lord, I don't think I can manage this. Lisa felt her insides draw tight.

"How can he cough up stuff from his lungs?" her dad said.

"A highly trained nurse will be with him at all times. She will insert a much smaller tube down inside the tube in his throat to suction mucus and debris."

"What else do I need to know?" Lisa said. "I want to see him now."

"You will see a heart monitor, IV bags, bladder catheter, the ventilator with all of its dials, and an O2 monitor. Oh, and he will not be dressed, only covered with a thermal blanket. The room temperature will be about 89 degrees, which is critical to prevent hypothermia. With so much skin damage, he will have difficulty controlling his body temperature. In his case, a temperature that is too low is as bad as too high."

"Wow," her dad said.

"The first 48 hours are very critical. Above all, we have to prevent shock. The IV fluids will be carefully monitored to replace fluid loss, and he'll be getting antibiotics to prevent infection."

"Can we please see him now?" Lisa said.

"I'd like to tell you more, but I know you are anxious to see him." Doctor Raj stood up. "Just before we go into the room, you'll have to wash your hands, put on rubber gloves, slip on protective gowns, and wear a mask."

Lisa looked at him with tears in her eyes, "Can we go?"

"Okay," he said.

Chapter 7

Lisa had never been in a burn center ICU before. The size of it and all the machines amazed her. It was a large area with glassed-in-rooms on the outside walls. A large circular area in the center housed nursing stations in a way that nurses could see over the counters and into each room.

“Mr. Buchannan is in room three,” Doctor Raj said.

Lisa started toward the room, but Doctor Raj stopped her. “Remember, we’ve got to wash up and suit up before we go in.”

“Sorry, you better show me how.”

Doctor Raj turned the water on with a foot pedal, washed his hands and dried them with a paper towel, and retrieved latex gloves from a box on the wall. Next, he reached into a plastic container nearby, flipped out a yellow paper gown, rammed his arms into the sleeves, and tied it at the waist. “Do just what I’ve done, and then get your mask.”

Lisa and her dad helped each other, and after considerable effort, both took a deep breath. The ties barely reached around her dad. “One size almost fits all.” He chuckled. Lisa noticed Doctor Raj did not smile.

“Remember you can talk to him; he will most likely be able to hear and understand what you say,” Doctor Raj said, “but don’t ask questions. He can’t answer you.”

“What do I say?” Lisa said.

“Just small talk, tell him that you love him, talk about the weather outside, whatever. Don’t talk about his injuries.”

Lisa and her dad walked into the room and gasped.

This ain’t my husband, Lisa thought. It can’t be. We’re in the wrong room. She stepped closer and covered her mouth with her hands, “Oh dear God.”

A nurse dressed in a yellow gown stood on the other side of the bed and in front of the ventilator machine; to Lisa, it looked like a robot with all kinds of lights and knobs. “Hi, my name’s Sonya. I’m Luke’s nurse for tonight.” She smiled at Lisa, “You must be his wife.”

Luke moved slightly.

“Yes, mam.”

“We are going to take really good care of Mr. Buchannan.”

Luke squirmed, tried to cough, and groaned. Lisa flinched. The ventilator machine beeped, and lights flashed. Sonya flipped the cover of an opening on his ventilator tube taped to his mouth. She slowly inserted the tube about 15 inches or more and slowly removed it with a twisting motion. Lisa heard a sucking sound, and the ventilator calmed down. She closed the opening and Luke’s chest moved up and down in a slow rhythm.

“What just happened?” Lisa said.

Sonya motioned the two to join her in the corner of the room. “We don’t want him to hear what we say,” she whispered. “The burned areas in his lungs secrete fluids, mucus forms, and the dead tissue sluffs off. He’s got to cough it up, but I’m here to help him. It should clear up in about three days, and we’ll wean him off the machine. It’ll depend on his O2 levels and his tolerance for pain.”

Her dad pointed, “What’s that blue stuff in the plastic bag?”

“We’re feeding him through a tube into his stomach.”

Lisa turned toward her dad with a puzzled look.

“It must go through that tube in his nose,” her dad said.

“Give that man a star by his name,” the nurse said. “Yes, it will provide him with all the calories he needs, about 9,000 a day. The mixture also has all the right stuff: vitamins, protein, fats, and such.”

“Sounds like a lot of calories,” her dad said.

“He’s lost a lot of tissue. To replace it, the healing process will require more than he could eat even if the tube were not in his throat.”

“Is he doing okay?” Lisa said.

“At the moment, he’s hanging in there.”

“Can I talk to him?” Lisa whispered.

“Sure,” Sonya nodded, “encouraging words, please.”

Lisa stepped toward the bed and leaned toward his ear, “Honey, I love you. I want you... I want you...to get better. Aaron sends his love. He misses you. You are in God’s hands, and He is going to see that you have everything you need.”

Lisa walked toward Sonya and whispered, “How bad is he burned?”

Sonya pulled the thermal cover back and exposed his naked body with huge white fluffy bandages covering large portions of his arms and legs.

Lisa began to sob and fell against her dad’s chest.

Sonya quickly covered him. “Sorry about that. I wasn’t thinking.”

Doctor Raj appeared at the door. “Time’s up.” He ushered her dad and Lisa out of the room.

Lisa started toward the exit. Doctor Raj touched her on the shoulder. “Hold on, the protective garb has to be left behind.”

She started to carefully untie and remove the yellow gown.

“Just tear it off and stuff it in this container; it goes to the incinerator anyway.”

She and her dad followed his instructions.

“Now, please join me in the conference room.”

Doctor Raj stood; her dad and Lisa sat in a chair at the table. “What’re his chances?” Lisa’s dad said.

“Of his survival, you mean?”

Her dad nodded slowly.

“We’ll know more in about 48 hours,” Doctor Raj said. “The goal now is to stabilize him and to begin debridement.”

Lisa sat down and put her head on the table, exhausted. Lord, please keep him alive.

“Stabilization depends mostly on his lungs and our ability to keep him out of *hypovolemic shock*. The loss of fluids can be devastating. That’s why you saw all the IV bags. We have to replace his fluids and maintain a proper balance of chemicals.”

“The paramedics started an IV at our house,” Lisa said.

“They did the right thing.”

“And his lungs?” her dad said.

“That’s unknowable at the moment. Aggressive treatment was more important than an exact understanding of the exact extent of his injuries.”

Lisa looked up. “What else could go wrong?”

“Infection,” Doctor Raj said.

“Don’t you have antibiotics?” her dad said.

“He got antibiotics on site, in the helicopter, and he’s getting a steady dose through his IVs and will for a long time. But, he has a lot of dead tissue in his lungs, other burn areas, and especially the deep burn areas. The dead tissue has to go.”

“Is there a name for that,” Lisa said.

“Yes, we call it *debridement*.”

“Painful.”

“Yes.” There was a somber note in his voice. “That’s not a pleasant thing for the patient or the nurses.”

“So how do they do that?” her dad said.

“Let’s save that discussion for a later time,” Doctor Raj handed them a booklet. “We provide this material to all family members so that they may have a better understanding of what our center offers and what our procedures entail. Please take it and read it before your next meeting.”

A young lady walked into the room, and everybody turned toward her. “I’m looking for Doctor Raj Solanki.”

“I’m he,” Doctor Solanki said.

“I’m here to get some intake information from the family of Mr. Luke Buchannan.”

He nodded toward Lisa. “This is Lisa, his wife.” He held out his hand toward her dad, “The father-in-law.”

“Doctor, I’m happy to wait until you’re finished.”

“No, you came at an opportune moment.” He turned to Lisa and her dad. “Help this young lady in any way you can. I have other patients waiting.”

Doctor Raj left the room.

“I’m Brenda; sorry to meet you under these circumstances, but this shouldn’t take long.” She sat down, opened her bag, and pulled out a clipboard with a stack of papers.

She retrieved her pen. “Since Mr. Buchannan came in with a life-threatening condition, it was impossible to interview him.”

“I understand,” Lisa said in a low voice.

“She’s exhausted,” her dad said, “can we hurry this up?”

“Sometimes we ask the patient or a family member to fill out these papers, but if it helps, I can read the questions, you give the answers, and I’ll record it for you. You’ll simply sign the papers when I’m finished.”

Brenda got all the contact and insurance information and a summary of the circumstances that caused his injuries. She began to read through a long list of diseases and asked Lisa to respond if he had a history of any of them. Lisa shook her head to each one.

“He’s as strong and healthy as an ox,” her dad said.

“Is he an alcoholic?” Brenda paused.

“No, absolutely not,” Lisa said.

“And you are sure about that?” Brenda said.

“Absolutely,” Lisa barked, “he may have a beer or two on the weekend, but never at work, and it never interferes with his life.”

“How about recreational drugs?” Brenda paused.

“Same thing,” Lisa said.

“Does that mean that sometimes on weekends, he takes recreational drugs?”

“It means that he never, and I mean never, takes any kind of drugs prescribed or recreational,” Lisa said. “He’d never do drugs; he’s too careful about his body to do a thing like that.”

“I’m sorry I had to ask those questions,” Brenda said. “I was simply following instructions.”

“Why’d they wanna know?” Lisa said.

“I’m not a medical person, so I can’t answer that. You’ll have to ask Doctor Solanki.”

“That does it,” Brenda said, “after you sign, you are free to go home and come back tomorrow if you like.”

“Is there anywhere that I can stay here? I brought my overnight bag.”

“Sorry, mam,” Brenda said, “there’s a hotel across the street.”

“I’d like to stay with him.”

“Well, that is really out of the question,” Brenda said. “Have you seen the room?”

Lisa nodded.

“It’s too small, and you’d just be in the way of the nurses.” Brenda paused. “And I’d recommend you not be aware of some of the procedures.”

Brenda stood, “The next visitation time is tomorrow morning at 10:30, and it lasts for only 10 minutes. I suggest you go home, get a good night’s rest, and come back tomorrow.”

“Let’s do that,” her dad said.

Brenda stood. “Don’t count on that visitation time being exact; sometimes a procedure takes longer than expected, or the patient is being attended to.”

Lisa pushed her chair back and took her dad by the arm, “Let’s go home.”

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