

KAREN KINGSBURY

FOREVER FAITHFUL

THE COMPLETE TRILOGY



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FOREVER FAITHFUL
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B O O K O N E

F O R E V E R F A I T H F U L

Waiting
for Morning

*Dedicated to
my best friend, Donald,
If life's a dance...
then I pray the music keeps playing forever.
Being married to you is the
sweetest song of all.*

*To Kelsey,
my softhearted little Norm,
I can see in you the beautiful
young woman you are becoming...
especially your eyes,
which so closely resemble your dad's
and your Father's.*

*To Ty,
my precious son...
whose flowers have given me
the most beautiful bouquet of memories.
I cherish watching you grow
in the image of the daddy you
so clearly emulate.*

*To Austin,
my greatest miracle...
watching you throw the ball
and make layups
is daily proof of God's unending love
and faithfulness,
even in the darkest days.*

*And to God Almighty,
Who has—for now—blessed me with these.*

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And finally, a special thanks to my dear friend, Julie Kremer.

One day nearly a decade ago, Julie's husband got a phone call from their teenage daughter. Her friend's car had broken down on the side of the road. Julie's husband did not hesitate but left immediately to help.

While he was out, he was hit and killed by a drunk driver, leaving Julie and two teenage children alone.

I never knew Julie's husband, but I will forever be touched by the way Julie forgave. She brought a Bible to the man who killed her husband, and after that, continued to keep her eyes on the Lord.

Thank you, Julie, for teaching me what it is to forgive...and for giving me a reason to write *Waiting for Morning*.

One

I am in torment within, and in my heart I am disturbed.

LAMENTATIONS 1:20A

Sunday Evening

They were late and that bothered her.

She had been through a list of likely explanations, any one of which was possible. They'd stopped for ice cream; they'd forgotten something back at the campsite; they'd gotten a later start than usual.

Still Hannah Ryan was uneasy. Horrific images, tragic possibilities threatened to take up residence in her mind, and she struggled fiercely to keep them out.

The afternoon was cooling, so she flipped off the air conditioning and opened windows at either end of the house. A hint of jasmine wafted inside and mingled pleasantly with the pungent scent of Pine-Sol and the warm smell of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies.

Minutes passed. Hannah folded two loads of whites, straightened the teal, plaid quilts on both girls' beds again, and wiped down the Formica kitchen countertop for the third time. Determined to fight the fear welling within her, she wrung the worn, pink sponge and angled it against the tiled wall. More air that way, less mildew. She rearranged the cookies on a pretty crystal platter, straightened a stack of floral napkins nearby, and rehearsed once more the plans for dinner.

The house was too quiet.

Praise music. That's what she needed. She sorted through a stack of compact discs until she found one by David Jeremiah.

Good. David Jeremiah would be nice. Calming. Upbeat. Soothing songs that would consume the time, make the waiting more bearable.

She hated it when they were late. Always had. Her family had been gone three days and she missed them, even missed the noise and commotion and constant mess they made.

That was all this was...just a terrible case of missing them.

David Jeremiah's voice filled the house, singing about when the Lord comes and wanting to be there to see it. She drifted back across the living room to the kitchen. *Come on, guys. Get home.*

She stared out the window and willed them back, willed the navy blue Ford Explorer around the corner, where it would move slowly into the driveway, leaking laughter and worn-out teenage girls. Willed her family home where they belonged.

But there was no Explorer, no movement at all save the subtle sway of branches in the aging elm trees that lined the cul-de-sac.

Hannah Ryan sighed, and for just a moment she considered the possibilities. Like all mothers, she was no stranger to the tragedies of others. She had two teenage daughters, after all, and more than once she had read a newspaper article that hit close to home. Once it was a teenager who had, in a moment of silliness, stood in the back of a pickup truck as the driver took off. That unfortunate teen had been catapulted to the roadway, his head shattered, death instant. Another time it was the report of an obsessive boy who stalked some promising young girl and gunned her down in the doorway of her home.

When Hannah's girls were little, other tragedies had jumped off the newspaper pages. The baby in San Diego who found his mother's button and choked to death while she chatted on the phone with her sister. The toddler who wandered out the back gate and was found hours later at the bottom of a neighbor's murky pool.

It was always the same. Hannah would absorb the story,

reading each word intently, and then, for a moment, she would imagine such a thing happening to her family. Better, she thought, to think it through. Play it out so that if she were ever the devastated mother in the sea of heartache that spilled from the morning news, she would be ready. There would be an initial shock, of course, but Hannah usually skimmed past that detail. How could one ever imagine a way to handle such news? But then there would be the reality of a funeral, comforting friends, and ultimately, life would go on. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord; wasn't that what they said? She knew this because of her faith.

No, she would not be without hope, no matter the tragedy.

Of course, these thoughts of Hannah's usually happened in less time than it took her to fold the newspaper and toss it in the recycling bin. They were morbid thoughts, she knew. But she was a mother, and there was no getting around the fact that somewhere in the world other mothers were being forced to deal with tragedy.

Other mothers.

That was the key. Eventually, even as she turned from the worn bin of yesterday's news and faced her day, Hannah relished the truth that those tragedies always happened to other mothers. They did not happen to people she knew—and certainly they would not happen to her.

She prayed then, as she did at the end of every such session, thanking God for a devoted, handsome husband with whom she was still very much in love, and for two beautiful daughters strong in their beliefs and on the brink of sweet-sixteen parties and winter dances, graduation and college. She was sorry for those to whom tragedy struck, but at the same time, she was thankful that such things had never happened to her.

Just to be sure, she usually concluded the entire process with a quick and sincere plea, asking God to never let happen to her and hers what had happened to them and theirs.

In that way, Hannah Ryan had been able to live a fairly worry-free life. Tragedy simply did not happen to her. Would not. She had already prayed about it. Scripture taught that the Lord never gave more than one could bear. So Hannah believed God had protected her from tragedy or loss of any kind because he knew she couldn't possibly bear it.

Still, despite all this assurance, tragic thoughts haunted her now as they never had before.

David Jeremiah sang on about holding ground, standing, even when everything in life was falling apart. Hannah listened to the words, and a sudden wave of anxiety caused her heart to skip a beat. She didn't want to stand. She wanted to run into the streets and find them.

She remembered a story her grandmother once told about a day in the early seventies when she was strangely worried about her only son, Hannah's uncle. All day her grandmother had paced and fretted and prayed...

Late that evening she got the call. She knew immediately, of course. Her son had been shot that morning, killed by a Viet Cong bullet. A sixth sense, she called it later. Something only a mother could understand.

Hannah felt that way now, and she hated herself for it. As if by letting herself be anxious she would, in some way, be responsible if something happened to her family.

She reminded herself to breathe. Motionless, hands braced on the edge of the kitchen sink, shoulders tense, she stared out the window. Time slipped away, and David Jeremiah sang out the last of his ten songs. Lyrics floated around her, speaking of the Lord's loving arms and begging him not to let go, not to allow a fall.

Hannah swallowed and noticed her throat was thick and dry. Two minutes passed. The song ended and there was silence. Deafening silence.

The sunlight was changing now, and shadows formed as evening drew near. In all ways that would matter to two

teenage girls coming home from a mountain camping trip with their father, it couldn't have been a nicer day in the suburbs of Los Angeles. Bright and warm, a sweet, gentle breeze sifted through the still full trees. Puffy clouds hung suspended in a clear blue sky, ripe with memories of lazy days and starry nights.

It was the last day of a golden summer break.

What could possibly go wrong on a day like this?

Two

How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!

LAMENTATIONS 1:1A

Sunday before Dawn

Long before the sun came up, Dr. Tom Ryan stirred from his rumpled sleeping bag and nudged the lumpy forms on either side of him.

“Pssst. Wake up. One hour ‘til sunrise.”

The sleeping figures buried themselves deeper in the down-filled bags, and one of them groaned.

“Ahhh, Dad. Let’s sleep in.”

Tom was already on his feet, folding his sleeping bag in a tight, Boy-Scout roll and wrapping it with a nylon cord. He poked his toe first at one form, then the other, tickling them and evoking a giggle from the chief complainer.

“Daaad. Stop!”

“Up and at ‘em. We have fish to catch.”

Alicia Ryan poked her head out of her bag. “We have enough fish.”

Tom was indignant. “Enough fish? Did I hear a Ryan daughter say we have enough fish? *Never* enough fish. That’s our creed. Now come on, get up.”

More groans, and finally Jenny Ryan’s mass of blond curls appeared near the top of her sleeping bag. “Give it up, Alicia. You know how Dad is on the last day.”

“That’s right.” Tom was already pulling a sweater on. “The last day of the Ryan camping trip is famous for being the best day to catch fish.”

Alicia sighed and struggled to sit up. She reached for a rubber band and shook her thick brown hair, gathering it into a ponytail. At that hour, Cachuma Lake was cold and damp, and Alicia shivered as she pulled her sleeping bag around her shoulders once more. “What time is it anyway?”

“Not important.” Tom unzipped the tent and ducked through the opening. “Time is for the civilized world. Today, there is only us and the fish.”

Alicia and Jenny glanced at each other, rolled their eyes, and snickered. “We’re coming,” Alicia shouted after him. They stretched and climbed into their jeans and sweatshirts.

The annual camping trip was held at Cachuma Lake mostly because it was famous for its fishing. Nestled in the mountains northeast of Santa Barbara off San Marcos pass, the lake was a crystal blue oasis in a canyon that typically experienced temperatures twenty degrees higher than those on the nearby coast. Swimming was not allowed in Cachuma Lake, which supplied all the drinking water to Santa Barbara. For that reason it attracted puritan fishermen, those to whom fishing was a serious venture.

Each year Tom Ryan and his girls spent three days at the lake. Days were devoted to fishing—and occasionally drifting near enough to a secluded cove to watch deer graze unaware. Sometimes they fished in comfortable silence, but many hours were spent with Tom and his teenage girls talking about boys or the importance of a college education or what it meant to live a life that pleased the Lord. There were lighter moments on the water as well, particularly when they recalled embarrassing escapades or memories of other camping trips. Once in a while they laughed so hard they rocked the boat and scared away the fish.

There were afternoon hikes along the narrow shoreline trails, and sometimes they would drive ten minutes to nearby Zaca Lake for a swim or a nap on the beach. Back at the campsite they built a bonfire each evening, cleaned fish, and fried

them for dinner. Then in the hours before they turned in, the girls would play cards while their father played his worn acoustic guitar and sang favorite hymns and church choruses.

Campsites were not far from the shore, hidden among gnarled oak trees and without the benefit of running water or modern bathroom facilities. The Ryans brought water in ten-gallon jugs, food in an oversized Coleman cooler, and an old canvas tent that had been in the family for fifteen years. Camping at Cachuma Lake was *roughing it* at its best, and Tom Ryan wouldn't have taken his girls anywhere else.

Jenny stuffed her sleeping bag into its sack and poked her sister in the ribs. "Hey, since it's the last day and all, I just might have to catch more fish than you." She was the youngest, and a friendly competition had always existed between the two.

"Oh, okay." Alicia pretended to be concerned. "I'll try to be worried about it."

Tom kept their aluminum fishing boat docked lakeside while they camped, so there was little to carry as he and the girls waved their flashlights at the trail and made their way to the water.

"It's freezing!" Jenny's loud whisper seemed to echo in the early morning silence. The path was damp and still, awaiting the crest of new-day sunshine to warm it and stir life into the wooded shoreline.

"Remember that feeling this afternoon when we're packing the gear and it's a hundred degrees." Tom grinned.

"I can't believe it's been three days already." Alicia moved close to Jenny so that the girls walked shoulder to shoulder.

"Time flies when you're fishing, that's what I always say." Tom inhaled the air, filled with energy, loving the early hour of the day.

They climbed into the boat and took their seats, adjusting their flashlights so each could see. Tom watched the girls with

pride. Like experienced fishermen, they maneuvered about the tackle box and baited their hooks.

“We’re off.” He flipped the switch on the battery-powered motor, and a deep puttering sound broke the reverie. The sun was climbing quickly, and the girls set aside their flashlights as the boat slipped away from shore.

Four hours later they were back. Jenny was the winner with three catfish, two bass, and a beautiful twelve-inch rainbow trout.

“You guys aren’t much competition.” She held up her string and sized up her catch. “You were right, Dad, nothing like an early morning run on the lake.”

“Oh, be quiet.” Tom laughed and shoved his youngest daughter playfully. He and Alicia had caught just five fish between them. “Let’s get back to camp. We have a lot to do if we’re going to be on the road by two.”

Alicia stepped out of the boat and led the way up the trail toward camp. Suddenly Jenny stiffened and pointed at the trail in front of her sister.

“Alicia!” Jenny’s scream was shrill and piercing. Tom and Alicia froze, and Tom followed Jenny’s pointing finger... There, coiled two feet from Alicia’s muddy hiking boots, was a hissing diamondback rattlesnake.

Tom’s heart jumped wildly. “Alicia—” he kept his voice calm, “don’t move, honey.” He pulled Jenny away and motioned for her to move farther behind him. He had treated snakebites before, but he’d never encountered a snake. This one was already angry and easily within striking distance.

“What should I do, Daddy?” Alicia sounded like a scared little girl.

God, please, protect my girl. And give me wisdom...

“Okay, honey—” he spoke quietly and with more confidence than he felt—“don’t let your feet drag in the dirt. Lift them one at a time...very slowly...and walk backward, away from the snake.”

Alicia whimpered. "He's staring at me, Daddy. What if he bites me?"

"You'll be all right, sweetheart. That won't happen if you back up slowly." *Please, God, let me be right.* "He doesn't want to bite you."

Alicia nodded. She was an energetic girl, ambitious and rarely given to moments of stillness. But now she moved painstakingly slow, and Tom was proud of her. Right foot, left; right foot, left. Three feet, then four separated her and the hissing snake. Right foot, left...right foot, left.

Tom grabbed her hand and pulled her toward him. Together they backed up even farther to where Jenny waited for them. Alicia crumpled in her father's arms and started to cry.

"Oh, Daddy, I was so scared," she mumbled into his grubby T-shirt.

Tom could feel his pulse returning to normal, and he stroked her hair silently. He could treat snakebites when he was in an emergency room with a vial of antivenin. But here, an hour from urgent care, Alicia might not have made it. "Thank you, God." Then to Alicia, "You did it just right, honey."

Jenny moved in then, wrapping her arms around her father and sister. "I thought you were going to step on him."

Alicia looked at her. "I would've if you hadn't screamed."

Both girls shuddered, and there was a pause while they clung to their father. Fifteen feet away, the snake stopped hissing, uncoiled, and slithered off the path into the shrubbery.

Tom broke the silence. "You know what it was, don't you?"

Alicia sniffled loudly and pulled away from him, running her palms over her jeans. "What?"

"He wanted to see Jenny's catch. Rumors spread quickly along the shoreline in these parts. He had to see for himself."

Alicia and Jenny grinned and wordlessly cued each other so that they ganged up on him and rubbed their knuckles against his head.

“Okay, okay, come on, you monkeys.” He took their hands and led them once more toward the campsite. “Let’s get the site cleaned up and the car loaded. Mom’s waiting for us.”

Three

Brian Wesley's body lay contorted, twisted underneath the rear axle of a '93 Honda Civic, while heat from the sweltering Los Angeles pavement radiated through his flesh. He drew breaths in quick, raspy gulps. In the cramped, dark place where he lay, the stench of grease and gasoline was suffocating. His pulse banged loud and fast, the sound of it nearly drowning out the roar of nearby traffic. He had to get air, had to calm the wild beating of his heart, the violent trembling of his hands, and the anxiety that engulfed him.

It had been three weeks since he'd had a drink.

Brian wiped the sweat and grime from his hands onto his worn Levi's and used the last of his remaining strength to steady his fingers. With fierce determination he gripped the torque wrench and made one final turn. There. He tried to breathe more slowly. One Civic rear axle, good as new. Three repairs to go.

If only he could take a few moments to settle his nerves, sip some cool water, maybe chew a piece of mint gum or eat a candy bar. Something, *anything*, before he lost his mind. Every part of him was screaming for a drink. He closed his eyes, and he could feel the fiery liquid sliding over his lips, satisfying the craving that coursed through his veins.

From somewhere near the shop's office, he heard footsteps. They were loud and threatening, making their way toward him.

"Wesley!" The voice barked out over the sound of humming machinery and noisy afternoon traffic.

From underneath the Honda, Brian studied his boss's shoes and struggled to compose himself. He had seen this coming for

days. He straightened his legs and used the heels of his worn work boots to push himself out from underneath the car.

“Yeah?” He blinked twice and felt his lip twitch wildly.

Steve Avery, shop manager and owner of Avery Automotive, sized him up like a sack of rotting leftovers. Brian stood and noticed his hands were shaking badly. He forced them into his pockets with a nervous jerk. Avery muttered something about laziness and then turned abruptly.

“Follow me.”

I'm finished. Brian swallowed painfully. *Too many guys, not enough work.*

They made their way past several cars in various states of repair and then through a door down a long corridor. Once inside, the roar of the garage died instantly. Avery led the way and made no effort at small talk as they entered a boxy, air-conditioned office.

“Sit down, Wesley.” The boss remained standing, sifting through heaps of clutter that covered his imitation oak desk. He did not look at Brian. “I’m laying you off, effective today.”

Brian gulped and his heart rate doubled. “Me?”

Avery looked over the rim of his glasses and glowered making Brian feel like a fearful failure of a man. “Yes.” Avery spat the word. “Know why?”

Brian shook his head. He couldn’t breathe, so talking was out of the question.

“Complaints, Wesley. That Honda was supposed to be done two days ago. These past three weeks you’ve had more customer complaints than in all your six months combined.”

“Well—” Brian tried to steady his voice—“I know business is slow and, uh, with less guys we each have a lot more work and all. So, uh, if you wanna cut my hours some maybe we could, you know, work something out.”

Avery stared at him, one eyebrow slightly elevated. “This has nothing to do with slow business. It’s you, Wesley. You’re the one who’s slow. You’re lazy and you’re making stupid mis-

takes. There's no discussion here. You're finished."

For an instant Brian thought his anger might actually overcome his anxiety. "Now wait a minute—!" He rose to his feet.

"Sit down!"

Brian's knees buckled as he collapsed back onto the metal folding chair.

"You're not pulling your weight, Wesley. Get your things and leave."

Brian hung his head and rose slowly to his feet. Before the door closed behind him, he felt the distinct blow of one more verbal dagger.

"Too bad you gave up the bottle... You work better drunk."

Brian stormed around the garage while the others worked quietly, keeping to themselves. He snatched his extra work shirt from the office closet, grabbed his power drill off a dusty shelf, and painstakingly picked up dozens of bits and ratchets, organizing them into his tool chest. Finally, he rolled the ten-drawer red steel container toward his pickup and, with the help of a buddy, heaved it into the bed of his beat-up, white Chevy pickup.

He climbed into the truck, grabbed the wheel with both hands, and dropped his head in defeat.

Brian knew Avery's dig was a lie. He wasn't a better mechanic when he was drinking. Fast maybe, but too sloppy. It was why he'd lost every job he'd ever gotten in the past five years. Customers smelled alcohol on his breath and reported him to the boss, or he'd drink through lunch hour and forget to report back until the next morning.

The drinking had been killing him, destroying him and Carla and everything he'd ever dreamed or desired.

He had tried to quit once three years before. He'd lasted two days. Two lousy days before he woke up in the front seat of his parked car, outside a shady liquor store, at four o'clock in

the morning, an empty bottle of Jack Daniels lying on the floor next to him.

After that he'd been a binge drinker for two years. There were five DUIs, two license suspensions, numerous alcohol education classes, and two separate car accidents—once when he rear-ended a neighbor's car and wound up in a head-on collision with a maple tree a block from home, and again when he pulled onto the freeway headed the wrong way. Someone had flashed headlights at him, and he'd turned into a guardrail, narrowly averting a tragedy. No one was really hurt in either accident, and he continued to drink—often waking up with a raging headache and no idea how he'd gotten home.

Carla cried and begged and threatened to leave, but she wasn't serious. Life would always go on as it had—his addiction far more powerful than he.

But all that changed six months earlier when Carla gave birth to their first child, a son, Brian Jr. The boy was a precious reminder of everything Brian had forgotten about life, a tiny living incentive that kindled within him a strong desire to change.

After Brian Jr.'s birth, Brian got the job at Avery Automotive and cut back on his drinking. Finally, three weeks ago, he quit for good. It hadn't been easy. He'd been forced to break ties with Big Al, his drinking partner, and he'd avoided driving by his favorite bars. His hands trembled nonstop, and he had frequent anxiety attacks.

But for the first time in his twenty-eight years, he believed he was a different man. He pictured himself putting in another two years at Avery Automotive and then taking a job with one of the dealers. A high-paying job with medical benefits and a dental plan. He'd buy a new truck and maybe some better tools. Eventually, he and Carla and Brian Jr. could move out of the noisy apartment and rent a small house in a safe neighborhood.

These were big dreams for Brian Wesley, and they had kept

him sober when he didn't think he could last another moment. Now, though, his dreams were good as dead.

He drove out of the shop's parking lot and considered his options. Left turn or right? Left and a mile west on Ventura Boulevard was The Office—a dimly lit sports bar where Brian had drunk away numerous paychecks in the past decade. Right and two miles east was the apartment complex where Carla and Brian Jr. would be spending the afternoon blissfully unaware of Brian's job status.

Right. Turn right. His hands trembled more violently and a thin line of perspiration formed on his upper lip. Panic simmered in his belly, and he gripped the steering wheel harder.

Just one drink, another voice argued. *One drink with the guys, enough to find the courage to face Carla.* He could feel the cool glass, smell the heady scent of forbidden liquor. *One drink. Just one drink.*

He turned his head and stared east. *Carla and Brian Jr.*

Carla would be so disappointed. Especially after he'd struggled to stay clean these past weeks. His arms were shaking now, his knees starting to knock. The drink was calling him, insisting. *One drink...one small drink.*

Three weeks of sobriety had to be worth something, some kind of reward. Besides, if he went home now, he and Carla would have it out, and he'd only wind up out after dark looking for any bottle he could get his hands on. *Do it now,* the voice said. *Just one drink. One drink. Calm your nerves and then go home. She'll never know the difference.*

"I can't...can't let 'em down," he hissed through clenched teeth. He could go home now, tell her the truth, and by tomorrow have a job somewhere else. There were dozens of garage jobs out there. "Just go home." He could feel the anxiety choking his voice, making each breath a struggle. "Come on. You can do it."

He inhaled. It was hard to get enough air. He set his jaw and forced the wheel to the right, toward Carla and Brian Jr.

Then, at the last possible moment, he wrenched the wheel in the other direction, and his pickup swung to the left.

In three minutes he was at The Office. And as he walked inside he could almost feel that first drink sliding smoothly down his throat, washing away his fears and anxiety—and all that remained of his dying dreams.

Nick Crabb was tending bar at The Office that afternoon, straightening bottles and wiping down the counter when a wide-eyed man walked in and stared at him.

“Where’s Rod?” The man’s feet seemed planted in the entryway.

Rod Jennings was manager at The Office. He worked five days a week and from everything Nick knew about him, he hadn’t missed a shift in two years. Rod had a special thing with the regulars, and the guy standing before him had the unmistakable look of someone who had done a great deal of drinking.

Nick dried his hands on a damp towel. “Sick. Food poisoning.”

The man blinked and then his shoulders slumped and he sighed. “Figures.” He moved toward the bar slowly, hesitating with every step. His hands were shaking, and he glanced over his shoulder nervously.

“Get you a drink?”

The man continued forward in jerky motions until he worked himself onto a stool. “Whiskey on the rocks, straight up.” He drummed his fingers anxiously on the bar, his eyes darting from bottle to bottle.

Nick hesitated for a moment. There was something strange about the guy...still he was a customer. Nick grabbed a tumbler, filled it with ice and whiskey, and set it on the bar. “You know Rod?”

“Yeah...old friends, Rod and me.” The man’s hands trembled

so badly that when he raised his glass he lost a few drops. Then he put the glass to his mouth and the drink disappeared. He set the glass down hard and with more confidence nodded toward the bottle. "Another."

In the other room the opening theme to *Rocky II* began playing. Nick poured a second drink. And a third. And another and another and another.

By the time the sad-looking man at the bar was on his twelfth or thirteenth drink in less than two hours, Nick was beginning to get worried. If only Rod were there. He would know whether the man had passed his limit. As it was, Nick had no idea. He was new at The Office—working to pay tuition at California State University Northridge. He watched the man nervously. He'd never had to cut anyone off before. Besides, the guy was Rod's friend. The last thing he wanted to do was offend the boss's buddy.

Nick wandered into the lounge where *Rocky II* was down to the final fight scene. Over the past two hours, an occasional customer had wandered in for a quick drink, but for the most part it was just the lone customer at the bar. From across the room Nick heard the man tap his glass impatiently.

"Another. Get in here and give me another."

His speech wasn't slurred. But he was getting loud and overbearing. Nick sighed and returned to the bar. "You sure?"

The man narrowed his eyes. "Don't get smart with me."

Nick shrugged and reached for the bottle. "You might want to give it a rest, that's all." He nodded toward the television. "Catch the last part of *Rocky* or something." He splashed house whiskey into a fresh glass of ice, and the man took it roughly. He downed it in three gulps and tossed several ten-dollar bills in Nick's direction. He stood then, somewhat slowly, and reached into his pocket, fumbling for something. Nick was about to offer to help when the man stopped and stared at him, his expression suddenly vulnerable.

"You know—" his voice was low and Nick strained to hear

him— “Rod should have been here.”

Nick counted the money and placed it in the cash register. “I told you, he’s sick.”

The man nodded and began fumbling in his pockets again. This time he found his keys, gripped them tightly in his fingers, and looked up. “Rod would have called her.”

Nick cocked his head back and studied the stranger. It almost looked like there were tears in his eyes. “Called who?”

“Carla. . .and then none of this ever would have happened.”

Nick leaned against the bar and crossed his arms. “Who’s Carla?”

The man’s expression hardened again. “Ah, forget it. You know, there ain’t nothing wrong with this world can’t be fixed with a drink or two.”

Nick studied his customer. “Whatever you say.”

The man stared at him through narrow eyes. “What would you know about it? You work back there, looking down at guys like me, guys who drink too much.”

“Hey, you okay, man?” Maybe, just maybe, this guy shouldn’t be driving. Even if he didn’t seem drunk.

The man clutched his keys tightly and shook his head. “Never mind me. . .get back to work.” He turned around and headed for the door.

“Hey, wait a minute. Answer me.” Nick came after him. “You okay? To drive, I mean?”

The man stopped and turned around. “Mind your own business.”

Suddenly Nick was sure. The man shouldn’t be driving. “Hey, buddy, why don’t you sit down for a minute. I’ll call you a cab. It’ll be on me.”

“You tryin’ to say I can’t drive myself home?”

“I’m saying I’ll hire you a cab, man. Either that or wait a while before you leave.”

A string of expletives split the air. “I’ll do whatever I want. And right now I’m going home.”

Nick wasn't convinced, but the situation seemed out of his hands. His boss had laid out the definition of a drunk on the first day: if someone could talk fine and walk fine and you were still worried about them, ask. Yeah, well, Nick had asked. There was nothing more he could do.

The man reached for the barroom door handle and missed, grabbing a fistful of air and nearly falling onto the floor in the process. Then with a jolt he threw his body against the door and disappeared into the parking lot.

Nick cringed. Several minutes later he heard the roar of a truck and then the sound of squealing tires as someone pulled out of the parking lot onto Ventura Boulevard.

Tom glanced at the clock and grimaced. They'd gotten on the road later than he'd wanted, but they'd still be home before dinner. He glanced at his daughters and grinned.

They had been driving for nearly two hours, and still the girls had not run out of things to talk about. School was about to start and with the annual camping trip behind them, Jenny and Alicia clearly couldn't wait to see their friends, get their class schedules, catch up on the latest teenage gossip. Tom glanced at them in the rearview mirror of the family's Ford Explorer. Sweet, silly, precious girls.

He sighed and tried to memorize their giggling faces. They were fifteen and thirteen that year, and Tom knew his summers with them were numbered. His little girls were growing up.

Years ago when he and Hannah married, he had assumed they'd have sons. When instead they had Alicia and Jenny, Tom made the most of the situation. The girls went fishing with him every summer from the time they were able to walk. They tossed a football with him and played Little League ball as good as any boys in the neighborhood.

But they also climbed onto his lap at night, melting his heart with their silky lashes and wide-eyed adoration. He was

their hero, and they were each his princess. For now he was still the only man in their hearts. He knew that would change soon. Precious little time remained before they would be gone with families of their own, so he treasured this trip even more than the others.

He had never known times like this with his father. His parents divorced when he was ten, and though his father promised to stay close, there was never enough time, and the roadway of his adolescence had been paved with unfulfilled intentions and missed opportunities. One boyhood memory stood clear in his mind. He was in Scouts, twelve years old, and it was the morning of the father-son Pinewood Derby. His father was dating a new woman that month and barely had time for Tom. Still, he promised he would meet him that day.

Tom could still see himself, a skinny, freckle-faced kid watching and waiting expectantly for his father that afternoon. One hour, then two. Other fathers offered to include him but Tom said no. His father would come, he was sure. He waited and waited until finally his friends and their fathers began to leave. As he climbed back onto his ten-speed and headed for home, angry tears trickled down his hot cheeks, and he made a promise to himself. He would never be an absent father. When he had children, he would be there for them.

Tom Ryan smiled softly at the noisy girls in the backseat. He had kept his promise.

He leaned back against the headrest and tuned them out, studying the heavy flow of L.A. traffic on Highway 101 through dark amber Ray Bans. He sighed. He already missed the serenity of the lake.

His mind drifted to Hannah. He'd missed her even more... her smile and her laughter, the way she felt in his arms. Amazing, really. After seventeen years of marriage they were still very much in love. He and Hannah were a rare breed anymore, even among their Christian friends. And to think he had almost married someone else. The idea seemed comical now.

He imagined Hannah's reaction when he told her about Alicia and the rattlesnake. She'd probably go on about how the girl could have been bitten and how they were too far into the wilderness to find help and how maybe the camping trip was too dangerous after all.

He grinned. Hannah wasn't one for camping or threading—*impaling*, she called it—worms on fishhooks or getting her fingernails dirty. She was especially afraid of snakes. But Alicia hadn't really been in that much danger. Besides, he was a doctor, a pediatrician. The snake had only added to their adventure. As their annual camping trip went, this was one he and the girls would remember forever.

He maneuvered the Explorer into the right lane and took the Fallbrook exit. A quick stop at the bottom of the off-ramp, and he turned the vehicle left, under the freeway. Typically there would be a wait at the intersection of Fallbrook and Ventura Boulevard, but this time the light was green.

Good. Tom smiled. *Home in ten minutes.* He pulled into the intersection long before the light turned yellow.

Only Jenny saw it coming. There was no time to scream, no time to warn the others like she had earlier along the path at Cachuma Lake. One moment she was looking at Alicia, asking her about Mrs. Watson's English class, and the next, in a mere fraction of an instant, she saw a white locomotive coming straight at them, inches from Alicia's face.

There was a horrific jolt and the deafening sound of twisting, sparking metal and shattering glass. Jenny screamed, but it was too late. The Explorer took to the air like a child's toy spinning wildly and coming to rest wrapped around a telephone pole a hundred feet away.

Then there was nothing but dark, deadly silence.

Four

How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations!

LAMENTATIONS 1:1B

Sal's Diner had been in business at the corner of Ventura Boulevard and Fallbrook for twenty-five years, and Rae McDermott had worked the counter faithfully for the last fifteen. That summer afternoon she was thankful the lunch crowd had been light. Another half hour and she could leave early. She needed to get some milk at the market before picking up the baby at the sitter's house. She made a mental shopping list as she ran a worn, bleach-soaked dishrag over the counter.

With a sigh, she stretched, then balled up her fists and pressed them into the small of her back. As she did so she glanced outside at the traffic on Ventura...and frowned. A white pickup truck, headed for the intersection, was speeding. Rae felt a rush of dread. The light was red, but the driver showed no signs of stopping.

She moved across the diner, drawn to the scene, desperately hoping the truck would stop. Suddenly, from south of the boulevard, an Explorer came into view on Fallbrook.

"Dear God..."

The scene seemed to unfold in slow motion, and there was nothing Rae could do to stop it. The two vehicles careened toward the intersection, then collided. The impact was so explosive it was surreal, like something from a violent action movie. The Explorer spun off the ground in a cloud of dust and glass and shredded metal, and Rae watched it sail across the street and wrap around a utility pole a hundred feet away.

“Dear God,” she whispered again, and dashed across the diner, grabbed the telephone, and dialed 9-1-1.

Sergeant John Miller of the Los Angeles Police Department was a veteran in handling traffic accidents. He had worked traffic for twenty-three years and had seen hundreds of dead bodies. Most of the victims had never seen the crash coming. They were getting off work or heading home from the market with no idea they were living their final moments. Too often Sgt. Miller had lifted a dead child from the backseat of a car or pulled a dead mother out of a mangled vehicle while her baby cried, unaware of its loss. More times than he could remember, he had watched paramedics perform CPR while someone’s father or grandfather or sister or niece bled to death on a grease-covered, trash-strewn piece of roadway.

The temptation was to become callous. Survival, his peers called it. Form a tough veneer, a carefully maintained wall between his emotions and the reality of working traffic in a city like Los Angeles. That’s how most of the officers he knew coped with their own vulnerability.

But Miller was different. He was a Christian, a born-again believer who had come to understand mangled vehicles and mutilated bodies as part of a fallen world. Often he reassured himself with Scripture... “I know the number of your days, says the Lord...” “What is your life? You are but a mist that appears for a little while...”

No, he hadn’t grown callous, but neither did he fear the dangers that lurked on L.A.’s busy streets. Nothing happened outside God’s control, and that was all that mattered.

In fact, he believed his presence at various accidents was often divinely appointed. Sometimes, very quietly, he would pray for—or even with—the victim. Once he had held the hand of a man who was bleeding to death as rescue workers used the jaws-of-life to extricate him from his car.

He'd talked to the man through a hole in the shattered windshield. "Do you believe in Jesus?" He volunteered to keep the victim alert throughout the rescue. He wanted to be sure the man would spend eternity with God.

"I know of him."

Father, give me the words... "He is the Son of God, God in the flesh. He died to give you life, and he wants you to have that salvation now. It's yours for the asking."

The other rescue workers continued their noisy efforts, unaware of the dialogue between him and the dying man. The victim had struggled then, choking on his blood. But his words had been vividly clear. "I want that. Yes, please pray for me."

Sgt. Miller did as the man asked. Rescue efforts had been futile, and the man was listed as DOA at the hospital. But the sergeant knew better. The man was very much alive, and he looked forward to seeing him again in heaven.

The very idea of sharing the grace of Jesus Christ with people in their dying moments made him thankful for his position with the LAPD. He likened it to the parable Jesus told of the workers who worked only a short while yet received an entire day's wage. The sergeant saw himself as the man who introduced Jesus to those who only believed a short while yet shared the same salvation as those who had known Christ all their lives. Physical death was a part of life. Because of his work, Sgt. Miller understood that better than most. All the more reason to cling to Jesus, he figured. Death would not have the final say.

Sgt. Miller received the call at 4:25 that afternoon: Accident with multiple injuries at Ventura and Fallbrook. Two fire engines, three ambulances, and four paramedics were on the way, as were two LAPD squad cars. He grabbed his keys and an accident notebook and moved swiftly through the office, out the back door toward his unmarked car. It was his job to orchestrate the roles of each emergency worker, gather witness information, and make sure protocol was followed perfectly in case an arrest was in order.

As always, he asked God to use him mightily in the next few hours and to comfort the victims and their family members.

“It doesn’t matter what task you have for me out there, Lord,” he whispered as he flipped on his siren. “Just use me.”

Brian Wesley opened his eyes. Was he dreaming?

His head hurt...He looked around and saw that his windshield was shattered. Shards of glass covered his legs and the seat next to him, and he realized he must have been in some kind of accident. He ran his fingers tentatively over his arms and legs...Nothing seemed to be broken. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head, trying to clear his vision. It was then that he noticed the front end of his truck was missing.

He gazed across the intersection and saw another vehicle wrapped around a utility pole. People were all around it, working to get inside.

Brian’s blood ran cold. This was no dream.

He had gotten drunk and now he’d hit somebody.

“Oh, man, please be okay.” His arms and legs shook, racked with the beginning of a raw fear more potent than any he had known before. He tried to get out, but his truck door was jammed. He turned around, kicking it open with his heavy work boots. Eyes wide, heart and head pounding, Brian walked across the intersection.

Today is the first day of the rest of your life...

The cliché floated through his mind—and chilled him to the bone.

Two motorists had stopped and were working alongside a woman in an apron. All were trying to free the people inside the vehicle. As Brian drew closer, he saw them lean inside, then together they lifted the limp, bloodied body of a teenage girl from the backseat and lay her gently on the grassy curbside. The woman with the apron covered the girl’s legs with a blanket.

“Oh, no...” It took Brian a second to realize the whining voice was his.

In the distance, sirens grew louder with each passing moment.

Brian tried to swallow, but his throat was so dry it almost choked him. “Hey, man, is she...is she all r-r-r-right?” He was consumed with dread, and he felt his knees start to shake again. The woman in the apron looked up at him, studied him for a moment, and then turned back to the girl. The two men were trying to find her pulse, and one of them began giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

The sirens were very close now, and Brian could see several emergency vehicles speeding into view. Relief swept him. *Hurry! Hurry! She needs you!* He couldn’t take his eyes from the girl lying on the curb. The others continued working on her without acknowledging him. Brian saw the woman in the apron begin to cry and the men sit back on their heels. They were giving up.

“W-w-w-wait...she n-n-n-needs help, man!” He moved toward the girl, but the woman in the apron rose to her feet.

“Get back!” She spat the words at him. “You’ve done enough!”

One of the men came to put a hand on her arm. “Come on. Let’s check the others.” They studied Brian for an instant, disgust clear on their faces, then turned to what remained of the Explorer.

Brian saw the girl’s face then...It was a pretty face, framed by honey-colored brown hair. But it was a lifeless face. Even he could see that. He sank to his knees ten feet from where the girl lay—ten feet from the body of a girl who would never again hold her mother’s hand or kiss her daddy good-night or dance across a living room floor...

A wail erupted from somewhere deep within him. He willed himself dead in her place, willed anything that might breathe life into her once more. Then his wailing became one

word, so weighted with regret that he felt it would consume him: “Noooo!”

Sgt. Miller arrived at the scene moments after the paramedics and saw both vehicles. The first one, a white pickup truck, had heavy front-end damage. The second vehicle was almost unrecognizable. Miller could see it was a Ford Explorer, one of the safest vehicles on the road, but it might have been made of tin-foil the way it wrapped around the pole. The impact must have been unbelievable, like getting broadsided by a freight train.

Sgt. Miller made his way to where a small crowd gathered near the twisted remains. Immediately an officer filled him in on the situation.

“We have a deceased female, maybe fourteen, fifteen years old; and two additional victims, a male, late thirties, head wounds, massive bleeding.”

Miller felt his shoulders slump imperceptibly. A young girl with her whole life ahead of her. He made several notations on the accident report and wondered if she had known the Lord. “Third victim?”

“Female, twelve, maybe thirteen years old, head injury and a broken arm. She has the best chance of making it.”

“Identification?”

“We have a home address for the male victim, some pictures. Guy’s a doctor. Tom Ryan. Female victims look to be his daughters.”

“Next of kin?”

“Nothing yet. Figured we’d do a drive-by when the ambulances leave.”

Sgt. Miller nodded. They didn’t always do drive-by notification. Quite often family members were notified by a hospital representative. But in accidents this serious, with multiple injuries—perhaps even multiple fatalities—the officers thought it was best to notify the family in person.

“Driver of the pickup?”

“Minor injuries. He’s in the squad car, cuffed.”

“Drunk?”

“Can’t you smell him?”

For a moment, Miller felt defeated. Another family destroyed by a drunk driver. Somehow with all their efforts, they weren’t doing enough to stop the problem. He pursed his lips. “You do the test?”

“Preliminary. Failed the straight line. I thought I’d wait for you to get the blood test.”

“Witnesses?”

“A lady, Rae McDermott, works in the diner across the street. And a couple of motorists. They’re still here.”

Sgt. Miller strained to see which of the victims was now laying on a stretcher and receiving attention from two paramedics. It was the young female. “Where’s the male victim?”

“They’re using the jaws-of-life. He’s bleeding pretty bad, trapped in the front seat. I don’t think he’s going to make it.”

The sergeant sighed and closed his notebook. He dismissed the officer and approached the mangled vehicle. Fire department rescue workers were busy on one side of the vehicle, so he walked to the other. Sleeping bags and camping gear had spilled onto the road. An ice chest had opened and dead fish littered the roadway as well. What a way to end a camping trip.

He saw a small passage where the window had been and gingerly stuck his head and upper body inside. The victim’s entire left side was pinned beneath layers of metal and draped with fireproof tarps. One paramedic was stationed under the tarp, just outside the driver’s door, waiting for the instant he could remove the man and begin treatment. Beyond him, another firefighter used a blowtorch to separate the wreckage while the jaws hummed and screeched, working to peel away the layers of metal.

Miller focused on the victim. There was a gash across the man’s forehead, and despite the noise, Miller could hear the

man struggling to breathe. Still, he seemed semiconscious. Reaching out, Miller took the man's hand in his own. He raised his voice over the machinery. "Sir, can you hear me?"

The man jerked his head twice and his eyelids began to tremble.

"We're doing everything we can to get you out of here. Can you hear me, sir?"

Suddenly the machines stopped as the separated layers were removed and set aside.

"Let's do it!" It was the paramedic stationed under the tarp. He moved, pressing fingers to the man's neck, feeling for a pulse. Then he shouted to the others. "Come on, *move it!* We're losing him!"

"Can you hear me, sir?" Sgt. Miller asked again. The vehicle was quieter inside now, almost tomblike. This time the man stirred and seemed suddenly frantic, anxious to speak.

Help him, Lord, help him say what he wants to say.

Suddenly the man's lips parted and he worked his mouth silently. Miller strained to hear him.

"The girls..."

This wasn't the time to tell him about the older girl. The man would have to remain calm if the rescue was to have a chance of being successful. He squeezed the man's hand. "Sir, they're already out. We're working on them right now."

The man seemed slightly reassured. A gurgling sound came from his throat, and he sucked in another breath. "Tell Hannah—" the man gulped, clearly fighting unconsciousness—"tell Hannah...the girls...I love them." He opened his eyes, and Miller saw an unmistakable peace there.

"I'll tell them. Now you hang on. We're getting you out of here and you can tell them yourself."

The man gulped again and his eyes rolled back for a moment and then closed. His lids twitched violently and once more his lips moved. Miller squeezed the man's hand another time. "Stay calm now, you're almost out of here."

But the man grew more agitated, his mouth opening and shutting soundlessly. He was slipping away, but he seemed desperate to speak.

Sgt. Miller moved closer. "It's okay, sir...I'm here. I'm listening."

The gurgling grew louder and the man coughed. Miller held back a grimace. The man was choking on his own blood. He was gasping for each breath, and his words were slurred, but finally they were audible.

Miller strained to understand.

"Tell Hannah...tell her...please, forgive...forgive..."

He said something after that but Sgt. Miller couldn't make it out. "You want Hannah to forgive someone, is that it?"

The man's entire body relaxed, and Sgt. Miller thought he saw him nod.

"We're losing pressure!" The paramedic's voice was angry. "Come on, let's *open* this thing." The machines whirred once more, and finally the man was free. Two paramedics lifted him immediately onto a backboard.

"He's not breathing! Prepare to intubate."

In a blur of commotion the paramedics worked on the man, doing everything they could to stabilize him.

Passersby had gathered, and now a crowd of stricken onlookers gaped at the bloodied man, watching the paramedics work frantically to save him. In less than a minute he was loaded into an ambulance while the EMTs used an oxygen pump and manually compressed the man's chest.

As the ambulance drove off, Miller looked around and knew his work at the scene was finished. He'd talked to the witnesses, each of whom had agreed that the driver of the pickup had sped through a red light and hit the Explorer without ever slowing.

Miller looked at his notes. The other driver was Brian Wesley, age twenty-eight...five prior DUIs. He'd been arrested and taken to the West Valley Division, where he would be

booked. He had been given a blood alcohol test—the results of which would not be available from the crime lab for several weeks.

If the results were positive, Wesley would be formally charged with whatever crimes the district attorney's office thought they could prove—anything from driving under the influence to vehicular manslaughter. A plea bargain might be struck, but because of the man's prior record and the severity of the accident, most likely the case would be ordered to trial.

Then months or maybe even a year later, after delays and continuances, when the memory of the accident had faded in the minds of witnesses, a trial date would be set. The trial would drag on for a month or more, and finally Brian Wesley might be convicted. At that point, barring some sort of judicial miracle, Wesley would most likely serve less than a year behind bars for destroying the Ryan family.

Sgt. Miller removed his sunglasses and rubbed his temples. Tow trucks had arrived at the scene and were busy removing the wreckage of the two vehicles. It was late, nearly 5:30, and his worst task lay ahead.

He remembered how the injured man had struggled to speak, how desperately he'd wanted to relay what might be his final message to his family. What was it the man had said? Something about getting mad...or about not getting mad. The sergeant wasn't sure anymore; the past hour had been so chaotic, so tense. Besides, the accident hadn't been Mr. Ryan's fault. No one could be angry at him. Miller shrugged. Best to forget it, whatever it was. For all he knew, the man had mumbled the words out of shock or delirium.

Either way, Miller remembered the most important part of Ryan's message: Tell Hannah and the girls he loved them.

Sgt. Miller sighed. It was time to tell Hannah.