



Finding Rita's Way

Russell Sisson

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Xerellian Press

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THE GIFT

CHAPTER ONE

When I was around eight or nine years old I discovered that I had some special faculty or ability. I only call it special because it was something that I didn't even know I had and well, that made it matter. The only reason I suspected I had something special was because of an event that happened to me. An occurrence that I could not explain in any other way, other than to believe that I was directly involved in some phenomenon that had no rational interpretation. You could call it a sixth sense but that would just be a fancy word for saying the same thing. My parents made up their own name for it. They called it a gift. Yep, I had a gift, although I didn't really know what that meant. To me, gifts were the things you were given on special occasions, like birthdays or Christmas. My mental image of a gift was that it was something that came in some kind of box, wrapped with special paper and tied up with some fancy ribbon and a bow. I suppose I was being pretty naive but I wasn't very old then and that was what came to mind. So as I said, to say I had a gift didn't quite make sense to me. I didn't think I was anybody special and if there were gifts involved, where were they? I suspected that if I was the gift, then shouldn't I be wrapped up like a present? No, that just didn't make any sense either. I couldn't quite figure

out how I could have a gift when there were no presents to be had. Just try to humor me.

One thing that I did know about gifts was that they were always something given to you by someone else. You didn't know what the gift was until you opened it, but you knew it must be something special. Thankfully, the outside of the present usually presented a clue. It revealed who gave it to you. If you were savvy, like most of us kids, who gave it to you told you a lot about how good the present was going to be. Sometimes knowing that was a good thing and other times, not so much. In other words, sometimes you were just plain old disappointed. Regardless, there was a certain excitement in just receiving a gift. It wasn't ever supposed to be about what was inside, the fancy box or the wrapping paper. Seriously? That whole thing about how it was the thought that counted was just something people said when they got a gift that was lame. Anyway, what were my parents thinking when they said I had a gift? If I had a gift, what was it, who gave it to me and why?

There were times when my father would say that my mother had a gift for gab. I asked my mother what he meant by that one time and she said it just meant that he thought she talked a lot. I figured then somebody must have given that thing called gab to her. She said that gab wasn't something that was given to you, it was just something that you had. She said that she enjoyed talking to people. They talked to her and she talked back. That was why she thought she had it. She had gabbed all of her life and it simply came natural to her. I wasn't quite sure, but I figured that must some how be related to the gift I supposedly had.

As I pieced it together, it seemed that my gift wasn't something physical given to me. It was just something that I had. Whatever that meant. I was still confused, but less so.

None of my friends ever said that I had a gift. We didn't talk like that. At times I might have thought that I had a talent for playing baseball or football, but that was about it. Whenever we would form teams to play ball, I was always the one chosen somewhere near the top. But that was only because I was pretty good at playing ball. At least I thought so. I suppose that could be called a talent. To me, talent was something that you developed over time. I worked hard to become a good ball player. So I had a talent for sports. But a gift? I didn't think so. Being a good ball player wasn't something I had been given. I earned it.

Needless to say, it wasn't till much later that I finally figured out what my parents meant by a gift. I guess that was when they finally came up with that label too. Turns out it had nothing to do with a box, a present or any other kind of physical object. What I had was something inside of me that allowed me to know things that other people didn't know. I had it, but I never knew it was there until it just came out one day. When it would happen I couldn't say. Why it would happen, ditto. I've never been able to pin it down exactly. It just happened when it needed to happen.

As a young boy, I used to play with the neighbor kids just about every afternoon. The main thing we did was play ball out in the street in front of our houses. I guess that was where I got that talent thing. By play ball, I mean we played with all different types of balls, depending on the sporting season at the time. It could have been baseball, football,

basketball or just plain old kickball. It didn't really matter which. It was too far to walk over to the school and I suppose, we were just a little lazy. So we made the street our field or court or whatever. The hidden benefit was that it got us out of the house. That made our parents happy and we were happy to be away from the overbearing rules of our parents and their annoying expectations.

We lived in a typical middle class neighborhood where the fathers went off to work and the mothers stayed home to take care of us kids. Most of the neighbors had kids but, in my case, we lived next to an older couple that had no kids. They were nice enough people but, since they had no kids, we didn't really socialize with them too much. Or at least us kids didn't socialize very much with them. All I knew was that their names were Mr. and Mrs. Franklin. We preferred to call the man, Old Man Franklin. He was kind of a peculiar old man, but that wasn't just because we thought all old people were peculiar. Old Man Franklin just happened to be the peculiar old man who lived next door.

There was one thing that Old Man Franklin would do that annoyed us to no end. As I said, we played out in the middle of the street. That was our playground. Well, every afternoon after work Old Man Franklin would round the corner in his big old yellow Cadillac car and slowly maneuver his way right down the middle of our field. Obviously, that made us all scurry frantically to the sides, not wanting to be hit by a car. Remember those overbearing parent rules? That was one of them. They didn't want any of us maimed or killed by some crazy runaway car. Any car coming onto our street was the signal

to everyone that it was time to spread ourselves thin and split like a banana. That rule applied to Old Man Franklin's car as well. Old Man Franklin would stop about mid way in the street, try to coax us back onto the field and attempt to be friendly with us. You know, talk about baseball or football or something that he thought would interest us. Of course all we wanted him to do was keep moving on so we could get on with our game. After a short stop of stern looks and no communication, he'd get the message, proceed on down the street and we would make our way back out to the center of the field of play to continue our game.

Next thing we knew, Old Man Franklin would come around the corner again. Automatically, we would all scramble our way to the curb again, only to see Old Man Franklin, with a stupid smirk on his face, slowly make a left turn into his driveway. He would then leisurely get out of his car, making sure we could see him, and with a wave of his hand, laugh to himself as he strode into his house.

Over time, Old Man Franklin's trip-around-the-block eccentricity never changed. We never did seem to learn to just ignore him. Maybe, and this pains me, we enjoyed his little antics? We learned wisely from our parents that we needed to get out of the street when we saw or heard a car coming. We did not hesitate to scramble for the sidelines whenever we saw a car rounding the corner. No matter who's car it was. We started to see less and less of Old Man Franklin returning home from work in the afternoons. Instead, we started seeing Old Man Franklin's big old yellow Cadillac remain parked in his driveway. Where was

Old Man Franklin? Not that we cared, but we did notice something was amiss.

If there was one thing parents were good for, it was prying information from them about things that were really none of our business. It was kind of like a game. They knew we wanted something and we figured out how to get it from them. One day, after making my way home from school, I opened up the front door and stepped inside to see Mrs. Franklin sitting in the living room with my mother. I knew something was up because as soon as they caught a glimpse of me, they clammed up. Of course, everyone knows that can only mean one thing. It meant that they were talking about something that did not involve me and I wasn't supposed to hear anything else from that point on. So I pretended to stomp my way down the hall to my bedroom, only to turn around and slowly, quietly make my way back towards the living room. By that time my mother and Mrs. Franklin had re-engaged. In chess lingo, that would be checkmate.

I saw Mrs. Franklin uncontrollably sobbing as she told my mother how Old Man Franklin had been diagnosed with something I hadn't heard of before. Something she called dementia. It must not have been a good thing because I saw my mother trying to catch her breath. That was followed almost immediately by her asking Mrs. Franklin if there was anything she could do? Mrs. Franklin said that Mr. Franklin had been diagnosed with being in the very early stages yet, but the two of them recognized that it was only going to get worse. He had already started to forget things, mainly insignificant things. He would not remember

where he left the remote for the television. Or he would forget to flush the toilet. They both knew that this would lead to more serious lapses of memory and, eventually, forgetting who she was. Even forgetting who he was, where he lived and what he was doing there.

Most of what I heard that day I forgot about. This thing called dementia kind of went way over my head. One day, a good time later, the boys and I were out playing ball in the street when I looked over and saw that Mrs. Franklin was heading over to my house. As she walked up to the front porch, my mother opened the door and led her inside with her arm draped around Mrs. Franklin's shoulder. Distracted, I missed the call on the next play and ended up just standing there while the others did their thing. The other guys were busy upbraiding me, when my mother came out the front door and made her way over to where we were playing. We all kind of looked up, startled. We knew it wasn't lunch or dinner time and she had this very serious look on her face, so we knew something weird was up. She gathered all of us around her and said she had a very serious question for us. She wanted to know if any of us had seen Old Man Franklin? We all looked around at each other sheepishly, thinking we had done something wrong. Were we supposed to be looking for him? We all answered in unison that we had not seen him. In fact, we said, we hadn't seen Old Man Franklin for days. I thought the question rather curious, but the others didn't seem to notice its peculiarity. I thought it peculiar only because I remembered the conversation that Mrs. Franklin and my mother had a while ago. I knew there was something else

going on. Why else would my mother interrupt our game with such an off-the-wall question?

As my mother made her way back inside the front door of our house, I made some lame excuse to my friends and headed straight for the back door. Once inside, I assumed my position in the hallway off the living room, like I had done before. Once again, I could hear Mrs. Franklin crying and sobbing uncontrollably. I heard my mother tell her not to worry, that she would make a few phone calls and Mr. Franklin would be home none-to-soon. Turning to go to my bedroom, the last thing I heard was that Mr. Franklin had been gone for over six hours now. Mrs. Franklin said he had never been gone that long before, but when he had gone missing, he was always found shortly just wandering around the neighborhood. Just wandering, seemingly lost.

My mother encouraged Mrs. Franklin to head back home, in case Mr. Franklin returned. My mother said she would let her know if she heard anything. After Mrs. Franklin left, my mother made some short phone calls, explaining what was going on. The last of which was to the police. From my mother's reaction, I had a feeling that the police would be at our door momentarily. I felt I needed to step up and let my mother know that I was there to help. So I went over to her and gave her a big, hearty hug. That was enough to open up the floodgates and I got more than enough information pouring out of my mother to explain what all the fuss was about. Enough to tell me that Old Man Franklin was in serious trouble. He was nowhere to be found, probably scared to death and didn't know how to get back home from wherever he was.

Needless to say, I didn't really know what to make of all this. Adults not knowing who they were or where they were? That just sounded crazy, but as it all started to sink in there was no denying it was real. Clearly, Mrs. Franklin was very concerned for her husband's whereabouts. My mother was quite distraught. All I could do was wait with her for the police to show up. When they did, I left the police to their duties and retreated back into my bedroom. A while later, I heard the front door open and the voice of Mrs. Franklin saying hello. I assumed the police had wanted to discuss the situation further with her. They were trying to piece together as many details as they could. I closed the door, feeling like my mother and Mrs. Franklin were in good hands.

I sat in my room trying to figure out what to do with myself. Do I just wait? Do I go back out and play ball? I looked at the door and it seemed to open for me, just a crack. I got this uncontrollable urge to head back outside. I got up and walked out, straight through the back door and outside. I had a feeling like there was something else I was supposed to do. It wasn't to go back to playing ball with my friends. I just knew I had to get out. Get outside and go somewhere. Where, I didn't know. I just needed to leave. My friends thought I was coming back out to play ball, but I just walked right on by them. They looked at me like I was some kind of zombie or something. I found myself walking without any real sense of direction, but I seemed to be heading somewhere. As I got down to the end of my street, I rounded the corner as if I knew what I was doing. I'm not sure why I turned the direction I did, but I just kept going. I looked up and could see that I was on a street lined with

shady trees that hung over the road like a canopy. I slowed down, starting to feel a little nervous, anxious. I hadn't ever been this way before. This was all new territory to me, but I couldn't stop now. I kept following the tree-lined street until it ended and emptied out into a large park with lots of grassy knolls and plenty more trees. This was definitely unfamiliar territory for me, but somehow it seemed right.

Off in the distance there was a nice set of baseball diamonds and a big sign promoting the Little League teams that played there. This was the place I had heard of, the place where I would be playing Little League some day. All the kids in the neighborhood had heard of this place, but, quite frankly, we didn't really know where it was. All we knew was playing Little League ball meant we were ready for the big time. The field certainly looked as if it was the big time. The grass field was nicely groomed and mowed. The infield dirt was smooth, wetted down and properly raked. The baselines were marked with real lime. There was a professional rubber on the pitcher's mound. There were bases, real bases, not just pieces of cardboard that we pretended were bases. To top it off, there were dugouts. One for each team. Each with their own bench, water fountain and batter's on-deck circle. This was the real deal. I could just imagine myself wearing a real baseball uniform, complete with the team name and my own official number on the back. I would have my own baseball cap, a new glove and a brand new pair of shoes with cleats.

As I stood there looking out at the field, my imagination ran away with me. There was a crowd in the stands and players out on the field. The scoreboard showed

we were in the sixth inning and my team was ahead by two runs. Something strange caught my eye and immediately yanked me back to reality. There standing on the pitcher's mound was Old Man Franklin. He was just standing there, staring intently towards what must have been an imaginary catcher, waiting for the sign. I don't know what made me do it, but I ran out onto the field and assumed the position of catcher behind home plate. I instantly saw a look of gratification on Old Man Franklin's face. I got up from my crouched position and pushed my face mask up onto the top of my head. I turned and pretended to ask the umpire if I could approach the mound? He nodded his head and I turned and slowly walked my way out to the pitcher's mound. I was determined to have a one-on-one conversation with my pitcher. When I got up to Old Man Franklin, I took his hand, shook it and pretended to place his ball into my glove. I looked over at the dugout, around at each player in the infield and then straight back into Old Man Franklin's eyes. I think he knew what was about to happen. I made a short speech, encouraging him to accept the fact that we needed to bring somebody else into the game to take over the final pitching duties. I told him he had pitched a perfect game, but now we needed a closer. Someone who could bring the game home for us. For now? We needed to take a walk towards the dugout. One final time.

Old Man Franklin kicked the dirt a couple of times and then we turned and steadfastly walked towards the dugout. After reaching the dugout, Old Man Franklin turned around and waved to the stands. I think we both heard the roar from the crowd. Then, we just kept walking. Past the

dugout, past the stands, past the refreshment stand, off of the field and out of the park. It was just me and Old Man Franklin. We were like magnets attached to each other. Every step I took he was right there with me. We walked up the canopy-lined street of old growth trees and Old Man Franklin stopped and lovingly looked up. He looked calm and reflective. He told me that this was the way he used to go when he played baseball. He asked me if I knew that he played baseball right there at that same park where I found him? He said he played a little semi-professional ball as well, but then he got hurt and had to stop playing. He said he spent a lot of time walking up and down this old street. It was lined with the same old trees, but back then the trees were a lot smaller. We started up again and came to the corner of the street down the block from my house. Old Man Franklin got this look of recognition on his face, like he really knew where he was now. We took our time, had more of a conversation about Old Man Franklin's days as a baseball player and finally made it up to my front door. I swung open the door and we both walked in to a living room full of stunned faces. Old Man Franklin's wife got up sobbing as she ran over and hugged her husband over and over again. I thought she was never going to stop.

Of course she finally did stop. At least long enough for me to walk over to Old Man Franklin. I reached for his hand, intent on handing him back the game ball. A sparkle returned to his eyes. He looked at my hand and this warm glow of contentment fell over his face as he opened his hand and I plopped the ball inside his glove.

Then began all the questions. I think they all realized that I didn't know which question I should start with first. It didn't really matter. I didn't have any answers that they would understand. All that I could come up with was that I had found Mr. Franklin wandering around down the street and thought I should bring him back to the house. I knew that wasn't the answer they were looking for, but I had nothing else to give. After the whole ordeal was over and the police and the Franklin's had left, I knew all was not done. There was still this conversation I needed to have with my mother.

My mother sat down beside me and asked me what really happened? I have to admit I was as dumbfounded as everyone else and I told my mother as such. I told her that there really wasn't much to say because I really didn't have any answers as to how I ended up somehow knowing where Old Man Franklin was. Did I really know or was it just dumb luck? I knew my mother wasn't satisfied, but neither was I. We decided to just leave it at that.

Over the years, I have experienced similar events to Old Man Franklin. Each one of them just as over the top as could be. That gift that I was talking about earlier? I guess I could say that has been confirmed. For some, my gift has brought happy endings. For others, not so much. All I would say is I did what I could, but it was either not enough or just a little too late. For me, I came to realize that, like it or not, things just happen the way they are supposed to happen. I couldn't change that.

It's good when things turn out for the better. Happy endings are always better than the sad ones. I realized this

firsthand some years later. While I was growing up my family always planned a summer vacation in the mountains somewhere. We would hike, fish and just enjoy being out in the wilds, as we called it. Those were definitely some good times. We would spend our nights sitting around the camp fire telling ghost stories, sleep under the stars or inside of a tent and wake up to the smell of bacon, eggs and pancakes cooking over an open fire. As I got older and ventured out on my own I tried to keep up that same tradition. I made it a point to schedule a summer vacation every year, alone up in the mountains. The wilds was where I would go to get away, clear my head of all the stress and antics of living in the city. Out in the woods, it was just me and nature. It would take a couple of days, but by the third day or so, I would come to the realization that life became more simple. All I needed to do was set up my camp for the night, gather firewood and go fishing to get my supper. The next morning, after moving on, I would do the same thing all over again. Sometimes I would just stay put and wait until the time was right to break camp. When the time was right varied. Life couldn't get much simpler. Each summer I would gather up all my backpacking gear, head to some far off place and walk the trails into the back country for six or seven days of peace, quiet and much appreciated relaxation.

On one particular occasion, I decided to visit one of the big State Wilderness Parks in my area. I didn't usually favor going to such overcrowded places, but this place was just over an hour away and something told me that this year, this was what I was supposed to do. I had some friends who had told me that this Park had both beautiful

lakes and streams, both of which had plenty of trout to satisfy that angler part of me.

I wanted to get to the Park just after sunrise, so I got up very early that morning. I loaded up the truck and drove away with the sun streaming through my windshield. As soon as the Park opened, I was there ready to drive through the entrance. I asked the person at the booth for directions to the Park Headquarters. I found that after numerous times of visiting Parks like this that they each had their own set of rules and regulations that you were expected to be aware of and follow. Most of them were the same, being government run parks and all, but it was just good practice to find out all of the particulars. Accordingly, what I found out was that I needed to purchase a permit if I wanted to hike or stay overnight anywhere within the back country. There were different types of permits available, depending on what you wanted to do. If you wanted to hike for the day, then you got a day permit. If you wanted to camp out overnight, then you needed the overnight version which allowed one to hike and camp overnight for extended periods of time. That was the one I needed as I planned to be gone six or seven days.

Most people didn't bother getting day permits. They didn't see the need and I guess they just thought it was a waste of time. I didn't see much use in getting any permit, personally. I suppose one plus was that it raised funds for maintaining the Park and trails, which was a good thing. But, in my opinion, the real purpose of the permit should have been to make sure whoever entered the back country did so safely and made it back out safely. That would of

course depend on the type of permit purchased, the length of stay and the area to be hiked. Applying for the permit certainly allowed the Park to keep track of those entering the Park for hiking or camping purposes. The application required the names of all hikers, addresses, phone numbers and license plates of any cars or trucks. But here is what I saw as the problem. Once you were done you were not required to notify Park Rangers that you had finished. So they knew who went into the Park but they didn't know who, specifically, came back out. Or if you had even made it out at all. If you got hurt or died or were just running late, no one would know to come looking for you. It might be days or weeks. A simple check-back-in process might have been better.

Anyway, I entered the Ranger Station just as it was opening up, hoping to get that early start out into the back country. I walked up to the counter and the Ranger behind the counter welcomed me to the Park. The spiel sounded familiar but I listened none the same. I knew the trail I wanted to hike due to my previous research. It was about a twelve mile loop, six miles each way, that took me to a lake which was where I wanted to spend most of my time. I planned to do a lot of fishing but also wanted to use that camp as a base camp to take further hikes away from the lake. The Ranger handed the application over to me and I gave it a cursory once-over, just to say I did. I then filled out all the required information and shoved it back over to the Ranger to see if there was anything else she needed. I watched her as she reviewed my permit application and when she got to the part about where I wanted to hike, she became a little fidgety. Her eyes got wider, one eyebrow

raised slightly and she looked around to see if there was anybody else within earshot. I think she wasn't quite sure what to say or whether to say anything at all. Then, in a well-rehearsed and official voice, she said she needed to inform me that there was going to be some congestion at the trail head and I might want to consider a different trail. Well, that wasn't what I really wanted to hear, so I inquired as to what she meant by congestion?

I could tell she was trying to be very guarded with what she was about to tell me. She said that the day before, there was a teenage boy who decided he was going to venture away from the car camping area adjacent to the trail head. He told his friends that he was going to leave early in the morning and hike his way to the lake and back in the same day. He didn't expect to be gone more than about six hours. Well, his friends waited the six hours and more. There was no sight of him. It was getting close to the sun going down and still, there was no sight of him. So they contacted the camp host, who, in turn, contacted the Ranger Station. There was a lot of back and forth, but the end result was that Search and Rescue was called. By the time Search and Rescue and the Rangers organized themselves, they were into the next morning. The Ranger behind the desk said that at the trail head this morning there were two Rangers and two Search and Rescue personnel. She said they would have liked to have had more, but that was all they could arrange on such short notice. The Ranger looked up from her notes and her eyes brightened. Out of the blue, she asked me if I would be willing to join in the search effort?

Things were not going as planned. This was supposed to be my relaxing vacation of solitude in the mountains. I thought to myself that I could always just get the permit and go somewhere else. I would have to make sure the trail I took was one that was really remote. In other words, that I wouldn't run into anybody else official. There would only be a very slight possibility that any Ranger would be on that same trail asking for my permit. Even with all my imaginative and alternative thinking, I could not escape the reality that someone needed help. So, after a minute or so, I informed the Ranger that I would be willing to help. She looked so relieved and thankful. She said that I should drive my vehicle up to the trail head where I would meet the rest of the team. She would contact the Rangers up there that I would be arriving shortly and that they should wait for me before heading out. She said that I would be briefed on all the pertinent details when I arrived.

I could already start to feel the anxiety building in my mind. I tried not to rush but, also, needed to make sure that the others did not have to wait too long for me. As I drove in my truck up the steep and windy road, I attempted to calm myself by looking at all the beautiful scenery. At one point I stopped to allow a couple of deer cross the road. Then there was this gorgeous waterfall crashing down from above on my right. I think I started to get a little irritated that I wasn't going to be able to do what I had started out to do. When I arrived at the trail head, sure enough, there was the team. If you could call four people enough of a team to be looking for somebody lost in the wilderness. Not that adding one more would make a huge difference. Just saying. I approached the two Rangers and identified who I was,

seeking some more information. The two Search and Rescue people were off to the side preparing for the hike ahead and getting their gear together. We made polite introductions, but I could sense they were wondering who the heck I was? One of the Rangers introduced himself as Bill and the other as Rachel. Bill appeared to be of a higher rank as Rachel seemed to let Bill do all the talking. Bill said that over there, getting ready, were Randy and Mike. Being somewhat aware of Search and Rescue, I asked Bill where their dogs were? Rachel got this slight frown on her face, as if she knew what was coming next. Bill kind of mumbled an answer that I could tell he was hoping I couldn't really hear. All he could say was that somehow, there were no dogs. There was not even a single Search and Rescue dog. I thought it kind of strange that there were no dogs. From what I had seen and heard, Search and Rescue always came with their dogs. That was what searching was all about. Dogs had this acute sense of smell and could find just about anything, given the opportunity and training. Guess that explained why Randy and Mike were sitting off to the side, not saying much.

Before I knew it, Bill had skipped onto the next topic and said that Rachel would be providing me with the update. I thought that was pretty slick of Bill to pass the buck like that. It had to do with the description of the young man they were searching for. She said that according to his friends, he was wearing a bright red shirt and had a blue backpack strapped to his back. When he left the campsite he was wearing a blue baseball cap, had long pants and a fairly good pair of tennis shoes. Rachel said that the tennis shoes were not ideal for the type of trail he was heading out

on, but it was not unheard of to hike that trail in those kinds of shoes. Rachel seemed more concerned with the young man's lack of proper clothing. When he left his friends at the camp, he said he was heading to the lake at the end of the trail and would be doing a little fishing. Considering that was a day ago and they hadn't seen or heard anything from the teen, they were all very concerned for his welfare.

As we gathered at the beginning of the trail, Bill went over all the pertinent details one more time. Yet another sign that he was in charge or asserting his authority. Obviously, this was his responsibility and things were going to be run his way. He said that we would all be heading up to the lake at the end of the trail. That would be our final destination. He said that if we hadn't found the boy yet, we would spend the night and then walk the trail back again the next day. Bill reiterated that we may have to spend the night and continue searching the next day if things didn't go well. Sounded to me like a typical textbook search procedure, which I guess made it easier for me to follow his script. Bill said we would be taking our time, searching the trail for any signs that the boy had been around. I thought to myself that if we may end up spending the night, maybe we should all make sure we had the proper gear and supplies. I knew I had enough gear with me to spend multiple nights. I brought along my warm, down sleeping bag, a two-man tent, a small portable camp stove and a filtering system for my water. I had packed more than enough food, just in case something happened and my journey got extended. I turned around a few times and made a brief visual survey of the rest of the team. I wasn't quite sure of their preparedness.

They appeared to be traveling very light but, at least they had sleeping bags.

We started out on the trail with Bill in the lead, followed by Randy and Mike, then myself and, bringing up the rear, was Rachel. Again, standard operating procedure in order to protect the new guy. Or at least that was my opinion. Ranger in front and a Ranger bringing up the rear. It sounded good to me. We took it very slowly as we climbed up, checking the trail, the sides of the trail, looking for any signs that the teenager had passed by. We found nothing. About three miles along the way, I noticed a small path trailing off to the right. If you could call it that. It was probably a deer trail or maybe just a temporary path made by a fisherman looking for the stream that you could hear way off, down in the distance. Bill, Randy and Mike were up ahead a little distance from myself and Rachel. We thought that would give us all adequate coverage to make a more thorough visual scan. When I saw the opening off the trail, as little as it was, I decided to take it. Why? I couldn't say. It just felt right. As I split off, I could hear Rachel questioning what I was doing? Of course, we weren't far enough away from the rest of the team that they didn't hear Rachel's questioning too. The three of them stopped and turned around trying to see what all the commotion was.

I lowered my voice and explained to Rachel that I thought the kid had gone down the path. In order to try and convince her I told her that I remembered his friends saying he was going to do some fishing. I said to Rachel, if there was one thing I knew about fishing, you go to where the fish are. In this case, the path led down to the stream coming

out of the lake that we were all supposedly going to. I said that sounded like prime fishing to me. Rachel's face changed to one a little less concerning and she turned and quietly said that was good with her. She added, but under one condition. She wanted to come along with me. I figured that was satisfactory. She would just be keeping the new guy safe. Bill and the rest were getting impatient with the delay. When they heard that we would be leaving the main trail, Bill exclaimed he was sure that they would find the boy at the lake. He said that was where he, Randy and Mike were headed, so that was where we would find them when we decided to give up on our wild goose chase. I guessed that was Bill's way of telling Rachel that she wasn't following protocol and she was on her own.

I started to regret that Rachel followed me. I had a hunch, but that was all it was and I didn't want to make us both look like fools. Thing was, it felt very familiar. Just like it did with Old Man Franklin. The path or trail, if you will, was very steep as it wound its way down the side of the canyon. Both Rachel and I had to keep our wits about us as we placed one foot in front of the other. Rachel was beginning to question what we were doing, as we had not seen anything at all to indicate that the teenager had gone this way. I was also beginning to question myself, but I said to Rachel that he was around there somewhere. I knew he was close by. When we rounded the corner to the next switchback, I pointed out to Rachel that the side of the path showed signs of something or someone slipping off the side. It could have been some deer or other animal, but it looked to be more human made. I stopped and peered over the side of the trail. I spotted something bright orange down

below. I figured it was about a twenty foot drop to where the object was. Rachel came up close and looked over the edge. She also spotted something orange a ways down. She said his friends might have been wrong. What they thought was red was actually bright orange. In any event, we had to get down to that point and explore further.

Turns out it was actually quite handy having Rachel there. We helped each other sidestep down the edge of the trail, as we slipped and slid our way towards the bottom. She also had her radio with her, so that we could communicate with the base station and the rest of our team. Especially Bill. Rachel radioed in that we had found something. She excitedly said that we had spotted what looked like an article of clothing, except it was not red, it was bright orange. There was a short pause and then the base station replied that the missing teenager's friends were there and, yes, his shirt could have been bright orange instead. As she was on the radio, I carefully climbed further down the side of the cliff a little ways. I could definitely make out the body of the teenager. There was his blue baseball cap and, better still, there was his blue backpack. I yelled to Rachel that I had him in sight. I heard Rachel radio that we had him. The next question was, was he still alive?

Both Rachel and I knew that the next question to be posed over the radio was whether or not he was alive. In order to find out we had to vary carefully sidestep our way down the remainder of the twenty foot cliff in order to reach the bottom where the teenager lay. The going was very slow and I turned back to Rachel to ask what the boy's

name was? I guess I hadn't thought about asking before. I was afraid of over-personalizing what we were doing too much, until now. Rachel immediately screamed out his name three times, "Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremy". I looked down and swore to Rachel that I saw some part of the body move. We knew it was only going to be a short time until we found out for sure if what I saw was a sign of life.

We reached the bottom and raced over to a small ledge where Jeremy had landed. At about the same time the call came over the radio wanting to know if he was alive or not? Rachel ignored the call temporarily and we carefully approached the young man who was only able to utter a few small words of relief and appreciation. He was alive. Rachel radioed that he was alive but appeared to have some serious injuries. Both Rachel and I had Red Cross training. That was a plus. Better still were the qualifications of the two Search and Rescue guys. One was an EMT (Emergency Medical Technician). The other, was a Paramedic. Of course, Bill, Randy and Mike were already at the lake, about an hour's hiking time away. Rachel and I did a quick assessment and determined that Jeremy had broken his leg and arm and had suffered a large gash on his forehead. The injury to his forehead probably resulted in a concussion. We thought he could possibly have some internal injuries as well, but we didn't know for sure. I did the best that I could to have him drink some water, take a small bite of an energy snack bar and then covered him up so that he could get warm. I grabbed my down sleeping bag off of my pack and draped it over Jeremy as Rachel got on the radio to Bill and provided him with our location. She said that if they just followed the outlet creek from the lake, then

they would run into us in about an hour. She said to hurry if they could because Jeremy seemed to be in pretty bad shape and needed medical attention beyond what we could give him.

Jeremy's eyes were wide open as we sat by his side. He said he hurt quite a bit and didn't feel very well. He said he was experiencing extreme pain in his arm and leg. He was only able to mutter something else that sounded like he felt clammy, very cold and sleepy. I laid down next to Jeremy, put my arms around him and covered us both in my sleeping bag. I tried the best I could to use my body warmth to transfer my heat to Jeremy's body. We just lay together for a few minutes and I could feel Jeremy's trembling and shaking start to lessen. Rachel watched as Jeremy opened and closed his eyes, then staying closed longer than staying open. I encouraged him to keep him talking. To talk about anything, just trying to keep him from closing his eyes. Rachel busied herself by building a fire and going to the creek to get fresh water. It was more than just busy work. She used the fire to boil some water and rinse a washcloth that we used to place over Jeremy's forehead. We kept looking around to watch for Bill, Randy and Mike, hoping that they would be arriving soon. We expected that Randy and Mike would have drugs to help keep Jeremy going.

It was about forty-five minutes later that Bill, Randy and Mike arrived. I knew it was hard for Bill to relinquish his command, but Randy and Mike assumed complete control over the situation. Mike had brought with him his medical kit and Randy his, so they immediately went to work triaging

the situation. As Rachel, Bill and I stepped back I was in awe of how Randy and Mike took control of the scene. The two of them worked together as if completely blocking themselves off from the outside world. Yet, the two of them totally worked in a coordinated way to assess and initially treat Jeremy. Bill took responsibility for handling the radio communications and I could hear him request that the base station send a helicopter, complete with a medical team, as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the reply back from the base station was that it was too late in the afternoon and they wouldn't be able to get a helicopter to take off until the next morning.

Suddenly, we all realized that we were going to have to spend the night. We didn't know if Jeremy could last another night considering he had spent the first night alone, hurt and not properly dressed for the elements. That didn't seem to faze Randy and Mike much, as I supposed they were kind of used to that kind of situation. I'm sure they had seen a lot worse than this and were working on autopilot now. They quickly formulated a plan of treatment, based on their diagnosis of the patient. Bill, Rachel and I knew it was up to us to provide them with as much support as we could in order to get Jeremy successfully through the night.

The diagnosis of Randy and Mike was that Jeremy had suffered a broken arm and leg during the fall from the trail. In the process he had also incurred a deep gash to his head that probably meant he also had a mild to severe concussion. Internal injuries? It was hard to tell, but Mike and Randy both felt that there were no obvious internal injuries to be worried about. Bill established a direct phone

link with the medical doctors at the base station. The doctors there directed Mike in gently washing and cleaning the wound to Jeremy's forehead. If possible, they wanted Mike to try and numb the area to help lessen Jeremy's pain, then treat the wound and close it with stitches. All Rachel and I could do was sit back and wait. Things were happening a lot faster than we could keep track of. Whatever they did though, Jeremy seemed to be getting better. The broken arm and leg would have to be set later, but for now, Mike and Randy had stabilized them as best they could. The deep gash on his forehead had been closed with stitches but I could tell that they were still very concerned. If he had suffered a concussion, he might suffer headaches, nausea and vomiting during the night. Even if he did make it through the night without any obvious negative signs, Mike said that it may be days before Jeremy showed any real symptoms.

We all decided that it would be best if we took turns watching over Jeremy throughout the night. For now, the next order of business was to move Jeremy to a slightly more protected location where he could spend the night. Rachel and I said that we would go gather some tree branches and things for a makeshift litter. In the meantime, Bill went to work setting up my tent, so that it could house Jeremy for the night. Those tasks completed, Randy and Mike very carefully lifted Jeremy over and onto the makeshift litter. Then, Rachel and I helped them carry Jeremy over to the tent and placed him inside. Randy stayed inside with Jeremy as we decided we had better gather more wood, prepare something simple to eat and settle in for the night. I volunteered to take the first watch

over Jeremy so that everyone else could get some sleep. I was told to wake up Randy and Mike for any reason that seemed to indicate a worsening of Jeremy's condition. The main thing was to keep him hydrated and warm.

I decided to sit outside of the tent for awhile, trying to stay warmed by the fire. Jeremy was resting comfortably. As I sat there under the stars, I kept looking over at Jeremy inside of the tent, watching for signs of distress. He wasn't moaning or groaning like he was in a lot of pain or anything. He seemed to be resting as peacefully as anyone could hope. I think Mike took care of that by giving him something earlier to help him sleep. His breathing wasn't short and fast, indicating distress. All seemed good.

A short while later I was joined by Rachel who said she couldn't sleep and wanted to sit with me for the rest of my shift. I felt like since it was the two of us who found Jeremy, she wanted to be part of the ordeal of making sure he was kept alive. I appreciated her help. I felt good about being close to her by the fire and we huddled close to keep warm. The sky was full of billions of shining bright stars and we struggled to find any of the named constellations. We pointed out to each other that, over there, was the Milky Way. The fire sent up sparks high into the night sky, seeming to melt away into the stars. Each one of us kept a watchful eye on Jeremy.

In a lowered voice I heard Rachel ask me how I knew? Feigning ignorance, my reply was to ask what it was I was supposed to know? I knew that wasn't going to work for long but I wasn't quite sure how to handle my true response. She looked at me with this very serious look in

her eyes and asked again, how I knew? Feeling that she wasn't going to keep playing this game anymore, I turned to her and began a very lengthy discussion of how I knew. Or, at least, what I thought I knew. I told her it all started when I was very young with this old guy down the street my friends and I called Old Man Franklin. I also mentioned a couple of other times after that, whereby, somehow, I knew something that other people didn't know. It may have been about some person or some animal, but somehow, I had a sense about them. Like, where they might be if they were lost. I told Rachel that when I saw that deer path off of the main trail, I knew that was where Jeremy had gone. It had nothing to do with it being a good fishing trail down to the stream. Although, I was pretty sure that was why Jeremy went down there.

Rachel's response in the flickering light of the fire was a blank, incredulous stare. A stare that said I want to believe you but it just goes against everything I have been brought up to believe, She asked me if, in other words, I knew way before I even arrived at the Park that I was going to be looking for a missing person? I politely said to her in response that she didn't quite understand what I had been saying. I said to her that I never knew beforehand what the future held, but, once there, something would just take hold of me. I just did what I normally would do and, somehow, I got guided by this force that directed me down a specific direction. I didn't know what the outcome was going to be. I just happened to be in some place and it just happened. I would just let it happen. I told Rachel that I came to realize that, like it or not, things just happen the way they are supposed to happen.

We didn't get to talk about the whole thing much longer as my turn watching Jeremy came to an end. Randy came over and asked how Jeremy was doing? I said that Jeremy seemed to be resting comfortably inside the tent. Randy went over to the tent and peeked in. He seemed satisfied. Rachel and I started to walk in the direction of her sleeping bag. My bed for the night? Fortunately, I was able to score a few blankets to help soften me from the ground. As I dropped Rachel off, she leaned in towards me and signaled that, although it was a hard thing to swallow, she believed me. She said she truly believed I had some kind of ability. She crawled inside her sleeping bag and said to me, just ask Jeremy.

The next morning I slowly drug myself off of the ground and looked over in the direction of where Jeremy was. Mike, Randy and Rachel were hovering over the tent. I looked over at Bill and he was being way too serious on his radio. Things didn't look good. Until, Rachel saw me and rushed over to tell me that Jeremy had pulled through the night just fine. They were busy getting him ready to be airlifted out by the helicopter. Bill was on the radio with the base station and they said that the helicopter was almost ready to take off to meet us. I was sure glad that first impression I had in the morning turned out to be wrong.

Waiting for the helicopter, we all had a quick breakfast of oatmeal, snack bars and a hot cup of coffee. Randy and Mike tried to get Jeremy to take some food and water, but he said he wasn't hungry. They gave him some anyway. They knew it was going to be a long while before he got to a hospital where he could get his next meal. It wasn't long

before we we could hear the pulsing of the helicopter following the stream up the canyon towards our location. Bill set off a flare so that they would know exactly where we were. Shortly, the helicopter was high overhead, hovering and looking for a safe place to land. Turns out there was none. I had heard that these mountain rescue pilots were good, but we had warned them that we were in a very difficult place to land.

The helicopter came back overhead and hovered again. We all stood there looking up when a basket stretcher, with a person inside, was carefully maneuvered out of the helicopter and gently lowered to the ground. We all started to scramble to make sure that Jeremy was fully ready to go. Mike and Randy both carefully lifted Jeremy's makeshift stretcher out of the tent and moved him over to where they thought the basket stretcher would touch down. When the basket and rescue person reached the ground, Jeremy was gently loaded onto the stretcher and securely strapped in. Then, as we all stood there and watched, Jeremy was slowly and carefully lifted back up to the helicopter where the rest of the medical team was ready to take over.

When the helicopter finally flew off into the distance, Bill, Rachel, Randy, Mike and I kind of stood around wondering what we were going to do next. It was almost as if we were saying to ourselves, what do we do now? Sure, there was this feeling of accomplishment. We had all done our jobs successfully. We found Jeremy, Jeremy was alive and Jeremy was going to live another day. Our eyes turned away from the sky and silently, we all just started quietly

gathering our gear together and breaking down the temporary camp. It gave us all something to do. To take our minds off of, well, we didn't know. When we were all gathered up and the site was returned to normal, I walked over to the three of my companions and nonchalantly said that I was going to be on my way. I said I was going to continue up to the lake and spend the rest of my planned vacation fishing and resting. I walked up and shook everyone's hand, expecting to get some kind of push back on my decision. That didn't happen. They were all ready to move on too. With the exception of Rachel. I could tell that she wasn't quite finished. I sensed that she wanted to know more. There was not much I could do for her. In short order, we left the spot of land that we had claimed as our own for the last couple of days. I, in the direction of the lake. The others, hiking back down the trail to, eventually, continue on with their regular jobs. Life would go on.

After a few days camping out by the lake, I guess I realized I had been there long enough. The fishing wasn't that good and the nights were getting colder. Frankly, I got bored. With everything that had just happened, I could never quite settle in to the kind of relaxation that I thought I was going to be able to experience. So I packed up all my gear and hiked my way back down the trail to the trail head where my truck was parked. It was late in the afternoon by the time I drove back down to the village where the Ranger Station was located. I was going to sleep in my truck this night but first, I needed to get some dinner. There was only one restaurant in the village, so I didn't have a whole lot of choice in the matter. I walked through the front door and inquired as to a table for dinner. I said that there would only

be myself, but before I could finish the waitress informed me that if I didn't have a reservation, then I was out of luck. She apologized but said they were all booked up. I must say I was a little dismayed and hungry, of course. Feeling rejected, I turned slowly around to walk back out the front door. Behind me in line was Rachel. She had heard the whole conversation. She asked me to wait a minute and she informed the waitress that her reservation for one, now included a guest.

Rachel and I had a very good meal together that evening. It more than made up for the freeze-dried meals and snacks we had out in the back country. Although the food was good, it was the company that I remember most. I remember the sparkle in Rachel's eyes. There was a lot of conversation about Jeremy and about how well he was doing. Rachel had heard from the hospital that Jeremy's broken appendages were on the mend and that there were no signs of concussion or internal injuries. That was good to hear. We also touched more on the subject of my ability or gift, as my parents called it. There really wasn't much more to say, other than what had already been said. I presumed Rachel was still grappling with my history and was checking the overall consistency of my story. Then we talked about each other. I rested easier thinking the hard part was over. I was never quite comfortable talking about my abilities. Rachel said she thought we should get to know each other better. I guess the hard part wasn't really over after all, but I was surprised how easy it was to say to her that I would like that. I think we both let out a sigh of relief knowing that we liked each other.

We ended the meal with Rachel asking me where I was going to be staying the night? I felt a little embarrassed, but I told her my plan was to sleep in my truck. Rachel said that she wasn't going to allow that to happen. She had a perfectly good house through the Park and she wanted me to spend the night at her place. Well, long story short, I did. It was all very innocent and platonic. We slept in different rooms, but we got up early the next morning to have breakfast together and chat some more. Then, we set off in our separate directions. I, to my home town of River's Run and Rachel, back to work at the Park.

That moment began a friendship that continued to grow over the coming weeks and months. We would contact each other and arrange to have coffee or dinner. Either her place or mine, it didn't make any difference. My town was only an hour or so from the Park, so distance wasn't an issue. To make a short story even shorter, Rachel and I were married within the year.

REDEMPTION ALLEY

CHAPTER TWO

Matthew couldn't help but wake up in the morning and wonder why things weren't different for him. It seemed that every day brought the same old woes and worries. He worried about whether his mother had enough money to buy food to put on the table. He worried if he was going to be able to get a job and financially help his mother out. He worried that he may not be able to survive the day and then, what would his mother do? Thus, was Matthew's woe. When he thought about the world around him, things just seemed so unfair. Just another worry? There were kids like him only a few miles away that were living in a completely different world. They didn't have to worry about things like food or whether you would be dead by the end of the day. What made them so special? What made them so special was where they were born. He thought to himself that, if he had just been born a few miles away, things would have been different for him. He wouldn't be waking up in this trashy old house, complete with its own menagerie of wild animals that included cats, dogs, mice, rats and cockroaches. Not to mention the strange and diverse collection of people he was obliged to call his neighbors. There would be reason to celebrate life, not regret it.

Matthew had just turned eighteen, struggling at completing high school. High school didn't suit Matthew or

any other type of school for that matter. All he wanted to do was escape what he saw as his entrapment in a life that didn't seem to offer him much. High school didn't allow him to do that, but he tried to put up with it. Growing up where he did had taught him to be independent and resourceful. He learned to make the most of what he had, even though deep down, he wanted more. Matthew grew up on the East side of a river that also served as the dividing line between those who had and those who had less. Matthew and the others who lived on the East side, had less. They were the ones who lived in substandard neighborhoods and had to make tough choices every single day. Just to survive. Matthew could be heard saying that there were no advantages to living there, but for others, the isolation alone was well worth it. Better to keep out all those undesirables on the West side of the river who thought they were the chosen people or something. Unfortunately, Matthew wanted to be one of those undesirables. He was willing to do most anything to be in their position. He wished he had been born on the West side of the river.

The more he thought about it, Matthew was convinced that the true randomness of it all was the real villain here. Things really were different only a few miles away for those born on the West side of the river. How did it turn out that Matthew was born on the other side of the river? Pure randomness. Some would say dumb luck. Whatever it was, Matthew was not content. Matthew made a promise to himself and his mother that he was going to change all that. He was going to be the one to escape the life that he had no decision in and make a name for himself. There was simply no other way around it.

Matthew made his thoughts known to those around him that cared to listen. Turned out, he had plenty of people that were willing to listen. Matthew saw them as followers but not really leaders. Matthew saw himself as a leader. Someone who could lead his followers out of their tales of woe. True, many of those who listened were in his own little circle of friends, but he thought at least it was a good start. None of his friends, including himself, had much going on in their lives. Certainly nothing that included bettering themselves by getting jobs or anything like that. Actually, they were content with their daily games of basketball down at the recreation center and afternoon drinking sessions that usually turned into fighting marathons. That was seen as better than working at some meaningless job that paid minimum wage. A wage that didn't even come close to what they could make selling drugs and stolen merchandise.

Selling drugs and stealing from the people on the West side of the river were not Matthew's thing. These were the kind of things that Matthew considered out of the question, if not dangerous. First of all, he didn't want to get in trouble with the law. That would end up meaning time in prison and a sure way to just wind up learning more ways to waste your life away. Second, Matthew had already said sad goodbyes to too many of his friends and neighbors. They weren't killed due to encounters with the police, but instead, were the consequence of being with their so-called friends and business partners. Kind of like friendly fire or being caught in the crossfire, except that their deaths were intentional. They were fighting over their own turf. A sure way to get yourself killed.

Instead, Matthew preferred to rely on his one and only gift. He wasn't taught it in school. This was something that he had learned on his own and had garnered him some respect from the community. What Matthew had naturally was the fine art of negotiation. His skill, if you wanted to call it that, was in his talking. Another way to put it was that he had a way with words. He could string together sentences that made people stand up, listen and want more. That was the first step. Just listen to what he was saying. Matthew just wanted to get them to stop and think about what they were doing or about to do. He offered them the opportunity to do something different, if they chose to do so. Otherwise, their alternative was to just fall through the same old cracks. The same old lifestyle of despair and criminality.

Matthew figured since they were willing to listen to him, he could in effect, redirect their lives. They might end up thinking about life the way Matthew did. Life was an opportunity. That gave Matthew power. That incentivized Matthew to keep talking. Some even called it preaching. Matthew became quite successful at being an orator and bringing people together in consensus. Some of his old friends would snicker and call him just a big talker. They would say that he was a lot of talk and not a whole lot of action. Oddly enough though, they usually ended up doing whatever it was that Matthew suggested they do.

Somewhere in his early twenties, Matthew started to see some of the benefits of his earlier preaching. He had gained quite a following, beyond just his close-knit friends and those in his local neighborhood. Matthew's influence had spread out to those in the community as a whole.

Especially to those who had influence of their own. Matthew, whether he liked it or not, had become part of the establishment. He would speak at community events, local business meetings and political gatherings. He made quite the name for himself. Even those who were part of the religious world, saw a lot of potential in Matthew becoming one of the important representatives of the East side. In fact, this was when Matthew got to be known as the preacher. He could fire up the crowd like no other. His sermons, if you will, left people excited about their lives and gave them the hope they needed to create a better life.

Matthew enjoyed his newly found status and all the attention he was getting. He soon realized that his ability to speak was bringing him closer and closer to achieving his goal of escaping the undesirable reality of spending his life on the East side of the river. He really did have some kind of power over people and it had all started with just small group gatherings at the park or speaking in someone's home. It may not have been a lot of people in the early days, but it gave ten or fifteen people something else to do on a Friday night besides drinking. The difference came when people showed up for the express purpose of hearing Matthew speak. Matthew talked about all the things that people on the East side of the river were ready to hear. Unfortunately, they were unable to realize their vision on their own. He was offering to help them with that vision and supply them with a better one at that. The vision of a future that was easily within their grasp. Not just something they had to wait for in some after life, like the local religious leaders had to offer. Matthew was able to put it all together in words they could easily understand. His vision of a better

life for everyone became their vision of a better world. One where they would all come together and achieve that same vision. Matthew had become a prophet of sorts.

Matthew started to have concerns that what he was practicing, really was a religion. He wondered if he was getting too popular? He was not a religious person, never had been and had no intention of becoming one. But to be called the preacher? To have a vision of a better world? A prophet? To come together and seemingly pray for all this to happen? That sounded to Matthew like someone who was religious. As much as he wanted to deny it, Matthew had changed the community and in the process had changed himself and his own personal beliefs.

Matthew finally reached a critical juncture in his transformation. He saw himself reshaping right before his own eyes. He had not grown up like all the other kids in the neighborhood. He had not given in to the lure of drugs and stolen merchandise. He had made a name for himself without having to seemingly lower himself. But the time had come for Matthew to make a crucial decision. A decision that had to do with taking the next step in his own future. A next step that involved changing his view of himself and becoming the person that he wanted to be.

Matthew realized that the first thing he had to do was believe he really did have a constituency. These were his followers, his flock of parishioners. They were the people that seemingly worshiped him. They looked to him for advice and guidance, for answers to the big questions like the whys and hows of their lives. Matthew knew he wasn't really a preacher, a pastor or a minister. Legally, he didn't

have the credentials. That would require undertakings that Matthew simply didn't have the patience for. Things like a faith in God and a calling to serve the Lord were just obstacles in his way. More specifically, he had no time for the education required to take and pass ordination examinations in order to receive a license to practice. No, Matthew didn't have any plans on doing any of those things. But then again, he felt like he didn't have to. It already looked like he had. To pretend to be someone you were not? Matthew was not adverse to compromising himself in order to achieve what he wanted to do. If that meant he had to pretend as if he was a pastor or a minister, then he was more than willing to do so. At least by doing so he would have a much better chance of achieving his dream and maybe, in the process, change the lives of his followers. There was no mistake he would have to sacrifice some of his values in order to get what he wanted. That was alright. It would be worth it to live and feel like the people on the West side of the river. If that meant putting up some kind of facade, then so be it.

The one thing stopping him at this point was that he didn't have a church. How could you pretend to be a minister and not have a church?. Matthew needed a stage on which to continue to act out his role. He needed a building or a house of some kind where he could meet his parishioners and serve his congregation. Giving sermons in the park on some shady hillside or at someone's house wasn't cutting it anymore. If he was going to make it to the big time, he needed to start showing that he was in this for real. If he was going to be able to convince others and more

importantly, himself, he needed to make something like a church happen.

The only thing that made sense to him was that he needed to find a church to house his ministry. There were plenty of places on the East side that could accommodate his needs. They may not have been in the best location, but at least they would be cheap. Matthew wasn't looking for cheap. If he was to truly upscale to the standards of the people on the West side, his church would need to be located on the West side of the river. So that was where he decided to concentrate his efforts.

Getting to the West side didn't require much effort. You just walked or went by car over the bridge built long ago that connected to the other side. At that time, the service sector on the West side relied heavily on workers coming from the East side. They performed many of the jobs that those on the West side didn't want to do. Those on the West side could easily afford to hire someone else that would do it for them. Matthew surmised it was still pretty much the same today. Those on the East side of the river often went over to the West side looking for work. Did they end up working for cheap? Of course. Were they treated well on the West side? Probably not. Having his church on the West side of the river might change that and it would give Matthew increased credibility. Religions have a way of finding common ground amongst disparate groups and Matthew's church could serve as a conduit for doing that. It would be much easier for his parishioners to find new work opportunities and new contacts. All Matthew had to do was to get his parishioners to and from his church and then that

would all happen over time. Matthew figured he would just buy a bus and transfer his parishioners back and forth. Problem solved.

The next day found Matthew walking across the bridge to the West side in search of a place to locate his church. Whatever location he chose, Matthew had to make sure he didn't step on anybody's toes. Meaning, he did not want to upset any of the other religious organizations by seeming to cherry pick their followers. He didn't need to make any enemies. So ideally, Matthew needed an address that was somewhere betwixt. Fortunately for Matthew, there was just such an area on the other side of the bridge that resolved his concern. It appeared to be in more of a transition zone. Sure it was on the West side, but not that far on that side. It looked and felt a lot more like the East side. Matthew thought that would be the perfect location to start his search.

Once reaching the other side of the bridge, Matthew started walking up and down the streets searching locations and looking at any for sale signs. The first area he walked through was more like an industrial warehouse zone. There were commercial buildings and a lot of asphalt and pavement, but not much in the way of homes. He decided he had better find a way out of the warehouse district and try to find a neighborhood. He wanted his church to be near the warehouse district, so that some of his followers from the East side of the river could find better employment. But he also did not want to be too ensconced amongst the wealthy enclaves as to encroach and be threatening to their

way of life. He was looking for something in between. He just had to find it.

Finally out of the commercial zone, Matthew walked down one street after another until he came upon an intersection with a street that veered off up a hill. Something in Matthew signaled an interest in the street and he decided to head up and take a look. Trying to get his bearings, he looked up at the street sign. The street was named “Redemption Alley”. Matthew couldn’t quite figure out why it was called an alley. It was obviously a street, lined with old but beautiful trees. Matthew thought this was a street with some history. A smile grew on Matthew’s face, as if to acknowledge that going up this alley was the right thing to do. As he climbed up the hill, there were no houses on either side of the street. Matthew thought that the whole hill must be part of a larger farm or estate.

Matthew kept hiking up the street to the top of the hill and there on the top was a large open, grassy area. In the middle of all this was placed an old two-story house with a for sale sign out in front. It was a large white, two-story house with a tall spire on one side. Matthew immediately thought it must be a church but there were no other obvious signs of it being a church. There didn’t seem to be anybody living there, so Matthew took it upon himself to methodically work his way around the house, peeking in the windows as he went. Behind the house, Matthew came upon a large back yard. In one corner of the back yard there was a huge oak tree. Underneath the oak tree and to one side there appeared to be a stone marker hidden amongst the bushes. Matthew’s curiosity got the better of him. It was a grave

stone. The headstone and grave itself were hidden by a thick layer of dead vines, weeds and bushes. In fact the whole back yard was covered in vines, weeds and bushes. Walking up to the headstone, Matthew had trouble reading a name or any dates. The stone was just too weathered and aged. Matthew figured it was probably the grave of the original property owner and that it marked the final resting place of someone who was present a long, long time ago. Losing his interest, Matthew turned away from the headstone and continued walking around until he finally arrived back at the front porch. There was no question in his mind. This was the place he wanted.

Matthew slowly turned around in a circle trying to get a perspective of things. At the end of the street was an empty, undeveloped lot. It seemed to have an entrance driveway, perhaps in preparation for some future development that never happened. Matthew thought that was where his bus could park and let people off. It would only be a short walking distance to the church. Inside the house, Matthew had seen that there was plenty of space downstairs to hold services. It would take some work converting the space to accommodate the pews, but that was going to have to be done no matter where he went. The real bonus for Matthew was that he thought he could accommodate himself very comfortably on the second floor. He would have to wait until he could check out the insides, but the second floor idea looked very promising. Matthew walked over to the for sale sign and jotted down the Realtor's name and phone number. He was prepared to make an offer. If the asking price was too high, he would just keep up the haggling until they finally arrived at a

reasonable cost. The house looked like it had been for sale for a long time, so Matthew didn't think there would be a problem. As he started walking back down the street, he chuckled to himself that, "The Church On Redemption Alley" would be what he would call it.

Back home on the East side of the river, Matthew began the process of crunching some numbers. Whatever the price of the house, Matthew didn't have very much money to work with. After having found the ideal place for his church, coming up with the money became a pretty hefty obstacle to overcome. The more he thought about it, the only way he could do so would be to get help from the community. He had never charged a fee for his public speaking before, but he could certainly start. He could hold a fundraiser or go door-to-door asking for donations. Any of these would certainly start the process, but Matthew was quick to realize that even those kind of events would hardly result in the kind of sums he needed. Certainly not enough to cover the monies needed to buy the house and property, no matter what the total cost turned out to be. In any event, it was the start of a plan. A plan that needed to be implemented as soon as possible.

The next day found Matthew walking door-to-door speaking to those in his neighborhood and passing out fliers for a special fundraising event he was going to hold. The event was to be held at the recreation hall in just a few days so it was critical to get the information out as soon as possible. It was equally critical that Matthew start preparing his spiel. It would need to be especially appealing and motivating if he was going to garner the financial support of

the community. Bottom line was, he needed to somehow incentivize people to contribute to his cause.

The day of the event Matthew was waiting in the wings of the recreation hall, peeking through the curtains to judge the size of the crowd. His first glance told him that the hall was filling up. That was a good sign. Most of the seats had been taken and there still was a crowd of people streaming in. Matthew was both elated and scared to death at the same time. These were his people. These were his friends, relatives, neighbors and others who were coming to hear what he had to say. Matthew wasn't sure they wanted to hear him begging for their money.

As the start time approached, the lights in the hall flickered and dimmed, signaling that the show was about ready to begin. As the lights came back up, the curtain rose and there was Matthew, center stage, a lectern the only thing separating him from the hundred people or so that had taken him up on his offer. In the end, it was another one of Matthew's great presentations. He laid everything out plainly for everyone to see and made his point that, by helping him buy the house and property on the West side of the river, they would all benefit. He promoted all the positive aspects of better access to jobs and membership within the community on the West side. He ended his speech with a heartfelt plea for their financial assistance. He asked them to please give whatever they could and promised them that, if they did so, they would secure a brighter future for everyone present. As he left the stage he headed for the exit where there was a small table set up to accept donations. Matthew met and conversed with all those

leaving the event, encouraging them to make a donation of any size.

After everyone had left, Matthew gathered up his belongings, including the donation box and returned to the hall. He sat down at a table and reflected on what had just happened. He was exhausted but also elated that so many people showed up and that, as far as he could tell, the majority of them were happy enough with his speech to make sure they dropped something in the donation box. Matthew sat quietly inside the hall for awhile, lost in his thoughts. He knew that whatever he had raised in donations from the community was not going to be nearly enough to come up with the financial arrangement he had worked out with the Realtor.

His thoughts were interrupted by a door swinging open and the shuffle of footsteps coming from the doorway at the entrance to the recreation hall. When he looked up, he saw one of his oldest friends walking up to greet him. Behind and alongside of his friend were two other gentlemen of whom he had never seen before. Matthew thought it a strange sight. He hadn't seen anything like that kind of procession in quite a long time. When he had, the purpose was to form a protective shell. The goal was to protect the person in the center. Matthew's friend had come with his own personal protection ensured.

Matthew stood up and greeted his friend with hugs and then stood back as they looked at each other up and down. They hadn't seen each other in quite a while, since they were in high school together. That was when they kind of split up and went their own separate ways. His friend's

name was Larry and, in fact, it was Larry who had encouraged Matthew to pursue his life's ambitions. Even if it meant leaving school. Larry said that he was sorry but he was unable to attend the gathering. Larry said he didn't really need that kind of pep talk anyway. He was already convinced that whatever Matthew was asking for, Matthew should get.

Matthew was a little embarrassed to ask, but pressed Larry for the reason he was accompanied by the other two gentlemen? Larry said that they were his body guards. They were there to make sure that wherever Larry went, he went safely and arrived unharmed. Larry apologized for their presence with the two of them now, but said that wherever Larry went, they went too. By this time, Matthew understood the kind of business that Larry was in. Body guards? They were probably packing weapons and knew exactly what to do when the use of a weapon became necessary. Obviously Larry had made it to his own big time. Matthew's guess was that it probably had something to do with drugs and stolen merchandise.

Not wishing to engage in small talk any further, Larry said that there was a reason for his visit. He knew full well that Matthew was trying to raise money for what had become known as Matthew's church, otherwise known as "The Church On Redemption Alley". Larry also knew full well that, whatever Matthew had been able to raise through donations, it was not going to be enough. Larry said the reason he was there was to make a proposal to Matthew. A proposal, that if accepted, would pay for the church in cash and in full.

Matthew nervously sat back down and squirmed in his chair as he listened to what Larry had to say. Not having enough money was just what he had been fretting about and the thought of being able to purchase the building and property outright sounded intriguing. Matthew also knew that whatever Larry proposed would come with many strings attached. Be that as it may, Matthew gave a nod to let Larry continue.

Larry started by saying that he had worked his way up in the world of dealing in drugs and the sale of stolen merchandise. He said that was why someone of his stature required the two people that had followed him in. They were his protection from others in the community who wished they were in the same position as Larry. In other words, Larry said that he had control of a lot of money and product. Money and product that needed to be, well, safely looked after. That being the case, Larry said he was willing to pay a lot of money to keep himself and his product safe.

That was where Matthew came in. Larry said that what Matthew was doing was something that he had wanted to do for a very long time. That was to set up operations on the West side. He said that Matthew was able to concoct the perfect scenario. First, he was going to be operating under the guise of a church. Larry said that if you wanted to hide something, it was ideal to do it in the name of religion. Second, there was the location. Being on the West side of the river was closer to where the real money was to be made. There were a good number of well-to-do people living on the West side and a lot of really nice homes built to house those people. Wealthy people. Larry's proposal was

that he would pay for Matthew's church if one, Matthew would allow him to use the basement of the church for storing his product and two, allow him to utilize the church as a base station for his operations on the West side of the river.

Matthew had already predicted what Larry was going to say and was hesitant. But Larry was a very good and long-time friend and it must have taken a lot of guts for Larry to approach him with such an offer. Matthew thought that there would be more benefits down the road if he agreed to set up such an arrangement with Larry. He preferred not to think of the possible legal issues that may arise at some time in the future. So, in the end, it was a no-brainer to accept Larry's proposal. Matthew and Larry both saw the whole situation as a win-win.

After shaking hands on the deal, Larry and his posse of two got up and walked out of the recreation hall. Matthew went home that night and tried not to overthink what had just transpired. He knew there were plenty of risks involved in working with Larry, but what Matthew was about to do was a pretty hefty risk too. Right? Pastor Matthew? A new church on the West side of the river called "The Church On Redemption Alley"? Who was he kidding? This thing with Larry was peanuts.

Over the next few months, the Realtor and Matthew sealed the deal on the house and the property, the escrow closed and Matthew finally felt that "The Church On Redemption Alley" was a reality. He was ready to move in. Kind of. Matthew realized that there was still plenty of work to do on the place to get it ready to be a church. He could

certainly move his personal belongings into the second floor and set up residence. The first floor though, needed a lot of attention. Resigned to that fact, Matthew started packing up his personal belongings and gradually set to driving them over to the new place. One trip led to another and over a period of a few days, Matthew had begun to settle in.

Matthew leaving the East side of the river had not gone completely unnoticed. Any number of his neighbors and friends had witnessed all the comings and goings. They knew Matthew didn't need help with the moves, but they did know that there were a number of things that needed to be done to the first floor before any real services could be held. The day Matthew finished his personal move to the West side of the river, his friends and neighbors began gathering for a move of their own. They gathered early morning the next day and set their plan in motion.

Amongst the many friends and neighbors there were plenty of those who had the skills necessary to help with the remodel of the first floor. Some of them had their own jobs, but others were ready to start the ball rolling. They not only had the skills, but they had the tools too. There were plenty of donuts and coffee to go around for everybody as they loaded up their trucks and cars and headed over the bridge to the West side of the river. They were at Matthew's door just as Matthew had finished his first cup of coffee and was already stressing as to where he was going to begin.

Matthew was just too excited as he led them all into the house and explained what he was trying to get accomplished. The organization of the group was amazing as they formed into small teams, based on the skills they

had and the work to be done. Matthew felt a little helpless as he sat back and watched, but it wasn't long before one of the teams presented him with some tools and said for him to get started. Under their direction, of course.

Over the next few days, the first floor of the house was completely transformed. Walls were knocked out and relocated. Floors were redone and carpet laid. Benches were set in place to resemble the pews found in other churches. Finally, a fresh coat of paint was applied to the whole of the interior. The workers asked if Matthew wanted to have them work on the upstairs where he was living? Matthew thought that would be a good idea, but it simply didn't require the effort that was put into the first floor. When they asked about working on the basement, Matthew was adamant that no work was to be done there. In fact, no one was to even go down there.

Matthew wasn't even sure what was going on down there, let alone what it looked like. He had reassured Larry that the basement was Larry's domain and he would be responsible for everything that went on down there. A couple of nights previous, Matthew had thought he heard some noise going on down there. When he looked out the window, he could make out faint silhouettes coming and going between the street and the house. What they were doing, he didn't really know. The only thing Matthew was sure of was that anything going on downstairs appeared to be taking place late at night under the cover of darkness.

With all the work completed on the first floor and some minor changes to the upstairs living area, Matthew began contemplating his grand opening, so to speak. This was

going to be the announcement to the community, those on both the East and West side of the river, that he was open for business. Matthew knew that those on the East side already knew what was taking place at “The Church On Redemption Alley”. It was the West side community that worried Matthew, for they would be completely surprised by Matthew’s re-location to their side of the river. He needed to plan this announcement very carefully, so as to not upset any of the powers that be. That being so, Matthew decided to hold his opening on a day that would not conflict with the other churches on the West side. Those churches would normally hold their services on Sundays, so Matthew decided to hold his services on Saturday. There were other churches that held their services on Saturday, but Matthew did not consider them to be the ones to worry so much about. What made sense to Matthew was that the normal Sunday morning church crowd would be available for his services. Those were the ones that Matthew hoped to make an impact with.

Matthew went to work creating a flier announcing the grand opening of his church. He was going to set up shop on Saturday mornings for one service at 10:00 AM and another at 1:00 PM. Matthew was a little hesitant at first, but decided to go ahead and call himself the pastor on the flier. Mathew figured that no one would really bother with vetting his credentials. If somebody did, he figured he would just say that he was working on it.

When Matthew was finished with the flier, he made one hundred copies and decided to walk his way through the West side, handing them out and posting them on

telephone poles and such. Along the way he ran into quite a few people that gladly accepted his flier as he stopped to introduce himself. Some of those didn't seem much interested, but, others, seemed to relish the idea of hearing something new and doing something different. Those that were interested seemed to be open to mentioning Matthew's church to their friends and neighbors. Spreading the word, mouth to mouth, seemed to be the best way of getting everyone's attention. Those of his followers on the East side learned of the opening in a similar manner. Simply by one person telling another. It didn't hurt that Matthew had made it well known in advance to those who helped him remodel the first floor of his church.

It was early Saturday morning, the grand opening and Matthew was quite the mess. He had gotten very comfortable giving motivational speeches to his so-called congregation on the East side of the river, but this was going to be different. Not only was it a new venue, but the potential was there for a whole lot of people he had never met. Matthew sat down on a chair fretting about all of this when Larry showed up and sat himself down across from Matthew. Larry knew from Matthew's appearance and behavior that he was all stressed out. He knew that Matthew needed a pep talk. The first thing Larry wanted to do was simply calm Matthew down. He said to Matthew that nerves can be a terrible thing when you really don't need to be nervous. He said it was alright to be a little nervous. That could be a good thing. Being nervous can make you cautious and help you take things more slowly. Larry asked Matthew to take a deep breath and try to relax.

Larry said that the first time something was done, was always the hardest. Being nervous was normal. There were just too many unknowns. You question your own abilities. You wonder if you are doing the right thing. You just question everything. Larry looked Matthew in the eyes and said that after that first time, he would get stronger. More sure of himself and more familiar with what he was doing. He said to Matthew that he just needed to take that first step and then, do it again. The more he did so, the more his confidence would build and the more his confidence grew, the more he would know he did the right thing.

Larry asked Matthew to try and remember the very first time he stood up to a crowd and opened his mouth. It was probably about something that meant a lot to Matthew, but not so much to his friends. But they listened. The point was that Matthew had something to say that he thought would be helpful to his friends. Larry said that he was one of those who, at first, was not really interested in what Matthew had to say. Then, he started to listen. It was because of the way that Matthew was talking and presenting the information that changed his opinion of Matthew. Larry said, originally, he saw Matthew as a small time player. He wasn't the one making the big shots in basketball. He was the one that preferred to be the referee. He wasn't one of the leaders in the neighborhood, but what he had to say made a lot of sense. He wasn't into stealing. He didn't drown himself in the drug culture. Larry said that Matthew was different and that being different made him suspicious to others. Somehow though, Matthew convinced Larry and the others that things could be different for them. It was Matthew's ability to speak that showed them that

things didn't have to be the way they were. But they had to take that first step and do something about it. Larry finished by saying that things were not any different now. Matthew just needed to take that first step. The rest would follow. They always had.

Matthew raised his head, looked Larry straight in the eyes and said that he was right. It was his ability to speak to others that got him to where he was today. It was his ability to create a message that wowed the crowd. Yes, there were going to be different people and this was a different place. But Matthew said, it all comes down to what he had to say. Not who he was saying it to or where he was saying it at. In fact, Matthew said that the common denominator in all of this was the message and if anybody could communicate that message, it was himself. Larry felt Matthew getting stronger. Matthew said he knew what he wanted to say. He just needed to let his instincts take over. It was going to be highly inspirational. He was sure of that. Larry saw the nervousness slip away from Matthew. As he sat back in his chair, Matthew gave a big sigh of relief. He stood up and thanked Larry profusely for building him up and giving him the confidence to continue. They both leaned in, gave each other big hugs and then, they parted ways.

LARRY

CHAPTER THREE

Larry retreated to his basement, walking down the set of stairs at the back of the room. Matthew did the opposite. He walked up the flight of stairs to his study, where he was to sit down and write his sermon. The pensive moment was over for Matthew. He knew just what he was going to do and was ready to get it all down on paper. Larry on the other hand, felt a little uneasy as he arrived downstairs. Something wasn't settling right in his stomach. He wasn't quite sure what it was but he was a little off. The story that he had just given Matthew seemed to calm his fears but that was all it was. It was a story for Matthew. Larry wondered what his story was? He needed some pumping up too.

Larry and Matthew went back quite a ways. They grew up in the same neighborhood, only separated by a couple of houses. They went to the same schools, at least until Larry felt he had enough and dropped out of high school. They both felt that high school wasn't for them but Larry was the one to act on it. Larry was looking for something better. After leaving school Larry and Matthew tried to remain good friends, but they saw each other less and less. They just started going in two different directions. All in all, Larry felt that he and Matthew were like brothers.

Sometimes together. Sometimes apart. But they vowed they would always be there for each other.

Dropping out of high school turned out to have more of an effect on Larry than he thought it would. Larry didn't realize how much he relied on Matthew for always pointing him in the right direction. Without Matthew, Larry had to look elsewhere for the kind of guidance that Matthew had always provided him. There just didn't seem to be anyone else to look to. Larry thought, maybe wished, that he had stayed in high school with Matthew. But staying in high school meant accepting the same old argument that if you got an education you could end up with a good paying job and a lifestyle better than what your parents were experiencing. Larry would chuckle to himself that beating what his parents had to offer was a no-brainer. Larry's parents had divorced while Larry was still in diapers. His father simply stopped showing up one day. His mother did the best she could being a single mother and all, but what that translated to was they lived their life on welfare. No. Larry figured that it wouldn't take much to outdo his parents. Leaving high school was the right thing to do. He would be better off without it. He just wasn't sure he would be better off without Matthew.

The other side of the coin was that Larry leaving high school meant that he was leaving the safety net of having some place to go. A place he could go to meet up with other people. Even though high school was a drag, it did give Larry some place to go for the day. Frankly, it gave Larry something to do as well. No matter how boring high school was, out on the streets Larry needed something to

do and some one to do it with. At first he tried just hanging out around the house, but that didn't last too long. His mother kept ragging on him and he just ran out of things to do. One of the original reasons he left school was because it was boring. Unfortunately, it seemed to be just as boring staying home.

One day his mother sent him to the store to pick up some, what she called, necessary items. Necessary meant things like cigarettes and booze. At the store, a liquor store in this case, Larry was quite troubled to find that his mother had not given him enough money to cover what was on the list. There was only enough money to cover half the cost. That didn't matter much. Larry was just a little too young to be buying liquor and cigarettes anyway. Larry figured there were a couple of things he could do. First, he could abandon the mission and head home empty handed. Second, he could snatch the items and return home with the goods. Larry really didn't like the first option. He knew his mother would go off on one of her tantrums and use Larry as the whipping post. So, in effect, the second thought was Larry's only real option if he didn't want to get hurt.

Larry was standing there scoping out the best way to get at the liquor and the cigarettes. He thought he might be able to stuff a bottle or two under his shirt and grab a couple of packs of cigarettes as he ran out of the store. One look over at the manager said that was not going to be easy. He noticed a couple of other boys his age lingering in the aisle a couple of rows over. Larry was looking at them but they were both seriously looking back at him. They both

motioned for Larry to stuff what he needed in his jacket and get ready to run out the door. There was really no time for Larry to question what was going on. Suddenly, the two boys started running for the side door, opposite where the manager was sitting. The manager of course, thought some kind of heist was going on, so he jumped out of his chair and started chasing the two boys out of the store. Without hesitation, Larry grabbed a bottle of booze and a couple of packs of cigarettes and hightailed-it out the other door, completely unnoticed. Meanwhile, the manager caught up with the two boys a short distance away but was unable to find any stolen merchandise, so he had to let them go.

Larry was about half way home when the same two boys came around the corner and stopped right in front of him. Larry got nervous, unsure of what they wanted. Larry introduced himself and they introduced themselves as Cole and Bud. They asked Larry if he got what we wanted? Larry proudly opened up his coat to reveal the merchandise. Larry thanked them for their help and was waiting for them to demand some kind of compensation. But, none came. They said they were just glad to be able to have helped. Out of the blue, Cole asked Larry if he played basketball and Larry replied that he did. He said he was actually pretty good at it. Both Cole and Bud looked at each other favorably and then Cole asked if Larry would like to join their basketball team? He said their basketball team was in need of more players and they would like Larry to join. Bud said they played their games on Tuesday's and Thursday's at the local recreation center. Bud said they usually started playing around noon and that all Larry needed to bring was his game. As they walked away, Larry felt relieved. He

thought they were going to punch him out. What he didn't know was that he was about to start a whole new chapter in his life. He had met a couple of new friends that would lead him out of his prison.

That Tuesday, Larry showed up at the recreation center with his game shoes on. Arriving at the court, Larry saw a number of young kids Larry's age that gave him the once-over. Larry didn't think things were going very well, when Cole and Bud showed up and everybody's demeanor changed. It appeared that Cole and Bud were very highly respected or, more likely, very strongly feared. In any case, the kids on the court quickly surmised that Larry was not to be messed with. Any friend of Cole and Bud was a friend of theirs as well.

Everybody on the court rearranged themselves into the two teams that probably always played together. Just as they had always done. Except this time, there was this new kid. Cole and Bud pulled Larry over to their side, making it very obvious whose team Larry was going to be on. With the team numbers and players identified, they settled down to a not-so-friendly game of basketball.

Larry wasn't used to all of the punching and pushing going on as they hustled down the court. Larry was used to playing an aggressive game, but these guys were ridiculous. After a few tussles, Larry realized that most of the basketball rules he played by did not exist in this game. Here, it seemed that you did whatever you needed to do to get to the basket and make a shot. Once Larry understood that, he modified his approach to the game. He started to play the way everybody else was playing. In other words,

dirty. He started hacking, slashing, pushing and grabbing at the ball. To his surprise, it seemed to be working in his favor. Nobody complained and they seemed to respect his mastery of the game. He was one of them. Both Cole and Bud seemed impressed with Larry's skills, but, even more so with his ability to adjust to the circumstances.

After the game, Cole and Bud accompanied Larry on his long walk back home. They all congratulated each other on their win and the ability to come together after having never played together before. Bud said that was a quality that he and Cole were looking for in deciding who should be invited to join their business. Larry thought to himself, what business? He thought they were just talking basketball. Cole said that their business was in need of someone just like Larry to keep it moving forward. Someone who was a go-getter. Someone who they could trust to fit in and adapt to whatever the situation called for.

Larry stopped the three of them in their tracks and turned to ask them just what, exactly, was this business they were talking about? Bud replied that they were being intentionally vague, as the true identity of their business was something only a very few knew about. Only those who were part of the business were allowed to actually know what the business was about. In Larry's case, since he was being propositioned to be a part of the business, Cole and Bud were ready to divulge what it was they were inviting Larry to do.

Cole started by saying that what he and Bud did for a business was to sell and acquire "stuff". Cole emphasized that by "stuff" he meant two kinds of things. First, there was

the kind of “stuff” that people in the community used for personal recreation. Second, there was the kind of “stuff” that people in the community used for personal property. In other words, to be perfectly blunt, they dealt in drugs and stolen merchandise. Cole continued by adding that, of course, selling “stuff” was just one side of the business. The other side had to do with acquiring that “stuff”. Bud interjected that what that meant was that they bought, stole, sold and created things that they then offered for sale back to the community. Larry thought to himself, in other words, they were suppliers and dealers.

As this all began to sink in, Cole and Bud could see that Larry was having trouble processing all that he had just been told. Larry was having difficulty reconciling everything up to this point. Getting involved with drugs and stolen merchandise was exactly what he had been told never to do. His friend Matthew had always preached to him that, by doing so, he would just be giving in to the dark side of life. Whoever gave in to that temptation would face a lifetime of crime and potential criminal prosecution.

Larry had always respected what Matthew had to say. Matthew was the one who always stood up for the little guy, the underdog. But Larry concluded things were different this time. Larry's life had dramatically changed by dropping out of high school. He had lost all of those friends that had helped keep him on the straight and narrow. Larry thought that what Cole and Bud were offering him was a chance to better himself, even if it meant becoming part of the dark side of life as Matthew had so aptly put it. Larry could tell that Cole and Bud were getting impatient. Larry knew that

they were not going to wait forever for an answer. So Larry made up his mind. He accepted their offer to join their business. He turned to Cole and Bud and asked when he could start?

Cole and Bud had already decided that Larry would join their team. They were just waiting for him to make the decision himself. Now that he had agreed, they needed to introduce him slowly into the process. They didn't want to scare him off before he could even get started. Cole and Bud weren't novices at this. Like everybody else, Larry was going to have to learn the business from the ground up. In other words, he was going to have to start at the bottom.

Larry's first test came when Cole and Bud asked him to run some drugs from one location to another. They figured this would be a good introduction to the business and some of their customers as well. The question was whether or not Larry was up to the task. They didn't even know if he was into drugs? How can you be working drugs if you don't take drugs yourself? If Larry was going to get involved with the drug side of the business, he needed to experience their drug of choice, cocaine. Cole and Bud asked Larry if he had ever taken cocaine before? Larry replied that up to this point in his life, he had never done any drugs before, especially cocaine. Those were things he was taught never to do. Cole and Bud looked at each other dubiously. They couldn't quite believe what they were hearing. Larry was saying you were not supposed to do cocaine? What they interpreted that to mean was that Larry just needed to get high. Larry was just trying to deal with what his mother and Matthew had always said. But here

were Cole and Bud saying that he should just try it and figure it out for himself. That made more sense to Larry. If he was going to be working with Cole and Bud then he was going to have to adjust his way of thinking. He was going to have to start doing the things Cole and Bud did.

Cole and Bud were always looking for a reason to get high, so this became a perfect opportunity to do so and, at the same time, introduce Larry to getting high. There was a car show going on down at the local mall, so Cole, Bud and Larry got in Cole's car and drove on down. Once they got in the parking lot, Cole and Bud broke out a package of mushrooms and ingested a couple of them. At the same time, they passed one off to Larry. Larry wasn't quite sure what to do with it, but with a little guidance from Bud he put it in his mouth, chewed some and then swallowed it. After a short while, Larry started to feel, well, different. Cole and Bud were already feeling that way and were ready to get out of the car and head into the mall to walk through the car show. Both Cole and Bud knew what they were feeling. They had been there many times before and they liked it there. Larry wasn't quite sure what he felt, but he was quite sure it wasn't settling well. He felt sick to his stomach and decided to hang back, sit in the car a little longer and try to ride it out. Larry's nausea got worse so he climbed into the back seat to stretch out and try to relax.

Larry turned over onto his back and closed his eyes. Things were starting to spin so he just laid there a while and tried to calm his mind. After about ten minutes Larry started feeling a little better and before too long he was ready to get out of the car and head into the mall to find Cole and

Bud. As he exited the car, he started to feel a little woozy and the other cars in the parking lot seemed out of focus. He stopped, leaned against another car and tried to regain his balance. Then he pushed himself on to the entrance of the mall. Upon entering the car show, Larry was met with a dazzling display of old, but shiny, cars. They were all lined up with their hoods open so that you could look inside and see their super clean, modified engines. It was like they were just inviting him in to look and stare. Larry had to admit to himself, that, as he strolled between the cars in the show, he was actually getting the hang of this high thing. He was having a real good time.

Larry stopped to look at one of the cars and for no reason at all, got caught up looking down the line of cars to the other end. There, standing at the far end, were Cole and Bud. Cole and Bud were talking with someone, probably the owner of one of the cars they were impressed with. They had their backs turned to Larry, but as if in a highly choreographed maneuver, they both swung around in Larry's direction at the same time. The three of them made direct eye contact and it was as if they were the only ones there. Then, Cole and Bud just started busting up laughing. Of course, that actually made Larry start busting out laughing as well. The whole scene seemed surreal and strange to Larry. It was as if, somehow, there was this telecommunication thing going on between the three of them. Larry couldn't really identify what it was that connected the three of them, but here they were, connected. It must have been a couple of hours later, the three of them finished gawking at all the cars and decided to go back to the car. It was time to get back home. The

effects of the mushrooms were starting to wear off for Cole and Bud, but Larry was still tripping. Nevertheless, he was happy to be going home.

When they arrived back home, they all sat around for awhile, hashing over how great the car show was. Cole and Bud were feeling quite good about the mushroom experience and the car show thing. Larry, in due time, also came around to their way of thinking. Overall, Larry's first experience with getting high and seeing things from a different perspective made him feel like he wanted more. Cole and Bud were not done yet.

Cole and Bud felt that Larry had passed his first test. The next thing was to get Larry involved in the business. Cole said they needed someone to drive Cole's car to another part of the East side and pick up a supply of product. In this case, the product was a large amount of almost pure cocaine. Larry's job was to be that pick-up person. Cole and Bud went over all of the specifics but made it very clear there were two things that were critically important. One, Larry was going to be carrying an extremely large amount of cash to pay for the cocaine. The sellers were well aware of that and Larry was to be on his guard. They said it wouldn't be the first time that somebody like Larry was robbed. Two, the sellers knew what the agreed upon price was. Cole said that had better not change. The money given to Larry was only enough to cover the exchange. So, in other words, they were also warning Larry not to pocket any of the money. One other thing they told Larry was that the cocaine he was picking up weighed a very specific amount and they were told the

quality was considered to be fairly pure. They made it clear to Larry that they would be checking the product for accuracy when Larry got back home.

As Cole and Bud were describing Larry's task, they could see that Larry was starting to break out in a sweat. He had this concerned look on his face. They wanted to make sure that Larry was absolutely sure about what it was he was about to do. They asked Larry what the concerned look was all about? Larry said he could handle the exchange of money no problem. But the quality of the cocaine he was buying? Since he had never done cocaine before, how was he to know that it was pure? Was he supposed to weigh it and, if so, with what? Finally, Larry wanted to know what he was supposed to do if it didn't weigh the correct amount?

Cole and Bud got this look of gratification on their faces, like Larry had responded exactly how they had wanted him to respond. They said those were very good questions and, by the way, congratulations. They said to Larry that they were well aware of Larry's inexperience in the fine art of buying and selling cocaine. In fact, they said that they were just testing Larry. As far as they were concerned, he had passed with flying colors.

The real description as to how all of this was going to come down was still forthcoming. Cole said that he would be accompanying Larry on the whole ordeal. Cole would be the point person and Larry was to be the observer. Larry was to observe Cole and learn what to do and how to act. He said that, if the situation warranted, just follow his lead. That way Larry would know what to do the next time. The

next time he would be expected to take the lead. Larry was quite relieved. Relieved that he was not on his own and happy to hear that it seemed that there would be a next time. With that, Cole said that Larry was to meet him at the house, 9:00 PM that night. Bud said that was when they did all their business. Things were less visible at that time and keeping a low profile was a necessity. They emphasized that working under the cover of darkness was invaluable.

Later that night, at 9:00 PM, Larry showed up back at Cole's place. Cole was outside loading up a car with, what Larry thought, were supplemental items. Although he wasn't exactly sure what those items were. All Cole said was that they had proved valuable in the past and he always took them with him on these kinds of deals. The thing was, it wasn't the same car that they used to go to the car show. Larry asked Cole if this was another one of his cars? Cole said that he preferred to use different cars when doing drug deals. The make and models were different, the colors were different and the license plates were all different as well. Cole made some remark to Larry about trying to keep everyone guessing, saying that it was important to keep them guessing. He said the darker the night and the less obvious you are, the better chance that the deal was going to come off successfully. He said to keep them guessing.

When all was ready, Cole and Larry took off in the car to somewhere not divulged to Larry. Larry thought that was intentional. There was really no reason for Larry to have to know the exact location of where they were going. All Larry needed to know was when they got there. They drove for about 30 minutes to the other side of town and pulled over

out in front of an inauspicious house in a very typical neighborhood. Cole and Larry got out of the car under the cover of darkness and made their way up to the front door. Cole said that he had been told to use a very specific knock, letting the occupants of the house know that there was a friend not a foe at the door. Cole got to the front door and applied three heavy knocks, followed by a couple of two shorter knocks. Before too long, the door opened a crack and after making a brief, but informative introduction, Cole and Larry were hustled inside. No names were given on either side, but it was very clearly stated what was supposed to happen. Cole and Larry were led into the kitchen where a few other people were sitting around a big, long table. On top of the table was the package, alongside an obvious scale of some kind. The cocaine was partially opened for inspection. There was loud music playing in the background and those sitting around the table were rocking to the music like they had already imbibed their fair share of the product beforehand. Larry could tell that Cole was wondering how much of his product was missing?

Cole whispered to Larry that it was their time. It was apparent that everyone there knew what was going to happen next and no questions were raised as Cole walked up to the package and opened it up further. As Larry watched Cole, there were two things that Cole was obviously interested in. One, he wanted to judge the quality of the cocaine and two, he wanted to make sure it was the correct quantity. Larry picked up the package and moved it over to the top of the scale. After adjusting the weights a little, he nodded to Larry that quantity was not an issue. The next thing Cole did was to take his index finger and dip it

into the cocaine, leaving a small quantity of it residing on his fingertip. He put the tip of his finger in his mouth and proceeded to rub his finger against his gums. Cole reminded Larry of a master chef tasting his recipe. As Cole savored both the taste and the effects of the cocaine on his gums, he turned to his customers and asked them what, if anything, they had used to cut the cocaine? He added that there was a slight aftertaste in his mouth. He said that it wasn't an issue, but that he was just curious. Someone at the table muttered some word that Larry didn't understand, but it seemed to perfectly satisfy Cole. Cole seemed agreeable with the transaction so far, so he proceeded to the next step. Cole pulled out of his pocket a thick wad of bills that he turned over to the head person sitting at the table. That person made sure that it was the right amount and before much else could be said, Cole and Larry were escorted out of the front door with their package in hand.

Once they got to the car, Cole slipped the package under the driver's seat. Larry turned to Cole and asked what he would have done if the cocaine wasn't what he expected? Cole said then, it would be a matter of finesse. He said you had to be flexible with both the quantity and the quality, because it was going to be cut anyway. Larry wasn't quite sure what cutting the cocaine meant. Cole replied that meant adding another substance to the cocaine so that it could be sold at a profit. He said that what was cut was then available for your own personal use. Cole said that if measurements were not within the ballpark though, you would just start walking towards the door. He said if they really wanted to sell it, that would open the way to negotiation. Cole said to Larry that since he and Bud would

be cutting the cocaine later, it was important to know what the original product had been cut with. That was why he said he had asked.

As the two of them drove away, Cole said that driving home held its own risks. He said that they could be followed by someone wanting to steal the cocaine and that they had to be on the lookout for any police who might be lying in wait. In either case, they had to be prepared for a possible robbery attempt or criminal arrest. It was then that Larry remembered the items that Cole had loaded into the trunk of the car. Those items had been moved up to the inside of the car and consisted of various weapons that could be used to protect themselves. Larry unexpectedly found himself questioning what he was doing. He hadn't expected to hear that there were these kinds of risks involved in what they were doing. Still, it seemed Cole was confident and remained calm. Larry figured Cole had done this before and he was still alive, so he just must be trying to be safe. Cole reassured Larry that he had never had to resort to using any of the precautions that he was taking.

After arriving back at Cole's place, Cole and Bud put Larry through a mini debriefing. They wanted to make sure that Larry had done a good job of observing and understanding everything that Cole did. They made it very clear that the steps that Cole followed were critical to their supply and sales bottom line. In other words, to Larry's bottom line as well. That included leaving enough of the cocaine for their own personal use.

Larry headed home after a very late night and couldn't help wondering if doing the drug thing was what he really

wanted to do. He thought to himself maybe, he could just specialize in the stolen merchandise side of the business? He mused wouldn't that be less dangerous? After his head hit the pillow, Larry was still flying high. The adrenaline was flowing and he still had concerns about his future with Cole and Bud.

Larry sat downstairs in the basement of the church contemplating his friendship with Matthew. Larry thought long and hard about how dropping out of high school had really changed his life. The drugs, the hot merchandise and the lack of guidance from Matthew were starting to take a toll. He hadn't really planned it this way, but Larry investing in Matthew's church brought the two of them back together again. Larry thought that Matthew had always been there for him and now, he had to be there for Matthew. The doubt started coming back into Larry's thoughts. He thought that, maybe, he should have never become involved in a life of crime. But, then again, he wouldn't be where he was today, if he hadn't. He wouldn't be in a position to help his best friend Matthew. The conversation he just had with Matthew upstairs? That would have never happened.

Larry reflected on his life to this point. It was what most people would consider quite successful, even if it was a little atypical. Atypical? Larry had to admit that it was downright illegal what he had been highly successful at doing. In a lot of ways Larry owned his world. He had plenty of money, a good number of employees and a business that could rival any more legitimate operation. But as if with most things, Larry had to admit that his business had its pitfalls. For one thing, there was this foreboding he felt

every single day that at any moment things could all come crashing down. The peril of the police coming down on him hard was a real threat. And what about the bodyguards? Larry had to admit that needing people to protect him sounded pretty disconcerting.

Be that as it may, Larry didn't have a whole lot of options anymore. He had made his choices earlier in life and that was just the way it was. In an effort to try and rationalize his current situation, Larry thought that at least he had the best of both worlds. He had his business and he had Matthew again.

RIVER'S RUN

CHAPTER FOUR

The town where I live is called River's Run. It started out as an old mining town back in 1896. I'm sure you are thinking that River's Run is just another one of those old ghost towns that discovered gold around that time, and that's not too far from the truth. The thing about discovering gold in most regions of the world is that it usually didn't last very long. Most of the people hunting for gold quickly cleaned out the stream beds and creek banks, forcing them to reach higher up into the foothills to look for where the gold in the stream beds had originated. Unfortunately, those sources of gold were found embedded in veins of quartz, which involved the much more arduous task of mining for quartz and extracting the gold from the rock. Well, that didn't last very long either as most of the gold hunters didn't want to invest in that kind of energy and effort. So places like River's Run didn't grow much for years after that and it wasn't until the early 1900's that the mining started to pick back up again. This time though it wasn't to try and make it rich off of gold. This time, the miners were more interested in mining for the quartz.

Turns out that quartz has been used for thousands of years by ancient people for making jewelry and other adornments. It was used in the making of tools as its hardness rating was very high. One other thing was that

quartz was thought to play a major role in magic and healing. Some countries still use quartz for these very same purposes. So, for these reasons, the mining of quartz picked up again. The demand for quartz grew and there were a lot of people who made their fortunes mining the mineral. Over time, once again, supply outstripped demand and the market for quartz eventually slowed. It slowed enough to end whatever growth spurt River's Run experienced from this second wave of popularity. River's Run needed to find some other way to survive.

The town eventually grew to the size it is today through a transformation from mining to manufacturing. The name River's Run comes from the river that splits and divides the town, unintentionally creating two different socioeconomic areas. Those benefiting less, live on the East side of the river and those benefiting more, live on the West side. The manufacturing of products and goods takes place on the West side of the river and that just so happens to be where I work and live. I came to River's Run after graduating college with a business degree and finding that my skills were in high demand. I loved the outdoors and was looking for a place to work where I could experience the outdoors easily and without much effort. Coming to River's Run gave me that opportunity.

For the record, I am a manager at one of the largest manufacturing facilities in River's Run. We make and assemble furniture that is then shipped up the river to other facilities on the coast. Those facilities then ship the furniture, via truck and rail, to other retail stores throughout the state and nation for sale to the public.

That's some of the history of River's Run. It's somewhat typical of a lot of other old gold mining towns. At least in the sense that they found themselves needing to retool over time. Usually, that meant retooling to something less lucrative. Not that we don't make great furniture, but we certainly didn't all strike it rich like the old gold miners did. Overall, River's Run is a fairly small town of just around ten thousand people. We don't have the hustle and bustle of much larger towns or cities. We like it that way. Most of us would like to keep it that way. Then again, trying to stop change from happening can be like trying to stop a fast moving freight train by standing in front of it.

As such, River's Run has its own police department with precincts on both the East and West sides of the river. Crime just happens. There is a hospital, notably a Catholic hospital. We have churches, schools and stores, just like everywhere else. But again, living on the East or West side of the river makes a big difference in your lifestyle. Politics plays a large part in just about everything we do and see. People agree on a lot of things, but they can also strongly disagree with one another on various issues. In that sense, things are not that much different here in River's Run from other, typical towns.

Communication plays an important role in one's everyday life here in River's Run, just like it does in most places. It doesn't matter if you live on the East or West side of the river. How things get communicated is equally as important. In some ways that communication takes the form of the tried and true word of mouth. A neighbor talks to another neighbor who, in turn, talks to another neighbor. It

may not always be the most reliable, as news becomes rumors and quickly spreads as misinformation. In situations like that, people in River's Run turn to their town newspaper. The Newsroom is usually a good source of local fact and not just someone's favorite fancy. We do have television, but we don't have any locally sourced news shows. So that leaves our local newspaper as the only real way to communicate local and national news.

THE NEWSROOM

CHAPTER FIVE

If you don't live in River's Run, you would probably think that The Newsroom sounds just like another coffee place where you can meet up with your friends and share coffee and conversation. Or, maybe The Newsroom is a Christian Science Reading Room where one goes to find a quiet place to read, study and pray under the auspices of the Christian Science church. If you do live in River's Run, then you probably already know that The Newsroom is the local newspaper, a forum for both the town's gossip and the leading source of relevant news. In other words, in this town, if you want the news, this is your best bet. It's not a complete source of news for national or world level issues, but it does its best. It's pretty much, strictly, the local news of this small town of just around ten thousand people.

The Newsroom itself has very few employees, only the ones necessary to gather and report the local news. That's another way to say that they run a very minimal operation. The reporters for The Newsroom number a total of three individuals. There's Trent, George and Rita. Their job is to gather the news, filter through the town's gossip, take pictures of anything that needs to have pictures taken and report all of this in a newspaper format that is published twice a week. It used to be that The Newsroom published a newspaper every day of the week, but over time, the

amount of real news slowed down a lot. That meant that the number of publishing days went down to two. That meant the number of employees dropped to the three that are there today.

Most days, there's not a whole lot of local news to cover so the reporters might spend the majority of their day trying to generate news stories that the readers may find interesting. It's not like they make things up. It's just that some times the stories are very, very localized. Maybe creative is a better word. The Newsroom likes to call these stories human interest stories. Things like people living into their one hundreds and pets that never seem to die. Or, tried and true food recipes that have been passed down from generation to generation. Then there are the just plain and simple stories about the dumb things that people do. Like eating way too many goldfish or leaping tall buildings in a single bound and ending up in an alleyway somewhere hurt. It's surprising the kinds of things people will do to get their picture and story in the newspaper.

When the staff can't find other things to do, their daily routine is spent focused on break time or what they are going to do for lunch. If this was some big city job, it would probably be called watching the clock or gossiping by the water cooler. Same as just wasting time until it's time to go home. In this town the clock moves rather slowly, so it was not uncommon for someone like Rita to take extra long lunch breaks and spend her time on long walks throughout the community. Trent and George thought that was way too much exercise for any one person, so they preferred just hanging around the office, eating snacks, drinking more

sodas and playing uncomplicated computer games. Sometimes it was hard to tell if this was a business or a snack bar.

Rita enjoyed getting out on her walks even more so than taking her mandatory breaks and eating lunch. Let's just say that Rita enjoyed getting out. It was not just exercise for her. She really needed to get out in the fresh air and work through all the clutter that seemed to occupy her life. On some days Rita would leave work early. She would get up, grab her coat and her purse and just walk out the door. No one else in the office seemed to show much concern. They had become quite accustomed to Rita doing such things. On those kind of days, no one knew what Rita did. No one asked. Where she went? No one asked. What prompted her to just not show up for work? No one seemed to care. When there wasn't a whole lot going on anyway, it didn't really matter too much.

One day things started to heat up for the news staff. Just a little bit. They certainly did not want to get overheated. The Newsroom had a number of feeds or lead sources that it would tap into in order to get information about what was going on in the community. They had contacts with the local police, fire department, schools, the hospital and even, the local bars. The first sign that something was brewing was when they got a call from the contact at the local police station. Actually, it was the police captain, Captain Nolan. He suggested that they all get together to discuss something he thought newsworthy. You know. Breaking news. This even piqued the interest of Rita, so instead of going for her usual walk, she accompanied

Trent and George to the local police precinct to talk with Captain Nolan.

When they arrived, they were promptly directed into a meeting room by the receptionist. The window shades were drawn and there were only enough chairs for the four of them. When Captain Nolan walked in, he immediately closed the door and dropped a stack of reports on to the tabletop with a loud thud. Trent, George and Rita all looked at each other in disbelief. This had never happened before. They imagined something big must be coming down. They weren't quite sure how to take all of the drama. They looked over at Captain Nolan and he said that, being their contact and all, he felt compelled to inform them of some things that were looking more suspicious day by day. Trying to remain calm, even though their heads were about to explode in laughter, they encouraged Captain Nolan to continue.

Captain Nolan said that he wanted to show them some statistics that they had accumulated over the last few months. He said that every month they got feedback from the local business establishments as to what they were seeing regarding anything unusual affecting their bottom lines. The reports indicated that the general consensus was that their business was changing. They weren't just talking about new people coming into their establishments, although that seemed to be happening too. They were seeing real declines in sales and loss of inventory.

At that, Captain Nolan sat back in his chair, propped his feet up on the table and placed his hands behind his head. He was patiently waiting for a response. Trent, George and Rita eyed each other to see who was going to

respond first. Trent, being the senior editor of the paper, whatever that really meant, felt it was his responsibility to speak to the issue. Trent stood up from the table, walked back and forth a little and then turned to Captain Nolan and said that was a really Interesting presentation. George and Rita thought to themselves, well played.

Trent was not about to go out on a limb and say anything dumb. At least, just not yet. He continued his reply to Captain Nolan by saying that they would need to talk to each individual business owner to hear their own story first before jumping to any rash conclusions. He did reassure Captain Nolan though, that he thoroughly appreciated him contacting his team with such important information. Captain Nolan seemed satisfied. Trent, George and Rita seemed pleased. They all quietly got up from the table, pushed their chairs back in and made their way out of the precinct to discuss what they had just heard.

Trent, George and Rita got back in their car and proceeded to drive back to the office. No one said a word for quite awhile. It was eerily quiet. Finally, George couldn't take it any longer and asked Trent if they could stop at the local doughnut shop? He said he needed something sweet to eat and a cup of coffee would be nice to go along with it. Trent looked in the rear view mirror at Rita, who offered no resistance, and turned into the drive thru of the closest doughnut shop he could find. No one else wanted anything so it wasn't long before they were back on the road, quiet as ever. This time Trent finally spoke up and said that they would formally discuss the conversation with Captain Nolan after they got back to their office. In mid sentence, he

started to chuckle. Which, of course, caused George and Rita to burst out laughing. The emotional release was what they were all waiting for. Rita blurted out that Captain Nolan's attempt at secrecy was for what reason? George chimed in that the dark room with the pulled curtains was for what reason? Trent, somewhat laughing, said that he thought they were all going to be presented with the crime of the century. Instead, at the most, there was this accusation that there was a minor uptick in business crime indicated in the reports. Trent said that, to be fair, Captain Nolan was just doing what he thought he was supposed to do. Which was to report anything suspicious. George replied that he did, but it was just the way that he did it. Things settled down again inside the car until they got back to the office and sat down at their desks.

Even though their office came supplied with a substantial meeting room and over-sized table, the recent cutbacks made it easier to just rearrange their desks so that they all faced each other. Trent started the conversation by saying that he thought that Captain Nolan's conversation needed to be researched. He reminded George and Rita that they were supposed to be investigative reporters. Rita and George popped up their heads from their computers, apparently ready to address the issue. Or at least to react to what they perceived as Trent's veiled accusation. Truth be told, it wasn't as if they were doing anything pressing anyway. George was playing solitaire on his computer while chewing on his doughnut and slurping down his coffee. Rita, turns out, was looking at maps of River's Run, trying to scope out new places to take long walks. Rita responded to Trent by saying that he was correct, they were investigative

reporters. But did that have to mean that they were supposed to do the work of Captain Nolan's detectives for him? George agreed that it sounded that way, but Trent was right. If this was going to be their story, they needed to make sure the facts were right. That meant gathering the facts themselves.

While George and Rita were talking, Trent received a phone call from Captain Nolan giving the three of them their first business to contact. He told Trent that would be followed by a list of all the other businesses included in the report that his team had gathered. Trent informed George and Rita of the latest information and they began to discuss how all of this was going to play out. Trent said that, first things first, they needed to set up an interview with the first business. That business happened to be the local hardware store.

George said that he would take care of making arrangements with the responsible person at the hardware store. Rita said that she would like to bow out of this one. She had something else to do, but Trent and George were not told what that was. They were used to it though and just went with the flow of whatever Rita needed. They understood her mind was elsewhere.

George made the initial call to the hardware store and set up a meeting for the next day at 11:00 AM. Next day, Trent and George walked into the hardware store at the prearranged time and were met by the head cashier. She told them that she was well aware of what they were looking for. In fact, she said, she was the one who gathered all the information for the police report anyway. Trent and

George went off to the back room with the head cashier and sat down at a table to ask their questions.

The first thing on Trent's mind was to find out from the head cashier what she thought was so suspicious? The cashier turned to Trent and said that she had been working at this store for over twenty-five years, so she had plenty of history with who came in, who bought what and what kinds of things they needed to keep in stock for their customers. George thought that what they had here was a person with a nose for gossip. That could turn out to be a good source. Trent asked if there seemed to be new people coming into the store? The cashier stated that she hadn't noticed any real changes in the customers who came into the store over the last few months, but things just started to be missing off the shelves. She said they weren't big items, but where there used to be a stocked item, there was no stocked item in that place anymore. She said being head cashier, she kept track in her mind of what kind of things were being purchased. That was how she knew when to restock an item. Funny thing was, she didn't remember any of those items being purchased. At least, not that many. She knew the other cashiers very well. They went to the same church, lived close by to each other and chatted quite a bit. They hadn't noticed those kinds of items being purchased either. Trent said that he was sorry to interrupt again, but asked the cashier what kind of items appeared to be disappearing? She turned away, thought a bit and turned back and said, well, things like boxes of nails and screws. Other items like pliers and hammers.

Trent and George didn't look very impressed. The cashier said that she knew those things alone didn't sound very alarming, but there were other items that went missing that convinced her to file a police report. Once again, Trent pressed her. The cashier replied that there were other big ticket items that she hadn't told them about yet. She said that the main item that caught her attention were the generators. As they arrive from the supplier, they were to be kept outside the back door before being moved inside to the sales floor. She said this was the way they had been doing business for years and had never had any problems. Until lately. She said she saw the supplier deliver six of the generators. They unloaded them out of the back of the truck and dropped them by the back door, just like they were supposed to. The next day when she was ready to move them inside, three were gone. She had gone outside to get the serial numbers off of the generators when she noticed the ones missing.

George seemed disinterested up to this point, but when he heard about the missing generators he perked up and listened. He spoke up and asked the cashier if there was anything else missing like that? Anything else that she wanted to include in her story? She replied that, come to think of it, there were a few ladders missing from the outside as well. One step ladder and two extension ladders. Trent and George looked at each other and wondered, ladders? She ended by saying that it just didn't seem right that things would just up and disappear like that. Trent nodded his head in agreement. George shook his head as well, in disbelief that something like that could happen to the good folks in River's Run. Trent said that he had one

last question for the cashier. He wanted to know if the suspicious behavior was still going on? Had she continued to notice items missing off the shelves and property being, allegedly, stolen from the loading dock? The cashier replied that, funny thing was, it had not continued. It seemed to have only occurred for a very short period of time, maybe a couple of weeks or so. Having all they needed, Trent and George got up, thanked her for the opportunity to talk with her and said that they would be getting back to her if they came up with anything worth reporting. Meanwhile, they asked her to keep her eyes peeled for anything else suspicious.

On the way back to the office, Trent and George went over the conversation with the head cashier at the hardware store. George said that what it boiled down to was that there were some items missing from the store shelves and some items that had somehow disappeared from the loading area. Trent said under his breath that did not seem like a big crime wave or anything. He said to George, that kind of thing could easily be explained by some kids doing what kids do. Growing up and feeling their oats. Maybe, even trying to impress the girls.

Rita had not yet gotten back from her daily walk when Trent and George returned, but when they were all back at the office, they filled her in on the conversation with the cashier at the hardware store. Rita's take on all of it was that they needed to keep in mind that the cashier's story was just the first of many to be heard. They had to try and keep an open mind, fully document what she had said and, when all was said and done, sit down and thoroughly

analyze all the data to try and write the story. That made Trent and George think she should have been there, but that was neither here nor there. They thanked Rita for her comments and said they agreed. They shouldn't just write off the cashier's story so casually. It may be just a single piece in a puzzle that, when completed, would reveal a more impressive picture.

Sitting at his desk Trent noticed that he had received the list from Captain Nolan containing the other businesses reporting issues. Trent read over the list and talked it over with George and Rita. They decided that it wasn't really worth it to personally interview all the other businesses. George felt they all probably had pretty much the same story as the head cashier at the hardware store. He said that they could do just as good a job by telephoning the appropriate people and getting their statements over the phone. The list included businesses such as the department store, a drug store and, of all things, an auto repair shop. Three types of businesses, one each for the investigative reporters.

Trent, George and Rita went to work on contacting the other businesses on the list provided them by Captain Nolan. At the end of the week, they reconvened to share what they had learned. After hearing all the stories, they came to the conclusion that there was a similar thread running through them all. A thread that also seemed to be shared by the head cashier's story from the hardware store. That thread included a number of items. Number one, it seemed that all the suspicious behavior started happening about three weeks ago. In all cases, with the exception of

the hardware store, that same behavior had been continuing, but on a very small scale. In other words, it had been noticeable, but not that noticeable. Number two, the items that, allegedly, were to have been stolen, seemed to be related to electronic items and small appliances. Items such as televisions, microwave ovens, stereos, cameras and small refrigerators and freezers. These items were easily removed from unsecured loading docks and, in some cases, actually removed from the delivery trucks themselves. Again, the losses were continuing, but hardly noticeable.

Most of the businesses found it odd that their stock was not completely wiped out. Just, partially. Leaving them with just enough merchandise to restock the sales floor and stay in business. The last item of the common thread dealt with the items related to the auto repair shops. In actual fact, there was only one item common to all of the auto repair shops. It wasn't so much anything that they were missing. It had more to do with what they were being asked to buy. They were experiencing a high number of people coming into their businesses selling used catalytic converters and air bags. Obviously, these items had been ripped off of cars and trucks, so, of course, these people were turned down. When the auto repair shop owners were asked to identify these people, their description boiled down to just a few individuals. Unfortunately, no one knew who they were. They did not seem common to the area.

Having completed all the leg work they needed, Trent, George and Rita decided it was time to start writing the story. If this story was to be written in a newspaper based in

a much larger city, it would have probably been considered too inconsequential for publication. But this was River's Run and this kind of behavior, this kind of small time criminal activity, needed to be made public. Publishing the story would make people more aware and hopefully bring it all to a screeching halt. The flip side was that it might just make people hostile and angry. Angry enough that they would need to yell at somebody and that somebody would include the staff at The Newsroom. Trent, George and Rita believed that in that case, they would just have to point them to the police. Namely, Captain Nolan.

The story became the headliner of the very next issue of The Newsroom. The story was written, the facts laid out in print for everyone to see and the papers signed, sealed and delivered. Trent, George and Rita sat back in their chairs on the day the story was published and delivered, proud of the work they had done and basking in the glory of their thorough investigative reporting. By that afternoon, the phones were ringing off the hook. At first, there were the few calls that congratulated the team on their work. Then, the calls steadily increased. More and more people started describing their own personal experiences with the supposed crime spree. How their homes and garages were being targeted. Things were missing and they were angry about it all. Trent fielded the first set of calls, but then asked George to join in when it all became too much. Finally, Rita was brought in try and keep everyone happy.

By the end of their work day, the three investigative reporters were tired of investigating. They were worn out, exhausted and almost sorry that they had ever published

the story in the first place. The more Rita thought about it, the more she came to the conclusion that what they did was the right thing. She reassured Trent and George that the story needed to be published. She turned to her partners and asked them to think about it in a different way. She said that, understandably, there were a lot of angry people calling in to The Newsroom with their own personal stories and suspicions. To Rita, that meant that there were a whole lot more people effected than they had thought. She said to Trent and George that what was going on in River's Run was more than just a few businesses experiencing minor theft, shoplifting and burglary. It looked more like the whole community had been affected by this mini crime spree, the extent of which they weren't really sure of yet. Rita said to Trent and George that these people had a right to be angry. They felt they had been violated. Publishing the story put that violation on the front page for everyone to see.

RITA

CHAPTER SIX

Rita knew what it was like to be violated. She had been violated many times as a young child. Not physically, but emotionally. Just like the townspeople of River's Run. Trent and George had always wondered why she took such long walks during her lunch breaks. Rita never explained it to them. She couldn't bring herself to tell them, but taking long walks was Rita's way of dealing with the trauma of feeling emotionally violated all of those years.

Rita wasn't actually born in River's Run. About five years previous she was lucky enough to have started a job as an investigative reporter with The Newsroom. Rita grew up in what most people would call a pretty dysfunctional family. She was the only child of one of those kinds of couples that probably never should have had a child in the first place. Rita was always made to feel that she was just a mistake. For that matter, her parents probably never should have gotten married. Rita's parents always treated her poorly. They would tell her that she was just a bad seed. Rita was the cause of their bad marriage and the reason why their life was such a horrible mess. Needless to say, none of this fell on deaf ears. Rita came to believe that she was the cause of her parent's miserable life. She was led to believe that it was because of her that everyone else had to suffer through life.

There was one thing that Rita's parents did that gave Rita a glint of happiness, a little bright spot. It was probably the only thing that gave her something to look forward to. Her parents took her to church every Sunday. It was at church that her parents seemed to act as if being together as a family was a joy. It was at church where Rita was treated by the minister and the congregation as a normal, good human being. The minister would go out of his way to personally come over and talk with Rita and her mother. He would also try to converse with Rita's father, but her father wasn't having any of it. Rita knew that, deep down, her father didn't believe in any of this holy spirit crap.

Being at church created an almost imaginary, fairy tale, world for Rita where everything was the way it was supposed to be. The way all was meant to be. After the sermon was over, Rita's parents would socialize with the other adults, pretending to be the loving couple that Rita knew them not to be. Rita would be sent off to play with the other kids, to run and chase each other around. They would make up games in their heads and then reenact them for each other. It was at church where Rita developed her love of God because, as Rita saw it, it was God that made everything that was horribly wrong, right again. Every Sunday.

Just as easily as Sunday would come, Sunday would go. What was right for one day, returned to being horribly wrong the next. Fast forward a couple of years of Sunday's. Nothing had changed much at home, except the yelling got worse. Rita got a little older and her life got quite a bit more miserable. She found herself in middle school, but at least

on Sunday's she was able to escape to a more pleasant and happy existence. Rita continued to face the brunt of having to listen to all the yelling and screaming by her parents at home. They would fight and shout at each other, faulting each other for all the things they could have had in their lives if they had never met. They continued to blame Rita for having come along and ruined everything. Rita would hide in her room, cry and pray that God would get her through at least one more day. She hoped that Sunday would soon arrive.

Rita's mother and father led the typical middle class life. Her dad worked out of an office a few miles away and her mother managed the home and did her best to bring up Rita. That gave Rita and her mother some quality time to spend together without the hostility that her father brought to the mix. Rita remembers one of her birthday's where she and her mother arranged for a birthday party to be held at the house. Rita's father had never allowed Rita to have any birthday parties. That led to a lot of laughing and giggling amongst her classmates at school. Consequently, Rita didn't engage much with the other kids. Rita didn't really have any friends, so there really wasn't anyone special she wanted to invite anyway. Rita knew very well that her family's reputation throughout the neighborhood was not a good one. All the fighting and screaming convinced the neighbors that going to Rita's house should not be allowed. Regardless, Rita's mother took it upon herself to talk up the birthday party with all the other mothers, hoping that they would allow their kids to attend.

On the day of the party, Rita's mother went all out making food and creating decorations to make it look like a very special day. She had created party favors for all those expected to attend. There was a nicely decorated birthday cake, with candles and everything. Rita was ecstatic. She finally felt like she mattered. It was the very rare occasion that Rita's mother treated her like she should have. Rita's mother had never taken Rita out shopping. But for this special occasion, she had made an exception and had taken her daughter out shopping for clothes. Her mother wanted Rita to have her very own birthday dress.

As party time approached, Rita and her mother waited impatiently by the front door. They wanted to be able to spring up and enthusiastically greet everyone as they came in. They waited past the time and even longer as their hopes began to dim that anyone was ever going to show up. Rita was having one of those frightful moments that every kid has at some time in their lives. She was experiencing the reality of throwing a party and having no one show up. Rita's mother, disappointed as she was, knew that this was completely devastating to Rita.

Later that evening, after her father got home, things changed from bad to worse. Rita's father went into an out of control rage over what he thought was a complete waste of time and money. He didn't even address the fact that no one showed up for the party, except to blame the whole thing on Rita. He said that there must be something wrong with Rita. He demanded to know why Rita's mother would even think about spending his hard earned money on such a waste of a human being. He yelled at Rita's mother,

wanting to know what she was trying to prove. How good a mother she was? That Rita was some kind of normal kid or something?

Once again, Rita fled to her room to escape. Her parents ended up having another one of their enormous fights that lasted well into the night. Rita was embarrassed, knowing that the neighbors heard everything. They had to have heard everything. Still, Rita lay on her bed crying and blamed herself. She thought her father was probably right. There must be something terribly wrong with her. Sure, the neighbors were wrong for not showing up, but it was Rita that caused the whole thing to blow up the way that it did. She hated living there. She hated her life.

A few weeks later, Rita's mother decided to try a different approach. By doing so, she hoped to make it up to Rita. She told Rita that they were going try again to celebrate her birthday. She explained that if people didn't want to come to their house then she would invite them to come to the house of their Lord. Rita wasn't quite sure what her mother was up to, but the idea of celebrating her birthday excited her, even though the last one had turned out so badly. One day Rita tagged along with her mother on a visit to the church. Her mother was dead set on making arrangements with the minister for a birthday party. Rita wondered what on Earth her mother was doing? It wasn't even Sunday and they were going to church? But Rita's mother knew exactly what she was doing. She knew that there was no way the neighborhood mothers would spite the church. There was no way they would reject the

minister. Furthermore, for the love of God, they would come and bring their kids.

Rita and her mother walked up the stairs to the church and were warmly greeted by the minister. Rita's mother had already discussed the idea of a birthday party for Rita with the minister over the phone and he was more than happy to accommodate her. He complimented Rita's mother on how well she looked and how she had handled the difficult matter. He thanked her for allowing the church and the love of God to help her do the right thing for Rita. Rita listened to her mother and the minister exchange pleasantries and then she was excused to go play outside. Her mother and the minister wandered off to another room to start making arrangements. As Rita left, she could hear the door to the other room closing.

Out in the side yard there was boy about the age of Rita playing kickball against a block wall. Rita wasn't quite sure who it was but she knew the minister was married and had a son, so she just assumed the boy was the minister's son. Rita walked up to the boy and introduced herself as he was moving from side to side trying to fake a goal. The boy stopped and, politely, introduced himself as Ricky and said he was the son of the minister. Rita said that her mother was inside talking to the minister and asked where his mother was? He said that she had left to go to the store to pick up some items needed for the next sermon on Sunday. Ricky's mother assured Ricky that she would be back soon, but in the meantime he should occupy his time playing ball. Rita and Ricky played together, kicking the ball around for about twenty minutes before Ricky's mother arrived,

introduced herself and then they left. It wasn't too long after that, Rita's mother emerged from inside the church and called to Rita that it was time to go home.

The minister and Rita's mother had planned the party for that next week. The minister even made a special announcement during his service on Sunday that there was going to be a birthday celebration for Rita at the church. Of course Rita's father was none too pleased about the whole thing, but there wasn't a whole lot he could do since this was going to be a church affair. Rita assumed that her mother expected him to react that way and that was one of the benefits of having the party at the church. That wasn't the end of it though. Rita's mother heard about it from him later, but Rita just wrote it off as another one of those all too frequent, loud disagreements between her parents. Most of what Rita remembered from that night was that her father said there was no way he was going to attend. That pleased Rita to no end.

The day of the party, Rita put on her birthday dress again, hoping that this time there would be other people around to see it. Once again, her mother made her a special birthday cake and even she got herself all dressed up for the party. Rita and her mother decided to walk to the church and, true to his word, Rita's father stayed home to pout.

At the church, Rita couldn't believe it. There were most of the people from her neighborhood. The kids were all dressed up and running back and forth through the playground. Rita was looking for someone in particular when she spotted Ricky. Ricky was standing with his

parents, the minister and his wife, off to the side. She went over with her mother and thanked the minister for letting her have her party at the church. The minister's wife was polite but said she had to leave and take care of some last minute church business. Ricky and Rita strolled off to play with the other kids from the neighborhood. As Rita looked back at her mother, she was standing there with this giddy look on her face. Rita had never seen her mother flirting like that. The minister was certainly not oblivious to the attention. He had this big smile all over his face and from what Rita saw, her mother was quite pleased. The rest of the time was a big blur for Rita. There was plenty of cake, more than enough presents and at the end of the day, she was exhausted. By all accounts, the party was a huge success. Rita had the time of her life. It had been an excruciatingly long time since Rita had enjoyed herself as much as she did that day. Rita truly felt that God had blessed her on that day.

Over the next few weeks, Rita noticed that her mother would leave home at regular intervals. She would be gone for a couple of hours or so, but always left nicely dressed. Rita wasn't sure where she went but she noticed that her mother started talking a lot more about church. Some times, Rita would accompany her to the church whereby Rita and Ricky would sit together while Rita's mother and the minister would discuss church activities. Rita and Ricky became quite good friends during those times. Rita never imagined herself having that kind of friendship. She was always the lone one out. The one at middle school that no one wanted to hang out with. Rita played by herself, ate lunch by herself and studied by herself. Things seemed

different with Ricky. Ricky showed an interest in the things Rita had an interest in.

One particular day, Rita and Ricky were just sitting around, waiting for the grownups to finish their business, when Ricky started to make Rita feel a little uncomfortable. He would keep scooting himself ever closer and closer to Rita. She would politely inch herself a little further away. Then Ricky would scoot himself even closer. At one point he slid up close and put his arm around Rita. Rita was surprised and shocked, but tried not to show it. She didn't really know what to do but decided to stay the course. Ricky wasn't done. He put his other hand on Rita's leg and started to move it up Rita's thigh. All, while leaning forward and attempting to place his mouth over Rita's.

Rita had reached her tipping point. She was aghast and firmly pushed herself away from Ricky. Standing up she took a step forward, then quickly swung around. She turned to Ricky and demanded to know what his problem was? Ricky stammered a bit, then said that he was truly sorry. He said that all he was trying to do was do what his father did. Rita was confused and asked Ricky what the heck he was talking about. Ricky explained to Rita that he had accidentally barged in on his father a few times over the last few weeks. Each time, his father was with Rita's mother and they pretended to act as if there was nothing going on. He said there was this one time in particular, when he watched through a window as his father put his hand up her dress and they fell into each other's arms kissing and making heavy noises. Ricky said he just wanted to see what that was all about.

Rita was devastated. She sat back down next to Ricky and said that she wanted to believe him, but that was her mother he was talking about. Still, there was something inside of her that said Ricky was right. She wanted to know how Ricky had seen what he said he had seen? Confirming her suspicions turned out to not be that difficult. Ricky got up and led her over to one of the windows to her father's office. Together, they quietly inched their way up to the bottom of the window and peered in. There, inside the minister's office, was Ricky's father and Rita's mother doing exactly what Ricky had been trying to do with Rita.

Ricky said he wasn't sure of what they were doing, but Rita knew exactly what was going on. She had seen her mother and father many a time having sex. That was something only a married couple were supposed to do. As they silently slipped back down from the window, Rita's world exploded. She just started running. She was angry. Angry with her mother. Angry with the minister. Angry with the church. She was angry with her God. She felt violated by them all, the very things that had been keeping her whole world afloat.

The news spread fast. Things like that didn't stay hidden for very long, no matter what. Seems someone knew someone, who knew someone else and well, the minister and Rita's mother got found out. Rita wasn't quite sure who spread the word, but she thought it probably was Ricky's mother. Knowing Ricky, there was probably a slip of the tongue and his mother figured it out. She then confronted the minister and then, that was that. If the neighbors had thought they had heard fighting before, that

was nothing compared to what they heard this time. Rita spent the whole time hiding under her bed in her room, hoping that her door wouldn't suddenly open. She was just happy that no one was killed. So probably too were the neighbors. Although it was Rita's mother that instigated the whole thing, her father didn't turn out to be an angel either. During their heated argument, he divulged that he too was seeing someone else. From Rita's perspective, that didn't surprise her. The next morning, things were quiet. Rita was not surprised, but her father had moved out and her mother was not about to leave her bed. Rita's mother muttered something about how he had decided to go live with his girlfriend. Good luck with that.

Over the next few days a lot of things were said between Rita and her mother that probably shouldn't have been said, but were. They had their own version of a yelling and screaming match that rivaled that of her parents. The neighbors probably thought nothing had changed, but as Rita's father's car never showed up again, the signs were obvious that he had moved out. The loud fighting that was going on? The news in the neighborhood was that had to be Rita and her mother trying to work things out. Truth is, nothing ever really did get worked out between Rita and her mother. They kind of settled on a truce that required that they not talk about it anymore. At least externally. Internally, Rita felt she was still at fault. She felt if it hadn't been for her the whole messy affair would have never happened. Rita felt that it was because of her that everyone's life got upended.

Rita assumed the same thing went on in Ricky's house, but she was wrong. The rumor was that the minister and his wife reached some kind of reconciliation. Rita felt sorry for Ricky if the rumors were true. She knew Ricky was probably just as angry as she was when he finally figured out what all the secrecy was about. Rita ran into Ricky one day outside of school, and, at first, he didn't want to talk to her. Things changed though when they ended up sitting together on the bus ride home. Ricky started the conversation by asking how Rita was doing? Rita turned to him and said that things were getting better but they had a long way to go. Rita wanted to know if Ricky's mother and father had patched things up? That began a story that almost turned Rita's stomach. Ricky said that his father, being a servant of God, had repented before the Lord. That he had made his apologies to his maker and to his congregation. He had been forgiven and that was the end of it. Inside, Rita was furious and asked Ricky what his mother had to say about all of that? Ricky said that his mother thought it was God's way of testing her and her faith. If she could just forgive her husband's sin, she would find God waiting for her in heaven with open arms. So, they reconciled and were staying together for the sake of Ricky and the Lord. Not necessarily in that order. Rita muttered under her breath that this would not be the last time Ricky's mother would have to reconcile with her husband and her God.

Rita and Ricky never seemed to regain the kind of friendship that they were beginning to build before all of the messy things started happening. They would still talk and do things together, but it was never the same. They

attended a few sporting events together and even went to a few dances, but Rita had no desire to go much further than that. Rita could tell that Ricky wanted more of a relationship with her and found herself starting to give in to that temptation. Towards the end of high school, the tide shifted against Ricky. Rita was curious about what Ricky was going to do after graduation. When she asked Ricky, he said that he wanted to go on to divinity school and become a minister. Just like his father. He said to Rita that he wanted her to become his girlfriend and envisioned the day that they would be married. He said he wanted to start his own church, just like his father. That was way too much information for Rita. All she kept hearing was that Ricky was going to turn into his father. That made her stomach turn again. There was no way she was going to lower herself into becoming someone like Ricky's mother. Although she still blamed herself for what had happened, it was clear as day that, like father like son, history was going to repeat itself. Rita was sorry for having destroyed Ricky's vision of the future, but she made it clear that she was not going to be a part of it.

After graduation from high school, Rita and her mother lived together for a short while. Rita's mother was extremely embarrassed as to what she had done, but she still managed to find a male friend or two to consort with. Rita, on the other hand, became even more introverted and isolated. She could never get over the feeling that she was the cause of her family's breakup. That somehow, God had decided, like her father, that Rita simply wasn't worth the effort. Rita gave up on her mother. Rita gave up on God.

Rita eventually decided that it was time to move on. She needed to leave the house where she was born, get away from her mother and get as far away as possible from the ugly mark that God had left on her soul. She decided to move to a place called River's Run. She had never been there, but it would get her far away from where she was. Starting over wouldn't be easy. She still carried with her all her feelings of guilt, inadequacy and shame. She bore the deep scars of a pain that no one should have to bear. Years and years of having been violated. Not only by her family, but by her religion and her God.

RITA – PART II

CHAPTER SEVEN

After graduating high school and leaving the home of her birth, Rita traveled to River's Run to start a new life. She had no idea what she was going to do, but anything was better than continuing to live a toxic life with her mother. Searching for a job she found an ad in the local River's Run newspaper looking for a news reporter. It was placed by the local newspaper itself. The job reportedly started out as an intern, but would eventually lead to a full position as an investigative reporter. In high school Rita had worked on and off for the school newspaper where she wrote about current events and school sports. She thought that this might be the opportunity she was looking for, so she applied for the position. Rita got a call from the newspaper saying they were very interested in talking with her about the reporter position. Rita made it through the first phone interview feeling highly confident about her chances. That led to a second phone interview which was simply more of the same, with the exception that the net result was she was invited to come in and speak with the team at The Newsroom.

Rita arrived for the interview well ahead of time and sat in the waiting room hoping that she didn't appear too overly eager. Then again, she thought that maybe being overly eager was a good thing. She didn't know. What she

did know was that she was thinking way too much. She had to stop. So she started looking out the window, up at the ceiling, over in the corner and down at her shoes. She couldn't believe she wore those shoes. And this dress? Why this dress? It didn't go well with her shoes. She almost didn't see the person coming out of the door to get her. She looked up, extended her hand and introduced herself as Rita. The gentleman who came out to get her said his name was George and together, they walked back into the main conference room of the office. Sitting across from a table was another gentleman who introduced himself as Trent. Once again, she introduced herself as Rita.

For the next hour or so Rita responded to a lot of questions from both Trent and George. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately for Rita, none of the questions had a lot to do with investigative reporting. They seemed to take at face value her limited experience working on the high school newspaper. Rita knew that interviews were sometimes just to find out how good a fit you were going to be with everyone else. She understood that. As she looked around the office though, her first thought was where was everyone? This was supposed to be the town newspaper. She figured there would be a lot more people bustling around. The Newsroom had a very good reputation. She had done her research and that was what her research showed.

Trent and George both looked at each other and then looked back at Rita. They could tell she was getting antsy and they were running out of ways to keep her there. George took the initiative and told Rita his story. He said he

had worked at The Newsroom for only a few months and it was a great place to work. Rita could tell he was having trouble figuring out what to say next. George looked at Trent, Trent nodded his head and George blurted out that things had kind of changed since he got hired. Trent stood up and said that he was the senior investigative reporter and, as well, he was the chief editor and overall manager of operations. He readily agreed with George that things had sort of changed around The Newsroom. He said the way things were now was not the way they were when they first advertised the position. Unfortunately, the economy had taken its toll on The Newsroom and there had been a number of layoffs. Trent said that, in fact, he and George were the only reporters left. They could tell that Rita was starting to get more nervous and fidgety, so they cut to the chase. Trent said they would like to offer the position of investigative reporter to Rita. He said as an incentive for her to accept, there would be no internship, no probationary period and she would be treated as a full and equal partner on the team.

Rita sat there without saying much. She asked herself if this job was worth taking the risk? She asked Trent and George if, in fact, they had enough money to pay her a salary? Trent and George looked at each other and laughed. Trent said there was one thing she needed to understand. The Newsroom was the only paper in town. People looked up to them to publish the truth and to provide them with an accurate representation of the news. Trent said the owners of The Newsroom understood that and they had more than a vested interest in keeping The Newsroom alive. The owners themselves grew up in River's Run and

their parents before them. Their history was River's Run. The owners made it clear that would not change. Trent said to Rita that even with all the layoffs, the owners felt they were in a good position to continue running the newspaper. They had plenty of money and they were willing to spend it to keep The Newsroom up and running for quite a long time. Trent acknowledged that there were risks, but he said he and George felt completely comfortable that their positions were stable and, if Rita took the position, hers would be perfectly stable as well. Rita saw George nodding his head in agreement. George said that when he was first hired, The Newsroom had a large staff and a thriving subscription base. Then, he said, things started to change. He said the economy got worse, people got laid off but, curiously enough, the subscription base stayed the same. George said, he himself, thought about leaving, but decided to stay. He decided to stay because The Newsroom was still relevant and important to the people of River's Run. He felt they needed him to keep working. That was his job. That was who he was.

Rita stood up and calmly said that she understood what they were saying. She appreciated their frank and honest assessment of the situation. She thanked them for allowing her the opportunity to become part of their team. Trent and George looked at each other like they had just lost her. Approaching Trent she said she would like to accept their offer and that they would not regret their decision. She extended her hand first to Trent and then to George. Their handshake sealed the deal.

Rita showed up for work the next day eager to see what Trent and George had in store for her. There were, of course, the typical things that were done to get one familiar with the office, the routines and all the hardware and software to talk about. When that was all done, the three of them sat down to discuss what Rita's first assignment would be. George spoke first and said that he wanted to work with Rita on a new assignment they had just heard about. He wanted to introduce Rita to some of the elite of River's Run. That way she would get to know the who's who of the town. George went on to describe how there was this new church that had been built on the West side of the river that was to have its grand opening the next day. He said that the church was not your typical place of worship. Rita said she wasn't sure what he meant by that and George said that she would just have to wait and see for herself. He said the new church was totally funded by the congregation, built on congregation owned land and was the congregation's gift to the community. They said it was a gift through God, from them and to the community of River's Run. So, Trent said, it was a big deal and big deals were what The Newsroom covered.

Rita sat back in her chair, while hundreds of conflicting thoughts ricocheted through her mind. She was trying as hard as she could to hide the myriad of flashbacks that were taking her back to her hometown. Back to her mother. Back to the time when her mother shattered Rita's belief in God by sleeping with the minister. What kind of a God would do that to her? Rita didn't just blame her mother. She blamed her God and the messenger that he had sent. The minister who broke all the rules and destroyed the trust in

God that Rita had come so lovingly to believe in. Rita thought to herself, now she was expected to celebrate the glorious opening of another one of God's grand deceptions? How ironic.

Of course Rita had to keep all of those inner thoughts to herself. She didn't want Trent and George to know all the gory details of her past life. So she put on her best smile, nodded her head and accepted George's offer to accompanying her to the church opening. The next day they got in George's car and drove off to an area of the West side that Rita immediately recognized as upscale. The streets were wider than what she was used to, the cars were actually parked in their own private driveways and the houses? Well, the houses were larger and more grand looking than anything she had seen before. Rita thought that this new church must be located in one of the wealthier areas of River's Run. She was starting to understand George's earlier statement regarding the elite and who's who of River's Run. George could sense that Rita was impressed by all the finer touches of the neighborhood and said to Rita that, as a reminder, this church and the land that it was built on, was all purchased by the congregation. A congregation that just so happened to be spread throughout the neighborhood they were currently driving through. Completely purchased through donations from guess who? He said it was because of the congregation that the whole project came to fruition. That it showed the clout that this group of citizens had. George said that they needed to keep that in mind as they did their interviews and published the story in the newspaper. All Rita could do was

nod her head in agreement as they drove on down the road.

Arriving at the church, Rita could see what a gargantuan project this had been. This was not just some ordinary church. It wasn't the kind of church that she was used to, the kind growing up in her old neighborhood. This church was massively huge. Rita felt that you could stick three or four of her old churches in this mother of a church. Heck, the parking lot for the cars was bigger than any she had seen at most shopping malls. George neatly parked his car a respectable distance from the entrance to the church and he and Rita both got out. Rita could see that there were little booths lined up everywhere throughout the parking lot, selling anything from fancy snack foods to gaudy shirts and trinkets. There were bouncy houses for the kids, games and face paintings. Pretty much anything a family could ask for.

George and Rita decided to walk amongst the crowd and interview some of the people. They wanted to get a flavor of those who were attending the party as guests and those who were actual members. The people they talked to ranged from young to old, singles and families. The one thing that Rita noticed though was that there wasn't much of a difference. They were all well off. They wore fancy clothes, drove fancy cars and were, as Rita saw it, full of themselves.

George walked up to one couple who seemed more than eager to talk. They must have seen his badge indicating he was from the press. Rita came up beside them as she heard them say that they were the owners of the local hardware store. They said they had been a part of

River's Run for a long time and had been members of this church for just about as long. When asked about all the other people in attendance, the couple were eager to identify the high profile people. They said that over there were other local business owners, pointing out those that owned the local department store, the restaurants and those who were high end donors to the local Catholic hospital. The couple wanted to make double sure that George knew they were huge supporters of the very church they were standing in front of.

George and Rita walked up the steps to the front of the church to greet the minister. He was standing there meeting everyone as they arrived and welcoming them to their new church. George and Rita introduced themselves and said that they were from The Newsroom. The minister grabbed their hands and shook them fervently as if they were old friends meeting again after a long absence. George chuckled, knowing full well that the minister knew exactly who they were. The minister was doing his best to look good for the camera. Rita, on the other hand, was looking around, trying to judge the size of the crowd. Standing next to the minister was, Rita presumed, the minister's wife. She had that same sullen look on her face that she remembered her old minister's wife had. The look that said she was only there to support whatever her husband wanted her to say and do. Rita thought she put on a very good show. She was very nicely dressed, heartily greeted everyone, showed them the Lord's hospitality and encouraged them to enter the church and have a seat. The show was about to begin.

The church bell chimed once, then twice. It was time to come inside and stand in the grand hall before the altar. Off to the side sat at least twenty people in the choir who began to serenade the faithful. They sang out loud and clear and the congregation slowly started to sing along with them as they sat down in the pews and opened up their hymn books. Rita was suddenly taken aback by a wave of emotion that seemed to rush back into her mind and flow through her body. Her memory was flooded with what it was like when she was a young girl, standing with her mother and father pretending to be happy. Thing was, she was happy during those times. The times on Sunday when her life held a lot more cheerfulness and promise. But there was also that horrible pain and suffering her mother and the minister wrought upon her soul. There were the all too often temper tantrums and violent arguments started by her father. As the light beamed through the newly hung stained glass windows, she seemed to be standing in the shadow of God again, feeling his love and sensing his warmth.

George, in the meantime, was ready to move on. He turned to Rita and asked if she had been taken notes and snapping pictures? Rita answered that she had and recalled that was what she and George were there for. But deep inside of her something felt like it had shifted. She heard the voices of the choir calling out God's name. Were they angels? She felt like she was being drawn into the harmony of the others singing God's blessings. For a slight moment, she felt what it was like to believe again. The feelings of doubt and anger that had settled inside of her ever since the madness and chaos of her earlier days, started to vanish. Then, she woke up. She realized she was

being subconsciously subverted by her surroundings. She didn't belong in this church. It was way too big and impersonal for her. There were too many stuffy people. No, She was not quite ready to rejoin a church. In other words, she wasn't completely sold yet that God cared.

On the one hand, Rita almost felt like she had regained her peace with God. At least for the moment. It was there, inside, waiting to be rekindled. On the other hand, there was something missing. Rita was torn as to what to do. Fortunately for Rita, her prayers were about to be answered, so to speak. The minister pulled George and Rita over to the side and said he wanted to introduce them to the assistant minister and their brand new intern. He wanted to make sure that their names got into the newspaper article as well. Rita looked up from her notepad, ready to shake a new set of hands. That was when she heard a familiar voice say hello. The voice came from the brand new intern. The brand new intern was Ricky. The minister said that Ricky had come to them from their own, private, divinity school. Rita, of course, feigned excitement at seeing Ricky and Ricky, of course, came up to Rita and gave her a big hug. Well, that was all it took. Rita leaned into George, said that they had plenty of facts and details to write an exceptional article for the newspaper and reminded George that they needed to get back to The Newsroom to attend to other business. George took the hint and they made their apologies for having to leave so soon.

Whatever chance there was of Rita giving into the temptation of reawakening her love of God vanished when she saw Ricky. That was not a good sign. Other than to say

to Rita that she should stay far, far away. It was almost as if Rita imagined that this church had been marked for evil now with the presence of Ricky. She didn't think it was necessarily Ricky's fault, but Ricky was the product of his father and it was his father that brought such horrible hate and destruction upon her and her family. That meant only one thing to Rita. It meant that this church and everyone involved was just as sinister as Ricky's father had been. Rita resolved that nothing would change that. Although, to Rita, something had changed. There was a flicker of God still hiding inside of her just waiting for the opportunity to come out.

When George and Rita got back to the office, Trent was there and curious as to how everything had gone. George was very complimentary to Rita and said that he was very confident that Rita was going to be able to write a good story that the church and the whole community would be proud of. Trent was pleased with his decision to send Rita on this very important day for River's Run. They all settled down into their chairs, getting down to the business at hand. Trent began working on his computer, searching for other newsworthy items that they might try to pull a story out of and publish. George went back to playing the solitaire game that he never seemed to finish. Rita looked over at George, hoping that he would play a certain card, but it almost appeared as if George never wanted the game to end. Solitaire just gave George something to do. Rita was procrastinating as well. She knew she needed to start working on the story of the day, the story of the new church that had been built on the West side of the river. Except that she kept getting distracted. Something inside of her cried

out for God. She couldn't get it out of her mind. In an attempt to redirect her thoughts, she changed her browser to the maps application and searched for other places in the area worth walking to.

The next day Rita promised herself that she would finish the story about the new mega-church. Well, at least she promised that she would would get a lot of it done. The more she looked at the clock, the harder it became to start a new thought or paragraph. It was getting close to lunch time and she began to think more and more about where she wanted to go. She decided she would finish the story later. Around noon, Trent and George noticed that Rita got up from her chair, slid it back under the desk and started to walk towards the front door. They didn't pay much attention. That was to become Rita's routine. Rita, on the other hand, had a mission. She was going to walk to a part of the West side she had never been to before.

The walk took Rita through some neighborhoods that were a little less pretentious than the ones that she and George had driven through. The streets were all lined with huge Sycamore trees, that draped themselves over the street from sidewalk to sidewalk. The houses and yards were nicely manicured with deep green lawns and long driveways that went all the way back to a detached garage. Rita was comparing these houses with the ones she and George had seen and although, not as impressive, they were indicative of a much more lucrative lifestyle than Rita was used to. Some of the houses she passed had kids playing out front. There were cars in the street but not enough to prevent the kids from playing ball and riding their

bicycles. Rita passed some mothers that waved to her and made her feel like stopping and having a conversation. Of course, she didn't. At the end of one of the streets was a very old church. Obviously one that had been around a very long time. Rita liked the feel. She liked the neighborhood. She liked the people she saw. Outside of the church was, presumably, the minister. He was busy manicuring his flowers and tidying up the outside appearance. That feeling of restlessness came back to Rita. It was the restlessness of what had happened to her in her past, but it was also a different kind of restlessness. One that said she was tired of holding on to all the anger and resentment.

Rita was almost ready to go up and start talking to the minister, when a couple of neighbors beat her to the punch. Rita thought that there must be some event being planned for the coming service, as the two mothers and the minister went back inside the church to talk. It was then that Rita's old memories came back. She found herself shivering, she started to sweat and get clammy all over her body. Seeing the two women going inside the church with the minister and the door closing behind them, made her extremely uncomfortable. Rita turned around and hurriedly made her way back up the street. Past all the pretty houses. Past all the kids running and playing. Trying to get past everything that was her past.

By the time Rita got back to the office, Trent and George were wrapping up their lunch. They weren't much for sticking to a sixty minute lunch either. They noticed Rita kind of rush in and sit down as if she had run the whole way back. They didn't think to ask if she was alright or why she

seemed so hurried. Frankly, they felt it was none of their business. It really didn't matter too much to them. They just assumed that Rita needed to get outside, get some exercise and get some fresh air. At least that was how they rationalized it.

What was in fact going on was that Rita was searching for something on those long walks. She was searching for something that had been missing in her life for a long while. She thought she might have found a little bit of that something when she visited the mega-church. Turned out the only thing she discovered was that, whatever it was she was looking for, remained elusive. The real reason for the long walks? Rita was searching her soul. She was trying to reconnect her soul to a spiritual side she knew was there. It was just that it was being blocked by a past that would not let her forget. Forget and forgive the God that had caused all of her pain and suffering. For that reason Rita found it difficult to reestablish that spiritual connection.

In the end Rita ended up writing her story. Both Trent and George were extremely happy with the results. Rita had followed all of the good journalistic practices that they expected of her. She was able to tell the story of the community coming together to celebrate their worship of God and, yet, keep all of her inner thoughts to herself. The church got its grand debut, the wealthy donors of the congregation got their press and Rita felt she had dodged a bullet.

The days turned into weeks, weeks into months and, before she knew it, Rita had been at The Newsroom for a couple of years. Her lunch time walks had taken her all over

River's Run, but mainly just the West side of the river. Trent and George never really talked much about the East side. Either there wasn't a whole lot going on over there or Rita felt that maybe the East side of the river wasn't the best of places to be or write about. Rita, having an inquisitive mind, took it upon herself to do her own research on what she saw was an opportunity. She felt there must be a story somewhere, but that Trent and George hadn't really explored the potential. What Rita soon learned was, true to the historical records, River's Run used to be an old mining town. It had all started out with fortune seekers looking for gold, but mining for gold just became too expensive. The process of extracting the gold from quartz was too cost prohibitive. So, instead of gold, the miners chose mining for quartz. The rest is history, as they say.

That history, as Rita found out, included making a lot of people very wealthy. And, as was usually the case, those wealthy people lived at the expense of a lot of other people who worked for them and didn't benefit from the huge profits that were being amassed. Also typical, there became a geographical divide, leading to a socioeconomic divide, that separated the owners from the workers. The well off from the not so well off. Rita discovered that was where the significance of the river came in. The river divided River's Run into an East and West side. Although the river was used to transport goods and supplies from the quartz mines to the buyers far upstream, the river also served as a natural barrier between the two different social strata living in River's Run. The rich and powerful stayed true to their area on the West side of the river and those on the East side of the river eked out whatever living they could working

for those on the other side. Eventually, a bridge was built connecting the two sides of the river, but it never became a true bridge, bridging the have's from the have nots.

Rita thought that this would make a really good story for the newspaper, so she pitched the idea to Trent and George. They both calmly listened and thought it was a great idea. They confessed, in fact, that they had discussed the idea many times before. Unfortunately, whenever they pitched the idea to the owners of The Newsroom, the word came down from above to let it go. Trent said that the owners thought that it would be too political and that there was a risk that it would drag up old issues and grievances. They thought the risk of community embarrassment was too high. Their final decision was based on the fact that they didn't want the potential complications. When Rita questioned their decision, both Trent and George agreed that the owners were simply afraid of publishing anything that might offend their friends and supporters on the West side. The owners simply did not want to stir the pot. Rita heard them loud and clear, although she was never one to run from a story.

RACHEL

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rachel was the kind of person who knew at age five what she wanted to be when she grew up. Ever since she was a young kid she enjoyed going to the wilderness with her parents on their vacations. It didn't seem to matter whether it was winter or summer, it was an opportunity to get out in the environment. Hiking and fishing? She wanted to do it. Skiing and sledding? She wanted to do that too. Rachel looked forward to those times when she could be with her parents and enjoy the great outdoors. Indeed, it was the great outdoors where Rachel found herself most often in later life.

Rachel often reflected on that very first time she experienced what it was like to be totally free. She was about five years old when her parents took her on one of their many summertime adventures. They drove for a couple of hours to reach their destination, which proved to be boring and not very much fun. So Rachel wasn't in the best of moods when they finally entered what her parents called a National Park. She wasn't sure what that meant, but to Rachel it meant that they were going to be stopping and she could finally get out and run around. When they finally pulled into their camping spot, Rachel nearly rolled out of the car onto the ground. Almost doing a face plant, she got up, dusted off her knees and looked around. All she

could see were these super tall things growing straight out of the ground that her parents called trees. These weren't the kind of trees her parents drug into the house at Christmas time. Although there were similarities. Behind the trees were these high, majestic mountains that sprung out of the ground and surrounded the campground. Some still had snow capping their peaks like little white hats. Rachel sniffed the air and turned around to ask her mother and father what that great smell was? Her parents told her that she was probably smelling the pine trees but it could also possibly be the smoke from the various morning campfires that were slowly burning themselves out. Then Rachel spotted these tiny little animals running around with somewhat long, furry tails. Upon closer inspection, there appeared to be two different kinds, one larger than the other. Her mother said that the smaller ones were called chipmunks and the larger ones were squirrels. They would scurry all around looking for small scraps of food left by the previous campers. Rachel was warned that her parents didn't want to catch her feeding them. They said the chipmunks and squirrels needed to eat only the natural foods found inside the Park.

That night they sat around a large campfire that helped to keep them warm but also gave them light well after dark. They looked up at the stars and counted the meteors that would streak across the sky. Rachel had never seen so many stars in all her life. Let alone a meteor light show. They told stories, sang songs and ate something her mother and father called S'mores. They were toasted marshmallows and a piece of semi-melted chocolate, which were then placed between two graham crackers and

smushed together. The best part of all was placing the marshmallow on a stick and roasting it over the open campfire. Too close and they would burn. Just right and they would cook to a golden brown. Rachel thought S'mores were probably one of the tastiest things she had ever eaten. To top it off, she got to lick each of her fingers clean after they became stuck together from the melting marshmallow.

That night they slept in a tent. Each had their own sleeping bag that kept them cozy and warm all night long. Although sleeping on the ground certainly wasn't as comfy as sleeping in her bed at home. Rachel's father got up early and started the morning fire, after which Rachel crawled out of her sleeping bag and stepped out of the tent. They had eggs, pancakes and bacon for breakfast, cooked right over the morning fire. The aroma of the meal drifted over all the other campsites and greeted their occupants as they crawled out of their tents. Rachel knew it couldn't get any better than this.

But, it did. That was one of many times that Rachel found herself in the wilderness. The experience of the great outdoors never left Rachel. She graduated high school and went on to study environmental science in college. Throughout her schooling, she continued to spend as much time as possible in the forest. Towards the end of her college commitment, she changed gears and focused on becoming a Forest Ranger. She got her bachelor's degree in conservation law enforcement and, eventually, ended up as a Forest Ranger in the State Wilderness Park where she

and I ended up meeting while looking for a lost hiker named Jeremy.

Ever since that time we met looking for Jeremy, Rachel and I have spent our free time together camping and hiking within the State Wilderness Park where she works. We met up again today to do the same thing. Hiking and camping is what we most love doing, even more so, together. When I arrived at her house within the State Wilderness Park, she was waiting outside with all of her gear ready to go. We loaded up the car and drove to the trail head, where we would hike out and spend the next four or five days alone together in the wilderness. We didn't do a whole lot of talking while we were hiking, which was different from normal. But, then again, it was a strenuous hike and I just figured we were trying to conserve our breathing. When we finally reached our stopping point, we set up camp and I could tell something was bothering Rachel. I figured when the time was right she would tell me what was going on. After dinner, as we sat around the campfire looking up at the night sky, she was ready.

Rachel started by reminding me how being a Ranger was what she had always dreamt of doing. She never really thought that dream would come true, but here she was living her dream. She said that there was one thing about being a Ranger that wasn't ideal. Just when you thought you had found where you wanted to be, there was this awful requirement that, as a Park Ranger, you had to move on. She said that Rangers never seemed to stay in one place very long, before they were required to move on to a new position somewhere else. It was just part of the job and

something that you had to accept. Rachel looked up at me and said that her number had come up and she was being terminated at the State Wilderness Park effective in thirty days. I'm not sure what my body language said, but I felt so bad for Rachel. I knew how important this job was to her, but I was confident that she would be able to find some place else to work that would make her happy. But then it hit me that she might transfer to an out of state Wilderness Park somewhere far, far away. She was distraught and now I was too. We both sat quiet for awhile, trying not to let our emotions get the better of us. I asked Rita if she had any ideas as to where she may want to work? Rita said she hadn't really started looking yet, but from what she understood, she should be able to transfer to wherever she wanted to. Her boss, the head Ranger at the State Wilderness Park, said it would be up to her to choose.

As I sat there thinking about it, I remembered that River's Run had its own Quartz Mine State Historic Park. The mining area itself wasn't that attractive, but the Park encompassed a large area of wilderness very similar to where she worked now. I brought it up to Rachel to see what her reaction would be. I said it was just a thought. She was ecstatic. She said she would be a lot closer to me and still be able to do what she had always wanted to do. To be a Ranger. Rachel turned to me and said that was exactly what she would try to do. I decided to go out on a very large limb. I turned back to Rachel and said that, if she wanted to, she could live with me. Rachel got this look of loving approval on her face. So much so, that I decided to go out on an even bigger limb. I got down on one knee and asked Rachel to marry me. Without hesitation, she said yes.

CHURCH AND STATE

CHAPTER NINE

Rita went to work thinking that this was just going to be another one of those days with nothing to do. When she opened the door and walked over to her desk, she thought otherwise. George wasn't too far behind her and probably wondered something similar. They both looked around for Trent. He wasn't sitting at his desk and the door to the conference room was closed. On each of their desks they found a hot cup of coffee and, to George's delight, there were a couple of danish strategically placed in front of the computers. George looked at Rita and Rita's only response was that she expected George to know what was going on. They both looked over at the conference room with the closed door and Rita noticed that George got a worried look on his face. George knew that he couldn't hide his concern so he said to Rita that something big was going on. They had stopped using the conference room a long time ago. He thought the last time they used the conference room was when they interviewed Rita. Rita became a little more nervous but wondered what the coffee and danish thing was all about?

Just then, the door to the conference room opened and out walked a couple of well dressed gentlemen, along with Trent. Trent followed them out the front door and thanked them both as they exited the building, headed for

the parking lot. When Trent came back inside he could tell that George and Rita were extremely curious, to put it lightly, as to what had just happened. Trent thought that he would play it up a bit, just to get George and Rita even more worked up. As Trent turned to face them, the smile on his face disappeared and he said that he was calling a mandatory meeting in the conference room. George stumbled as he got up from his workstation and Rita thought that this was it. She thought they were all being let go. Trent entered the doorway to the conference room, turned round and reminded George and Rita to not forget their coffee and pastry. Trent got this twinkle in his eye and George and Rita figured out that this was all just a joke. Trent was pulling a fast one on them.

After they all sat down at the conference table, Trent burst out laughing and admitted that he was just having fun with them. George wanted to know who the two guys were that just left? Rita had never seen Trent joke like this before, but still was quite relieved that she wasn't losing her job. Trent stood up and said that he had a big announcement to make. The two gentlemen who were just there represented the owners of The Newsroom. The owners had decided that it was time to make some changes at The Newsroom, beginning with the news that they were going to be pumping more money into the operation. Trent said that the owners had been quite pleased with the way that the three of them had handled the day-to-day operations. They thought the quality of the stories was excellent, better than anybody could expect under the circumstances. So much so, that they were all going to be receiving pay upgrades, along with increased job

responsibilities. George and Rita wondered what that really meant? More responsibilities, meaning that more of their time would be required? Trent could tell that a little more explanation was needed and informed George and Rita that they were going to be hiring more reporters that would report to each of them. Therefore, Trent said that was the reason for the coffee and danish. In other words, that was his way of saying thank you.

The smiles returned to the faces of George and Rita, but Trent wasn't quite through. He said that before any of the new hires arrived, there were two high impact stories that needed to be researched, written and published in the newspaper. The first, to be assigned to Rita, involved the Quartz Mine State Historic Park. There was to be a wedding taking place at the Park and Rita was to take charge of handling the press and all publications. Rita looked thrilled as, at last, she was going to be able to cover some of the history of River's Run. She even thought she could sneak in something about the socioeconomic divide between the East and West side of the river. Her next question to Trent was who was getting married? She thought that whoever it was, they must be fairly prominent people in the community. Perhaps they were the ancestors of one of the founding fathers? She knew that only very special and exclusive people got married at the Park.

Trent replied that neither of those conjectures applied. He said that the couple getting married were, for the most part, just two ordinary citizens of River's Run. Rita looked perplexed. She wanted to know how two ordinary people would be able to make arrangements to reserve Quartz

Mine State Historic Park for their wedding? That, Trent said, was a good question, but it seemed there were some extenuating circumstances. Turns out, he said, the bride-to-be was one of the Rangers at Quartz Mine State Historic Park. The groom was a high ranking manager at one of the manufacturing facilities down by the river. Rita was still confused. She understood that the bride worked at the Park, but why did this wedding warrant such news coverage? Trent said that there was something else, but he was not at liberty to say what that was. He told Rita that was what she would be responsible for finding out. And, whatever it turned out to be, the owners of The Newsroom wanted to make sure that the event was properly covered by the newspaper. Rita felt summarily dismissed, but it seemed the best thing to do was to do what the owners wanted.

Trent turned to George and said that he and George would be covering the second item of business. This was going to be a highly sensitive story that would have to be handled very delicately. Trent could tell that Rita was feeling left out and, possibly, that she was being told that she was not good enough to handle the story. He turned to Rita and said that this had nothing to do with her qualifications. Instead, he said he made his decision to have he and George cover the story out of concern for Rita's safety. That statement made George flinch a little, not sure what Trent was getting him into. Trent continued by letting both George and Rita know that this second story involved covering the recent anti-abortion protests that had been popping up in front of the local Women's Health Clinic. He said that it was suspected that the organizers of the

protests were largely members of the mega-church that George and Rita did the story on recently. Ever since the Women's Health Clinic had announced that they would be providing abortions, the protesters had been showing up every day, disrupting the clinic's care. Trent said the clinic was following all the laws and regulations established by River's Run and the state government, but that didn't seem to matter to the protesters. Trent said, just to be clear, this had become a big issue. Not just for River's Run, but for the state and federal government. Even though Rita wanted to be a part of the coverage, she understood Trent's concern for her safety. She herself had recently witnessed the ferocity of some of the tactics used by the protesters in front of the Women's Health Clinic. She was happy not to be a party to all of that. George wanted to know what role, if any, the local hospital was playing in all of this? Trent said that, of course, the local hospital was Catholic owned and was against having abortions performed at any of their facilities. But to answer his real question, Trent said that the hospital board and founding members were all congregants of the same local mega-church. He said there was reason to believe that the hospital was implicated in the actions taken by the protesters. It was just that there was no direct evidence linking them.

Rita and George left the meeting feeling that their day had not turned out exactly as they had expected. First, there was the frightening thought that they were about to be terminated. Followed by some momentary euphoria that they were being rewarded for a job well done. Then, that euphoria was wiped away by some new assignments, the

success of which was going to be totally decided under the watchful eye of The Newsroom owners.

QUARTZ MINE STATE HISTORIC PARK

CHAPTER TEN

Leaving the State Wilderness Park turned out to be more difficult than Rachel anticipated. She had made some very good friends while there and on her last night they all threw a big party for her. Rachel knew it was going to be hard to say goodbye, but she also knew she was going to be expected to make a speech. That was going to be the hard part. She and her friends had been through some very good times and some overly rough times together. Working with the public could be difficult at times, whether it was trying to quell arguments, enforce Park rules or, on those rare occasions, rescue someone from themselves.

When the time came for Rachel to speak, everyone got quiet. They knew Rachel was not much of a talker. She preferred the quiet of the wilderness to saying much of anything. But in her speech she was able to bring to the two together. She looked out at her friends and told them that being with them quieted her soul, just like being out in the wilderness. She said that theirs was the kind of friendship that was born of the woods and sharpened by their act of camaraderie and mutual trust. She reminded them that if she got the job at Quartz Mine State Historic Park she would not be that far away and that she would make sure that their friendship endured. As she was speaking, her boss strode up to the podium and said that he had some

news for Rachel. Rachel turned over the microphone to him. He began by saying that he brought good news for everyone. He said that, yes, Rachel was leaving the State Wilderness Park, but he had the official news that she would be joining the Quartz Mine State Historic Park located in River's Run. She would only be about an hour's drive away and, best of all, she would be joining her fiancé.

I managed to take a few days off and drove over to the State Wilderness Park to pick up Rachel on her last day. I was helping Rachel pack up the last of her belongings into the car. I thought that given the circumstances, Rachel was holding up rather well. She was pretty quiet but, then again, she usually was. A couple of her closest friends came up to say their last goodbyes. They gave each other big hugs and with tears in all of our eyes, we got in the car and away we went. That was all it took. Rachel burst out crying as the car pulled away and we headed to our new home in River's Run. I figured it was best just to let her cry it out. I didn't know what else to say anyway and I didn't want to say the wrong thing. After about 30 minutes she was contained enough to start a conversation. We talked about the weather, where to stop for lunch and what to have for dinner. Nothing too heavy. We arrived at my home, our home, by the river in River's Run in about an hour total. Unloading her things, Rachel was upbeat and at ease, having finally accepted that this was to be her new home.

We had a couple of days to ourselves before Rachel had to show up to work at her new job. We tried to think of some fun things to do but, frankly, we ended up spending most of our time just orienting ourselves. The hours ticked

by and before we knew it, it was time to get ready for work the next day. On Rachel's first day she was, of course, delegated to the role of the newbie. Being a newbie meant that she didn't have as much pull as to what she was going to be assigned to do. Heaven forbid she should say no to an assignment. Consequently, she got stuck at the entrance, collecting fees from the visitors and answering their questions as best she could. Rachel was actually quite content in her new role, although she hoped it really was only temporary. Sitting at the entry desk gave her plenty of time to research the Park and get to know the layout. The Park itself was divided into two main sections. Rachel was currently working in the section that included the quartz mine and the historic owner's mansion and grounds. This was the area where most people visiting Quartz Mine State Historic Park ended up touring. The mine shaft itself was the high point for most of the visitors. There was just something about a deep hole in the ground that would attract attention. Especially, for the young ones. The owner's mansion was also quite popular. At the time of the mine's operation, the owner's house was where the wealthy mine owner lived occasionally with his family and guests. The historical society and the state had done a wonderful job at keeping the house in fine condition. The Rangers would lead tours and there were docents that would dress up and act according to the historical period.

The other main section of the Park included the wilderness area. This is where visitors would come to camp, hike and fish in the wild back country. There were a total of three main campsites, with sites available for tents, campers and trailers. Rachel noted that it wasn't as large a

Park as the State Wilderness Park, but there were plenty of opportunities to enjoy nature and get out of the hectic city. This was where Rachel hoped to eventually end up. She enjoyed meeting all the people at the mine but, it was out in the wilds that she was able to mingle with the visitors and show them the wonders of the wilderness. Also, just be alone.

After a few days, Rachel realized that there were not a lot of people coming to visit. In other words, it got kind of boring just sitting there at the entrance waiting for a visitor or two to show up. So she spent a lot of her time thinking and day dreaming. She took a self guided tour of the owner's mansion and walked the grounds that were covered with roses and flowers of all kinds. In one of her moments of solitude, Rachel reflected that the owner's mansion would make a wonderful venue for her wedding. The surrounding grounds held another old historic building that could easily hold all the guests for the reception. Rachel knew that weddings and other kinds of large events were not commonly held at the Park. It wasn't that they weren't allowed. It was more that to do so, one had to be a member of a pretty exclusive club. That club consisted of the well-to-do of River's Run, their families and special relatives. Relatives of those who had originally occupied, worked and lived at Quartz Mine State Historic Park. Knowing that her odds were not good, Rachel decided to go for it anyway. But first, she had to talk it over with her fiancé.

I was the easy one to be convinced of the appropriateness of holding the wedding at Quartz Mine

State Historic Park. As Rachel described it to me I thought it would be the perfect place to say our vows and receive our guests. The only thing left to do was to convince the powers that be that we should be allowed to hold our wedding and reception there. Rachel was unbelievably upbeat about our prospects and thought we had a pretty good chance, given that she was a Ranger at the Park. Then again, she was the newbie Ranger at the Park and that usually translated to having less of an influence. In any event, we both thought it was worth a shot.

Rachel made her request the very next day. She was told not to get her hopes up as this kind of event was usually reserved for those of River's Run who had money, were well off and had shown as such by financially supporting Quartz Mine State Historic Park. Rachel kind of took that as a no. There was really nothing special in her, or my, life that would effectively warrant a change in policy. Even if that policy seemed to be slanted only towards the wealthy. That night, when she got back home, Rachel told me how things had gone. We were both highly disappointed, but knew that things would work themselves out for the better in the long run. We were kind of moping around when the phone rang. Rachel answered the phone and I could tell immediately that it was an important call. She stood up, as if she was ready to stand her ground. And then, her demeanor immediately changed. I could hear her utter a slew of thank yous and, before I knew it, the call was over. Rachel came back to me and said that she had just received a call from Quartz Mine State Historic Park. I was ready for the worst, but, instead, Rachel said that the Park had approved her request to hold a wedding and reception.

Rachel and I were stunned. There had to be something else going on, but we had no idea what that might have been. All we knew was that we had received approval and it was time to set a date. We didn't want to chance that they may change their mind, so we gave ourselves thirty days.

Rachel was at work one day when she received a phone call from a Rita at the local newspaper. Rita said that she would like to request an interview to discuss Rachel's upcoming wedding at the Park and would like to feature it in her newspaper. Rachel was a bit surprised that her wedding would be of such interest, but agreed to hold the interview. She said she would pencil Rita in for the next day if that worked for her. Rita agreed and the next day they met to discuss the upcoming event.

TROUBLE IN RIVER'S RUN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Trent and George were discussing their assignment in the office over coffee. George would have preferred to have donuts as well, but Trent didn't quite get the hint. Trent wanted to make sure that George knew what they were getting themselves into. He told George that the whole issue of a woman having an abortion was huge. It had become a real bone of contention between those for and those against. He emphasized that this was not a simple conflict with a simple solution. Those that were against abortion vowed to fight and end the practice at both the state and federal levels through a very intensive conservative, faith based campaign. Trent said that even though there were laws in place to protect a woman's right to an abortion, things were rapidly changing. The anti-abortion groups, evangelicals and conservative politicians had all banded together to fight those rights and insert their own views advocating that all abortions should be banned. Trent said that the climate had changed and the tide was turning in favor of rescinding those laws that gave a woman the right to an abortion. What Trent was really telling George was that they needed to be extremely careful. They were stepping into a hornet's nest of opposition. They were to report the story, from both sides, but getting that story might be a lot more difficult than either of them realized. He

said to George that they could be heading into a fire storm that might include physical violence.

George thanked Trent for the warning, but said he had already considered all that. He knew there would be complications in telling the story and after Trent brought it up again, the thought of it still concerned him. But he said that he was good with all the potentialities and that he was confident that he and Trent would be able to tell the full story for The Newsroom. Trent was happy to hear that and said that the real work had yet to begin. The first thing being to truly understand, as best they could, what all sides of the issue were saying and go from there. George agreed and waited to hear from Trent as to how they were going to accomplish that.

Trent suggested that they start right at the top. In other words, they needed to document what federal and state laws said about the abortion issue. George busily went to work looking it up on the internet and said, accordingly, federal law was set by the Supreme Court a long time ago with a landmark decision that afforded women a constitutional protection for abortions. He said that state laws were obliged to follow that federal ruling. Trent said that federal ruling was currently under attack by some of the states and that the Supreme Court was reviewing that earlier decision. A Supreme Court with newly installed judges favorable to changing the law. George said that he had heard that if that earlier decision was overturned it would lead to a large number of states taking it upon themselves to define their own laws as to the legality of abortions and how, legally, an abortion was defined. In fact,

George said, a majority of those states had already said that they would ban abortions outright.

Trent concurred and said that was what they were up against. He said that their own state was one of those states that would probably issue their own ban on abortions in just a matter of weeks, if not sooner. That was if the Supreme Court reversed their landmark decision. Trent showed George the research that he had done. Research that showed even River's Run was being affected, as evidenced by an uptick in highly organized, anti-abortion protests. He said the number of staged protests outside the Women's Health Clinic in River's Run had increased dramatically. George said that made sense since the Women's Health Clinic was the only place in town that provided abortions. The Catholic hospital certainly wasn't going to provide them. It was Trent's opinion, based on what he had heard, that the anti-abortion protesters were upping the ante and anticipating a huge win for their side.

Trent looked at George and summed up by saying that anti-abortion protesters were blocking the path to the Women's Health Clinic every single day. Trent's concern was that it would lead to innocent people being hurt and maybe even killed. Trent cautioned George that this was going to be a very difficult story to capture without getting hurt themselves. He said there were a lot of people in this community with strong opinions on both sides of the issue. This was a story that was going to have a huge impact on everyone in River's Run and the country as a whole. Trent finished by saying that his intuition told him that this was

going to boil down to a knock down drag out fight between two sides that were friends and neighbors of each other.

George stood up and said that, from how he saw it, there were three angles they needed to cover. First, the anti-abortion protesters. Second, the women and doctors at the Women's Health Clinic. Third, the owners and staff of the Catholic hospital in River's Run. George said he was going out on a limb but surmised that the Catholic hospital had a stake in all of this. Trent agreed, but said that the third angle might be a little difficult to connect, unless they could find a way to directly implicate the hospital.

George suggested that they approach the people at the Women's Health Clinic first. By interviewing them, they would be able to get a good perspective on the pro-abortion argument, one that included the views of the doctors, the nurses and the women seeking their services. Trent said that he was way ahead of George. He had already arranged for that first interview to take place the very next day.

When Trent and George drove by the Women's Health Clinic the next day, there didn't appear to be much going on. As they parked their car and approached the entrance to the clinic, there suddenly emerged about twenty women, men and children, appearing to come out of nowhere. They had signs they were waving back and forth with pictures of grotesquely suffering babies, presumably detailing the results of an aborted fetus. They were yelling and screaming highly offensive objections at the two attempting to enter the clinic. Trent and George looked at each other frantically as the crowd started to throw bottles of water at

them. They picked up their pace and entered through the front lobby, rushing up to the front desk. When they got inside, a young woman behind the desk asked if they were alright? She wanted to know if anybody had been hurt or was in need of medical attention. Trent and George said they were fine, but admitted it was a bit hairy getting into the building. They said they were there to see the director of the clinic who had agreed to an interview with the local newspaper. As George looked around the lobby, there was only one woman sitting there waiting patiently. She seemed alone and frightened. George said to Trent to go ahead and start the interview. Turning his head to the side, he said he was going to try and see if he could talk to that young lady sitting over there.

Trent was greeted at the door to the conference room by a man who introduced himself as the director of the Women's Health Clinic. He had one of those highly recognizable stethoscopes hung around his neck and an identification badge that indicated his status as a doctor. They introduced themselves and Dr. Nolan said he hoped Trent didn't mind, but he had invited their director of nursing, Angela, to participate in the discussion as well. Dr. Nolan made it very clear that, for the safety of he and his staff, there were to be no names mentioned in the article.

By the time Trent got out of his interview with Dr. Nolan and Angela, George was finishing up his conversation with the young lady in the lobby. George got up and thanked the young lady for talking with him. Then, he and Trent walked out the front door and back through the gauntlet of another barrage of verbal attacks from the

protesters gathered outside. They hurriedly got in their car and drove off back to the safety of their office.

RESTORING FAITH

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rita was finishing up organizing her notes when Trent and George arrived back at the office. Rita had spent the morning talking with Rachel from the Quartz Mine State Historic Park. Rita knew that covering the wedding was kind of a fluff job, but she also knew that she was the junior member of the team. She figured she just had to deal with that. There was one thing that still bothered Rita. She was still clueless as to how Rachel and her fiancé had managed to score having their wedding at the Park. Rachel had offered no clues and there didn't seem to be anything special about her fiancé. Rita mused to herself that things just didn't seem right.

When she noticed Trent's car driving into the parking lot, she started packing up her things. Her things being her purse and her coat. It was getting close to lunchtime and that was her sign to get ready for a walk. Rita had been thinking more about the story she wanted to do about the residents on the West side of the river. She knew that Trent had tried to dissuade her from doing so, but she couldn't get it out of her mind and it was a story, she felt, that needed to be told. As Trent and George entered the office, she said her pleasantries and passed them by on the way out of the door.

Rita had become very familiar with the streets in the immediate vicinity of the newspaper. Her almost daily walks were to thank for that. The streets further away from the office were unfamiliar to her but that was where she wanted to go. She knew the general direction to take. She would just have to let her instincts guide her. She thought she would try to make it to the bridge over the river separating the two sides of River's Run. Rita knew that was the real dividing line between those who had less and those who had more. That was the kind of story she was interested in and she figured the view from the bridge in either direction, would help visualize that story. Rita started noticing that the closer she got to the river the more the appearance of the neighborhoods changed. The houses looked different, from nicely kept homes with large lots and highly manicured landscaping, to homes that were aged and worn. They were smaller homes, on smaller lots with hardly any landscaping at all. Rita sensed she was getting closer to the dividing line. She entered the warehouse district just before the river, where products were shipped upstream for sale to the public. She wondered who were the owners and who were the workers? Was there anybody she could talk to?

Rita thought about how long she had been gone and was almost ready to turn back when she turned down this one street that attracted her attention. She kept walking, looking back every now and then to keep track of where she was. She came to a cross street that stopped her in her tracks. She looked up at the street sign and emotions she hadn't felt in a long time surged through her body. The street was called "Redemption Alley" and it was almost as if she was being directed to turn onto the street and head up

the hill. The word “Redemption” led her to recall all of those so-called sins in her life where she had been unable to forgive herself or anyone else. All the moments her father blamed her for his miserable life. The tragic moments of her mother and the minister, who had conspired to rob her of her faith, the church and God. “Redemption Alley” seemed enticing to her, like that was where she was supposed to go to receive absolution. She slowly walked up the hill and there, at the top, was another sign. A wooden sign that hung from the front porch of an old house that looked as if at one time it could have been a church. The sign read, “The Church On Redemption Alley”. Rita hadn’t heard about a church located in the warehouse district. It didn’t look like the typical church, which made it even more attractive to Rita. It was a cross between a house and a church. The house of the Lord? But there was something different. Something that called out to her that she needed to go inside. It was inside that she would find what she needed.

Curious, Rita slowly walked up to the front door and found it was opened just a crack. She peeked in and was surprised to see a man standing up at what appeared to be a podium. He stopped mid-sentence when he saw Rita through the partially open door. Rita saw that there was no one else in the room and wondered who he was talking to when she, obviously, interrupted him. The man didn’t miss a beat and welcomed her to “The Church On Redemption Alley”. He beckoned her to come in so that they could have a chat, if that was what she wanted to do. Rita wasn’t sure, but there was this peaceful feeling of serenity that swept over her and she walked further into the church and sat

down right in front of the man. The man smiled and introduced himself as Matthew, the minister of the church. He held out his hand attempting to comfort her. Rita was wary but apprehensively extended her hand to his. Rita felt the minister's hand wrap around her own, followed by his other hand doing the same thing. Rita felt her fear and mistrust suddenly slip away. She slowly stood up and in a quiet voice she said her name was Rita. Then she said something totally superfluous but must have come from her inner soul. Matthew heard her say that she had been looking for him. That she needed him. Rita knew what she said didn't make much sense. She needed him? Who was him? The Lord or Matthew? Or both? There was something about Matthew that reopened the door to her soul. A soul that now felt released from the prison of her previous torture.

Rita didn't remember a lot of what happened after that. There were fleeting moments of standing there at the altar holding Matthew in her arms. Matthew carrying her up a flight of stairs and being laid down on his bed. Then it was like the lights went out. She was mesmerized and lost track of what was happening. It was as if her mind was swirling in an imaginary world. The dream world of long ago when she was a little girl attending church with her mother. A time when she thought everything was so good, compared to what it was like at home with her father. At church everything was alright. Everything was just as it should be. That was how she felt now. In Matthew's church. Matthew made her feel safe.

When it came time to leave, Rita left with the promise that she would be back. She said to Matthew that coming here was like being in a sanctuary, a haven from her past. What Rita didn't fully realize was that her coming back would occur numerous times over the coming days and weeks. This became the place that she would go to on her long walks. She didn't quite understand, but Matthew had the ability to rekindle her faith in her beliefs. He was able to restore her trust in God. His church offered her respite from the storm.

RITA'S SALVATION

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Trent and George settled in for a long afternoon of putting together their story. They barely even noticed Rita heading out of the office for her lunchtime walk. Going to the Women's Health Clinic had been quite an eye opener for the two of them. Trent felt very good about the talk he had with Dr. Nolan and Angela, while George said that he was overwhelmed by the story the young lady in the waiting room had conveyed. Trent suggested that the way they should present the story was to create two stories based on their conversations. One would be a story of conviction, as told by the medical personnel of the clinic. The other would be a human interest story, as seen from the eyes of someone who actually experienced the personal trauma of having to make the decision to have an abortion.

Trent started the first story by summarizing his conversation with Dr. Nolan and Angela at the Women's Health Clinic. Trent gathered up his notes and said, first and foremost, they both believed that a legal abortion was really a women's healthcare issue and a personal choice. It affected the health of women, girls and others who became pregnant by providing them a safe medical procedure to terminate a pregnancy when appropriate. They said the benefit of that was that abortions actually saved lives. For example, it could save the life of a mother having a difficult

and life threatening pregnancy. Furthermore, they said that legal abortions protected the right of women to make personal decisions regarding their own bodies. Dr. Nolan and Angela were big supporters of a woman's right to choose. The right to decide for themselves if having children was in their best interests.

Trent went on to say that there was something else they said that addressed how religion had focused the argument against abortion. It had to do with what Dr. Nolan and Angela described as a faith-based attack. They said that the number one reason used by religion for banning abortions was that abortion was considered to be murder. For that reason alone then, the argument was that abortions should be banned. Period. Angela's point was that the use of that kind of an argument was problematic. She emphasized that murder was, by definition, defined as the killing of another human that was covered under statutory law. And by law, what that really boiled down to was the definition of what it was to be human. Specifically, at what point did something become human? That was something, Angela said, that had no agreed upon legal definition. Their opinion was that calling an abortion a murder was purely a faith-based rationalization, designed to specifically nail down the definition of when life began, such that it would prevent any abortions from ever occurring. Accordingly, if you believed that life did not begin at conception but, instead, it began after twenty weeks for example, then an abortion at six weeks could not legally be considered murder. With all the different definitions of when life began, it could not be called murder if life had not officially begun yet. Angela said believing that life began at

conception was mainly a Christian attempt to arm a faith-based attack to prevent any and all abortions without concern for the safety of the mother or the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy. Dr. Nolan said that was the reason why the faith-based attack was launched in the first place.

Trent said that it was Angela's belief that, depending on one's faith, banning an abortion could actually violate one's own personal religious beliefs. That would be a violation of their rights. She gave as an example the case of a Jewish patient who, according to her religion, believed that it was the life and health of the pregnant woman that was the most important, not the potential life of the fetus. Angela said, in that case, it would be considered murder if the abortion did not take place. She argued that there continues to be debate as to what constitutes life and when life began. Thus, the potential life of a fetus, as defined by Christian ideology, should not be used as an argument to take precedence over the health and life of the mother. To do so, would fly in the face of one's constitutional right to religious freedom.

Trent continued by saying that Dr. Nolan and Angela were both astonished that there was the belief that making laws to ban abortions would put a stop to all abortions. Dr. Nolan said that was a false argument. He said that abortions would continue to occur no matter what the law said and that what really needed to happen was to make sure it was a safe medical procedure performed by a trained medical staff. It was just common sense that banning abortions would not make them go away. It would

just drive them underground and jeopardize the lives of those seeking to terminate a pregnancy, no matter what the reason.

Trent said he had one other point to make and that had to do with establishing a link between the anti-abortion protesters and the Catholic hospital. Trent said, it turned out that Angela used to be head of the pediatrics unit at the hospital. While there, she had expressed some views that were not exactly in line with the stated mission of the hospital. In other words, not in agreement with the views of the Catholic church. So she was let go and that was how she became director of nursing at the Women's Health Clinic. Trent said the interesting part of all this was that Angela was privy to some pretty high level conversations. Conversations that described a complicated web of relations with the anti-abortion protesters. Angela was told that the hospital provided the protesters with training and conference rooms to hold their meetings. She said they even went so far as to pay for their transportation and supplies, such as for signs and other printed materials.

George's face lit up. He said that it sounded like we might have our smoking gun. He said that he had tried to set up an interview with the hospital to discuss the abortion issue, but that they had declined. They stated that they had nothing to say and were not involved in any way with the activities taking place outside of the Women's Health Clinic. Both Trent and George felt they had more than enough information needed to implicate the hospital, but even if the hospital did orchestrate the anti-abortion protesters at the Women's Health Clinic, that was not a crime in and of itself.

Publishing that information to the community of River's Run would certainly make it embarrassing though. Trent said that was something that the owners of The Newsroom might object to.

George didn't want to get into a heavy discussion about what the owners might object to. He figured they had made their case but it was now his turn to discuss the story as told to him by the young lady waiting in the lobby. George said that when he first approached the young woman in the clinic she was a bit apprehensive. George told her that he thought that was perfectly understandable. He said that he and his partner were writing a story about the Women's Health Clinic for the newspaper. He said he was just trying to make sure they got the story right by including her in the story. The young lady acquiesced and told him that she was there to get an abortion. She said she was eighteen years old and scared to death. She told George that she and her mother lived together with her mother's boyfriend. At first, she said that her mother's boyfriend just appeared to be overly friendly. Then things started to change. She said that when her mother was away, he would make sexual advances towards her. Obviously he wanted more than just a friendship. She said the scary moment came when he trapped her in her bedroom and forced himself on her as she tried to fight him off. But her fighting didn't work. He had his way with her, raped her, beat her and threatened her life if she ever said anything to anybody, especially her mother. So she didn't. She felt it was better just to keep quiet.

Unfortunately, she continued, she ended up getting pregnant from the attack. She said her mother didn't know about the attack or the pregnancy and that she had no plans on telling the mother's boyfriend. She said she had no choice but to figure it out herself. She said to George that was why she was at the clinic. When she had called the clinic they asked her to come in and talk about what had happened. Angela, from the clinic, told her that they would then be able to provide her with options as to what to do. George said to Trent that there were more details, ugly details, but he didn't feel comfortable going into those. George, knowing how difficult it was for he and Trent to get into the clinic, asked the young lady how she felt trying to enter the clinic? She said, at first, she was so terrified that she was ready to turn around and go home. But she didn't want to give them the pleasure of knowing she had changed her mind because of them. She said what really made her continue was understanding that, no matter how terrified she was, it in no way compared to the terror she felt in having to give birth to a child conceived in such a violent act. A child forced upon her during a vicious sexual assault. George said to Trent that there was no way he could ever understand the fear that she was going through. He said hers was a story that needed to be heard. Hers was a case that needed to be taken care of in a safe and respectful manner.

Trent was almost in tears as George ended his narration. Even so, he knew they had only gathered half of the story and they had to push on. Push on to the story of the anti-abortion protesters. They needed to hear their side of the story. George thought that might be kind of difficult to

arrange. There was no obvious phone number to call and no direct person to contact. He said there was only one option and that was to drive out to the Women's Health Clinic, walk right up to the protesters and ask politely to talk with their spokesperson. Hopefully, someone would step forward.

George wasn't too thrilled with his chances when he arrived at the clinic to find that the protesters were already up in arms against some potential patient trying to enter the clinic. He figured his only chance was to slowly walk up from the rear and mingle his way into the group. Fortunately, he was able to slip his way inside the lines and figure out who the right person to talk to was. He looked for the person carrying the biggest sign and shouting directions to everyone else. Things were very loud and dicey, so George waited for things to cool down before he approached the presumed leader. George very calmly and politely introduced himself and stated the purpose of his being there. Turned out the leader was the wife of one of the more prominent business leaders in the community. A business leader who also was a member of the executive board at the hospital. George was convinced more than ever of the hospital's role in all of this. She said that she would be amenable to discussing her stance on the issue of abortion. George assumed that would be the same stance as those who were gathered there beside her. She said her name was Alice, the mother of four children and a proud member of the new mega-church that had just recently opened. She had briefly met George at the grand opening. George felt they were off to a good start.

Alice appeared to be very clear and well rehearsed with what she had to say. George was pretty sure she had been pressed to define her position many times in the past. She started by saying the number one issue she had with abortions was that abortion was murder. Clear and simple. She said that beginning with conception, cells started to divide, leading to the development of a distinct human being. Terminating that process was murder. Alice believed that defining life as beginning at conception, made any abortion, of any kind, murder. She said that should not be tolerated, period.

Alice when on to say that tolerating abortion just led to a belief that life was disposable. A belief that life was just another one of those societal and cultural items that could just be thrown away. According to Alice, as a Christian, only God could make and take away life. Humans could not and should not play God. One final point Alice made had to do with contraception and birth control. She said that they were both attempts at eroding societal and cultural perceptions of what was morally and ethically acceptable behavior. She said, in other words, they helped to ingrain abortion and other anti-life practices. Thus, they should be banned as well.

George said that at this point Alice began getting distracting signals from the rest of her group to return. They acted as if they were celebrating something. Alice ended the interview by saying that was all she had to say and that she had to get back to what she was doing. She said she sensed something was going on that she needed to handle. George thanked her for her time and walked back to his

car. He wondered what could possibly have been going on? George got his answer when he arrived back at the office.

George opened the office door to find Trent and Rita both standing at their desks looking at their computers. They appeared consumed by some kind of breaking news. Rita even showed signs of distress. George asked them both what was going on and Trent said he had just heard some important news come over the wire. He said it seemed the Supreme Court had made a decision on the matter of whether to continue the precedent set of granting women constitutional protection for abortions. George looked over at Rita and could tell that whatever Trent had to say next wasn't going to be good. Trent said the Supreme Court had decided to reverse their earlier decision and leave it up to the individual states to determine the legality or illegality of abortion. George said to Trent and Rita that he was just back from interviewing the group of anti-abortion protesters stationed outside of the Women's Health Clinic. He had spoken to their apparent lead organizer, Alice, who abruptly ended the interview without a very good explanation. George said she was probably being told that the Supreme Court had handed down their decision.

Rita turned to both Trent and George and asked how the decision was going to affect their story? Trent paused and had to think more about Rita's question. He understood the significance of the story they were writing but he also knew that The Newsroom's owners didn't like stories that sparked controversy. Trent knew full well that their story might result in the owners getting an unwanted earful from

their friends and business supporters. George responded to Rita by saying that they still needed to go over the most recent interview with the anti-abortion protesters and that he was not going to let the recent decision change his mind about publishing the story. He still thought it was a good story, especially given what they had uncovered so far. Trent reluctantly agreed and said that regardless of the Supreme Court decision, abortion was going to continue to be a volatile issue that needed to be addressed.

Trent tried to reassure himself and explained that their story was all about discovering the causes of the increase in confrontation and hate from within the community. He said the issue hinged on how the community was reacting to the abortion issue. Specifically, how the Women's Health Clinic had become the sole symbol of the conflict. George agreed but said false perceptions played a significant role in how the issue had been portrayed. It was the perception that the Women's Health Clinic was doing something criminal that had amplified community reaction. Or at least, what their religion told them to believe was criminal. Trent said that, yes, religion was at the core of the issue and that was what worried him. Trent understood how hard it was to write a balanced story whenever religion was involved. Especially when that specific religion was so entrenched in the community. He said their goal was to shut down the clinic, stop the abortions and return the community of River's Run to God's benevolence.

Unswayed by Trent's concerns, George said the story that he and Trent were going to write was balanced. They intended to fully cover what they saw as the three angles of

the story. The voices of those of the Women's Health Clinic, the voices of those arguing to stop the Women's Health Clinic from performing abortions and, then George paused and looked to Trent for his opinion. Trent said that the third angle was a bit iffy, but their suspicion was that the whole confrontational atmosphere was initiated and encouraged by the local Catholic hospital. Rita looked at Trent and George, wondering what evidence there was of the Catholic hospital's collusion and, if true, why should anyone care? Rita was just trying to be the good journalist. She felt that if Trent and George were going to make such an accusation, they had better be prepared to back it up with evidence. Trent and George looked at each other and admitted that they had not really gotten that far yet. Trent said that they had just discovered the evidence connecting the hospital to the anti-abortion protesters. He said that he and George still needed to discuss how they were going to present that side of the story. George said, if anything, it would emphasize who was actually running the community of River's Run behind the scenes. He said It would raise some serious questions about the separation of church and state.

Rita said she understood and that it sounded like a well thought out approach. Her question to Trent and George was, given the recent court decision, wouldn't that put a stop to the protests and halt the abortions? Trent answered by saying he disagreed. He said that abortions would not stop. Women and young girls would still need to end a pregnancy, for whatever reason. They would find a way and while it may not be legal, abortions would still happen. The question, George said, was whether those abortions would be safe and protect the health of the

mother? George turned to both Trent and Rita and said that he was not convinced that that would be the case. He said the decision would be left up to the states and that, most notably, their own state had already promised to pass laws completely banning all abortions. They all nodded their heads in agreement. Trent said that he believed their state would be doing so, sooner, rather than later. Perhaps passing the legislation in just a matter of days and signed by the governor by the end of the week.

Rita was visibly shaken by all the talk. She had never really participated in the women's movement. She felt she had taken it all for granted and that, now, she may be in jeopardy of losing everything that the women's movement had fought for. All the gains that had been made over the many previous years. Rita started feeling her life closing in on her. Things unimportant to her until now, were starting to slip away. She desperately had the urge to get out. To flee. Both Trent and George could sense what was going and felt Rita's pain. The court's decision was a huge setback for her and all women. Rita was sensing the need to be comforted, to talk with someone close who might help console her. What she was really feeling was that she wanted to be with Matthew. What Trent and George didn't know and could not have known, was that Matthew was Rita's salvation.

THE WEDDING

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The days leading up to the wedding were pretty hectic for both Rachel and I. Although I know they were a lot more hectic for Rachel since she had wanted to take on the planning and schedule the arrangements. We would talk at night about all the details, but one thing that kept coming up was that Rachel had not heard from Rita at The Newsroom. That was a big concern of Rachel's, but I'm not sure why. The last time she saw Rita was a few weeks ago when they had their little chat about the wedding and the article that was to be written. Rachel said everything seemed to go fine and Rita walked away saying she had more than enough information to get started on the article. Since then, Rachel had not heard a word. Rachel wasn't really that worried but it just seemed strange that there was just this one contact and that was it.

The day of the wedding Rachel was understandably, a mess. I can't say that I was any better. Who would have guessed that getting married would be such a big deal? I had no idea the planning that had to take place and the day-to-day arrangements that had to be made with the venue. Fortunately, Rachel did a wonderful job and the Park did their best to make us happy. We were both assigned separate rooms at the owner's mansion to get ready for the wedding. Apparently that was a common

practice for most weddings at the Park, but it was totally unexpected for Rachel and I. Normally the owner's mansion was off limits to visitors and guests, but on special occasions the Park staff opened it up so that it could be used as part of the event venue. Once again, Rachel and I were in a fog as to how we were able to score such a deal.

I have to give the staff at Quartz Mine State Historic Park a lot of credit. They were very attentive and accommodating, acquiescing to all of our needs. Even though Rachel had her bridesmaids to help her, there were things they hadn't thought of and the staff stepped right up to help. There seemed to be a concerted and well orchestrated effort to make sure our wedding was enormously successful. They handled all the last minute details without a fuss and even found time to calm both Rachel and I down when our nerves got the best of us. In other words, they stepped up to take control when they knew that Rachel and I needed to get ourselves together if this thing was ever going to happen. The wedding ceremony itself was to take place outside of the mansion on the front lawn. Again, it seemed as if special arrangements were being made just for us. The Park staff delivered all the chairs, set them up and made sure there was a clear path for the bride and groom to walk down unimpeded to the minister.

I could see out of my window that some of the guests were starting to arrive. They were met by the Park staff and escorted to the bride or groom's side of the aisle to be seated. I could see that seats were starting to fill up and that meant only one thing. It was time to make my way

down the stairs and out to the patio. I'm sure Rachel was encouraged to get ready to make her way down the stairs as well. When the moment finally arrived, I walked out of the owner's mansion and saw what was in store. It was truly a beautiful site but I must admit I was quite nervous. I walked up to the top of the aisle and slowly made my way up to the minister. I couldn't help but notice that everyone followed my every move as I approached and stood by my Best Man. The next thing I remember is that the music started, announcing my bride's arrival. I stood there in awe as Rachel walked herself down the aisle, a flower girl throwing roses a few steps in front of her. As we met, I took her in my arm and we turned around to face the minister.

The rest of the ceremony was somewhat of a blur, but it must have happened. Both Rachel and I were so nervous that we almost forgot what we were supposed to say and do. Fortunately, the Best Man and Maid of Honor were there to guide us along. The one thing the Best Man didn't have to do was show me what to do when the minister said that it was time to kiss the bride. That was the moment when Rachel and I knew we were almost there. We turned, faced the audience and proceeded to make our way back up the aisle.

Thinking back, It was a beautiful ceremony. The timing was perfect and the only thing left to do was to make it through the reception. As we exited the top of the aisle, we were met and directed off to the side by our photographer. Rachel turned and whispered to me whether I had seen Rita or anyone else from The Newsroom? I told her that I didn't really know what Rita looked like but that I assumed

we would see her soon. Or at least someone else from the newspaper. Since we were about to take the official wedding pictures, time was running out.

When we finally made it to the most picturesque spot the photographer could find, we stopped and I looked around to see another photographer come running up to meet us. He introduced himself as George. He said he was sorry he was late, but he was the reporter that had been assigned to the wedding and, well, he was the newspaper's photographer as well. Rachel was quick to ask George where Rita was? George said that we could talk about that later, but for now, we all needed to focus on getting through the rest of the wedding and reception. George said that there was going to be something very special happening at the reception, so they needed to make haste. That was enough to take Rachel's mind off of worrying about where Rita was. That was enough to blur our minds once again with the thought of what was coming next.

The reception was a short walk from where the wedding and the pictures took place. It was in another old historic building that the Park had set up specifically to hold large receptions for weddings or otherwise. We were directed to sit over at the head table, along with the others in our wedding party. All the other guests had already arrived and were seated at their assigned tables. Both Rachel and I were anticipating the usual roasting to be done by our friends as the microphone started to be passed around. We acknowledged to each other that those kinds of things happen at weddings and we had no expectation that ours would be any different.

The first person to stand up and speak didn't come from the head table as we had expected. Instead, it came from a table at the far back of the reception area. We were not really sure who it was at first, but when we stood up we could see who it was. It didn't take us long to realize that it was Jeremy. Rachel and I turned to each other and the proverbial light bulb went off. This was the surprise that George had talked about. Our photographer, George and the Park's photographer started busily snapping pictures. We finally understood why our wedding had turned out to be such a big deal. It was Jeremy's attendance that made our wedding a wedding to be remembered. We found out later that it was because of the State Wilderness Park and Quartz Mine State Historic Park conspiring behind the scenes that this whole thing ever happened the way it did. The reason our request to have our wedding at Quartz Mine State Historic Park was approved so quickly, was now obvious. We also realized why the newspaper was doing a story on our wedding. It was all a well laid out plan, done a month in advance, by Rachel's superiors.

We could not believe our eyes when we saw Jeremy walking up towards us. This was our first contact with Jeremy since we rescued him from the hiking trail so long ago. This was the young man whose life we had saved. Having him at our wedding was the best wedding present we could have asked for. Jeremy had this big smile on his face like he knew all along that this was going to happen. He could hardly contain himself. He didn't seem to have any outward signs of the injuries that he had sustained on that trip. The broken arm and leg must have healed nicely and, hopefully, anything internal must have done so as well.

Jeremy gave each of us a big hug, which made for a good picture I'm sure. George said that was one for the newspaper story. As we hugged, I think Rachel and I had that same feeling we had when we watched as Jeremy flew away in the helicopter that day. Things were good and a life was saved. The only difference was that, this time, Jeremy wasn't going away. He had made it back safely for us and the world to see.

REVELATIONS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Some time before the wedding was to take place, Rita sat at her desk as Trent and George were talking about their story. The story on abortion activism and its effects on the community of River's Run. Rita was trying to help as best she could, but she was distracted. She wasn't feeling that well. She had finished prepping her own story about the wedding and was just waiting out the time before it was to occur. Trent and George could tell that something was troubling Rita but they had learned from the past that Rita wasn't big on talking about her troubles. It was getting to be close to the end of the work day when Rita calmly stood up, pushed her chair in and turned around. Trent and George both knew what was going to happen next. It was about a quarter of four when Rita proceeded over to the coat rack, grabbed her coat and her purse and headed out of the door. She didn't say anything, but Trent and George both expected that they would see her again the next morning.

Rita walked out of the office, stopped for a bit and then looked around. She questioned what she was about to do. Deciding, she turned and headed down the street, just as she did on most days when she broke for lunch. Except this wasn't lunch and she had something else on her mind. Her end destination was of course "The Church On Redemption Alley" and more specifically Matthew. She had been this

way many times before and didn't have to really think about where she was going. The journey took her mind off of how queasy she was feeling. Turning onto Matthew's street, she trudged up the hill to the front door of the church. Rita was feeling out of breath but just figured it was due to the long walk. She slowly opened the door and was met unexpectedly by Matthew. Matthew was on his way out but let Rita in and they walked together to the back of the church. There, they sat down and talked. Rita said that she had some exciting news for Matthew and she leaned in to whisper in his ear. She told him that she was pregnant. Matthew sat back in his chair, attempting to process what Rita had just told him. Rita could tell that Matthew wasn't as excited as she was. He stood up from his chair, turned around and walked over towards the wall. Leaning up against the wall, he looked back at Rita and asked her what she thought they should do? Rita could sense that her moment of joy had just slipped away.

Rita wasn't quite sure what Matthew meant by his question, but she could tell that her being pregnant was not sitting well with him. Matthew finally confessed that he wasn't ready to be a father. He had never intended for this to happen and he was so sorry, but he could not foresee this coming to its logical conclusion. He came back to Rita and quietly suggested to her that she should consider an abortion. That they should end the pregnancy. He said that he would be there for her all the way and that until then, she should stay with him at the church. He said that he would make up a room for her upstairs so that she could have her privacy, but he would provide for her.

Rita was devastated but tried to somehow hide it. She tried to imagine what it must have been like for her mother had she had the same kind of conversation with her minister. She presumed it would have gone the same way. The anger of her mother's infidelity with the minister returned. She questioned whether she had misjudged Matthew? Maybe Matthew was no different from her mother's lover? This was the kind of thing that had turned her away from religion, the church and God in the first place. When she calmed herself down a bit she rethought her misgivings. She realized that what she was really doing was just recreating what her mother had done so long ago. Except this was worse. She was pregnant. The more she thought about it, the more she accepted that she wasn't ready to have a baby either. She had a change of heart and thought that what Matthew had suggested was the right thing to do. After all, it was being with Matthew that had reopened the door to church and God. Matthew was able to do that for her. So she thought that Matthew must be correct. They should not have this baby. She turned to Matthew and gave in. She agreed to terminate the pregnancy and move in with him. She didn't like the idea of having to be kept quiet in the upstairs bedroom, but she understood that Matthew had an image to protect and that image did not include an unwed mother who was pregnant. But deep inside she just didn't feel good. She wasn't sure if she was sick or it was the pregnancy, but whatever it was she told Matthew that she needed to lay down. Matthew picked her up, held her close to him and they carefully walked upstairs to her new home.

After making sure Rita was comfortable, Matthew sluggishly climbed his way back downstairs and continued on until he arrived at Larry's door. When he knocked, Larry opened the door and could immediately tell that Matthew was frantic and in need of someone to talk to. Larry led Matthew inside and offered him something to drink. Matthew said he would take a beer if he had one. He said it didn't matter what kind or brand, he just needed something. Of course Larry had much stronger substitutes, but he knew that Matthew didn't really approve of those kind of substances. Larry also knew that Matthew probably couldn't handle it anyway, since he had never eaten mushrooms or taken cocaine before. Needless to say, Larry was pretty amazed that Matthew would even come downstairs to have a beer with him. Larry figured there must be something seriously wrong. Larry brought Matthew over to the couch, sat him down and then went to get each of them their drink of choice. On the way Larry stopped to take a couple of shots of whiskey.

Once they both sat down, Matthew promptly downed about half of his beer. Larry had never seen Matthew like that before. It was not long before Matthew was ready to talk. He started off by saying that he had done something terrible. He asked Larry if he had seen a particular woman coming to visit him over the last month or so? Larry knew who he was talking about, but feigned not to know. Larry was curious as to how Matthew was going to describe this lady. Matthew said the lady just showed up at his doorstep one day. He said she appeared to be looking for something or someone. For some reason she thought that he was the one she was looking for. Matthew said he was sure she

didn't know who he was and he didn't know who she was either. Being the so-called minister of the church meant meeting a lot of people you didn't recall meeting later. Matthew said that the lady seemed to be going through some kind of religious experience, like she was being re-born or something. He said at that moment this weird kind of connection formed between the two of them. He didn't really know how to describe it adequately, but said it was very much like a God-fearing experience. It was like she had found something in him that had been missing from her for a very long time.

Larry asked Matthew what her name was? Matthew said her name was Rita and that she worked for the local newspaper, The Newsroom. She was a reporter or something. Larry's ears perked up. He didn't say anything to Matthew, but The Newsroom was the one publishing all the stories about an increase in petty crime and vandalism in River's Run over the last few months. The Newsroom stories were the reason for Larry to have to lay low and curtail his business on the West side of the river. That meant a decrease in his sales and profits and that was something he didn't really appreciate. Even though Larry was thinking all of this, he tried to remain focused on helping Matthew. He said to Matthew that he should be pleased he had found someone like Rita, but Matthew wasn't so sure. Matthew said that as time went on, Rita just became someone that he slept with on a regular basis. She would come by just about every day and before they knew it, they found themselves in bed.

Matthew said the reason he came down to talk was that Rita had just visited upstairs and had some very jarring news. The look on Larry's face said that he knew what was coming next. He looked Matthew square in the face and said she told you she was pregnant, didn't she? Matthew was relieved Larry had figured it out. He wasn't quite sure he was going to be able to spit it out himself. Larry got up and walked around the table a couple of times, thinking. He then asked Matthew what they were going to do? Was everything alright? Matthew replied that they had talked about it and decided the best thing to do was to get an abortion. Matthew said that he didn't know who would do it, maybe the Women's Health Clinic or the hospital, but Rita had agreed to it. Larry asked where Rita was? Matthew said that Rita was going to be staying with him until the abortion was performed. He said the thing was, no one was to know that she was there.

Larry went into the kitchen and got a couple more drinks for the two of them. This time Matthew had no choice. Larry was getting him something stronger to drink whether he liked it or not. He came back into the room, set the drinks down and took a couple more laps around the table. Matthew told him to sit down. He was making him dizzy. Larry sat down, looked Matthew square in the face and said that abortion thing was just not going to happen. Matthew got this questioning look on his face. Larry took the next few minutes telling Matthew about the recent Supreme Court decision reversing their earlier decision that afforded women the constitutional right to an abortion. Furthermore, Larry told Matthew that having an abortion had become the decision of the state and that, state by

state, they would be enacting legislation to define whether an abortion could legally take place. Lastly, he told Matthew that their state had already decided and had since passed legislation banning abortions of any type for any reason. Matthew was back at square one. He had nothing more to say. Frustrated and depleted, he was all talked out and, instead of feeling that Larry had helped him resolve his issue, his hole had been dug even deeper.

The next morning found Matthew quietly checking on Rita. He opened her door slowly and peeked in, hoping to see Rita up and dressed. Instead, she was still in bed with the blankets pulled up high and the pillows stuffed under her head. When he walked over to the bed, Rita slowly opened her eyes and said that she wasn't feeling very well. In fact, she said she was feeling even worse than the night before. Matthew asked her what was hurting and she replied that it was mainly her back, but she also seemed to be having strong cramps. Matthew questioned her as to whether she thought it had something to do with being pregnant and all she could say was that she didn't know. She had never been pregnant before, but she knew what menstrual cramps felt like. These were similar. Matthew started to get very nervous. He got up and went to the bathroom to get Rita some water and a warm washcloth to place over her forehead. After that, he said he had to leave for a few minutes but that he would be right back.

Matthew rushed downstairs and knocked on Larry's door. It was still pretty early for Larry but he knew it must be Matthew and hurriedly got out of bed and opened the door. Matthew flew in and started pacing back and forth. He told

Larry that there was something wrong with Rita and he would like Larry to come up and have a look. Larry grabbed a different shirt, put on his shoes and the two of them went up the two flights of stairs to Rita's room. When they got inside, Matthew introduced Larry as his good friend. He said he needed Larry to take a look and see if there was anything that he could do for Rita. Larry could tell that Rita was pretty lethargic, experiencing pain and was having trouble turning over on her side. Larry helped her turn over on her side and both Matthew and Larry looked at each other in horror. There was some blood on the sheets. Not a whole lot of blood, but still blood. Larry let Rita know she was bleeding and asked if she could check to see where she was bleeding from? Rita slowly moved her hands down to her lower abdomen and brought them back up to announce that there was blood coming from her vagina. Larry looked very concerned. Rita whispered that maybe she was just spotting? Larry could tell that Rita was getting worried and rightfully so. She was bleeding from her vagina and that was a sign to Rita that she and the baby were in distress. Rita started to cry uncontrollably, almost in panic. Larry and Matthew put a blanket underneath her and laid her back down, all the while trying to calm her down. Matthew left briefly and returned with some aspirin and pain medication. He gave a few tablets to Rita, along with a glass of water to wash it down with. Eventually, they were able to get her to agree to just rest and take deep breaths. They wanted her to just lay there for a while and, hopefully, she would start to feel better. Larry got up and secretly motioned for Matthew to follow him outside the room. Rita appeared to be resting comfortably enough and there were some things that Larry and Matthew needed to talk about.

Closing the door behind them, Larry said to Matthew that he thought Rita's life was in danger. He said that they needed to do something more than just keeping asking her to rest. Matthew wanted to know why Larry was so concerned? Larry said that he had some experience with what Rita was going through. He said about a year ago his sister went through a very similar thing. She was experiencing a lot of back pain, had some vaginal bleeding and, unbeknownst to the family, she was pregnant. Larry said that what it turned out to be was that his sister was having a miscarriage. Matthew thought he knew what that meant, but he wanted more from Larry. Larry went on to say that his sister ended up losing the baby and almost ended up losing her own life. Larry told Matthew that, if what Rita was having was a miscarriage, that she could end up losing a lot of blood and, basically, bleed to death. Matthew asked Larry what they should do? Larry's only answer was to say that they needed to get her to the hospital. As soon as possible. Matthew stood up and said that he couldn't do that. He said he would pay a hefty price if word got out that he got Rita pregnant. He could lose his congregation. What Larry heard Matthew saying was that he wasn't ready to let the world know that he was a fake. That Matthew wasn't ready to admit to the dark side of what he had been up to. Larry told Matthew that they, at least, needed to call the hospital and find out what their recommendation would be. Matthew relented and the two of them walked over to the phone to make the call.

When they finally got it across to the hospital operator that they needed to talk to a doctor, they were transferred to another number where they spoke to someone who

identified herself as a nurse. She had a lot of questions for Larry and Matthew about Rita's condition. Once the nurse heard they were talking about someone who was pregnant and, possibly having a miscarriage, she got quiet and said that she was going to have to talk with a doctor before they could continue. So Larry and Matthew were left hanging on again as they were put on hold. After about ten minutes, someone else picked up the phone and identified himself as a doctor. He told Larry and Matthew that, from what they had described, the young lady was experiencing signs of a miscarriage. He said that if that was true, then the fetus could not possibly be expected to survive and that it needed to be surgically removed. Otherwise, the young lady would be at serious risk of infection that could lead to her death. Larry and Matthew looked at each other in shock. Larry momentarily held his hand over the phone as he pleaded with Matthew to relent. Mathew finally got it and agreed to get her to the hospital. Larry got back on the phone and told the doctor that they would be bringing the young lady in to the hospital for treatment as soon as possible. The doctor replied that, if there was any chance that the baby had any kind of fetal heartbeat, that he and the hospital would not be able to do anything for her. Larry and Matthew almost exploded. Did they just hear the doctor say that they would not treat her?

The doctor tried to calmly explain that if they ended up performing a termination of the pregnancy, he and the hospital might be accused of performing an illegal act. The doctor said that with the most recent decision by the Supreme Court and the legislation signed and passed by their state legislature, that would be against the law. He said

that would be considered to be as having performed an abortion and since state legislation did not include saving the life of the mother as an exception, the hospital would not be able to help them. The doctor made it very clear to Larry and Matthew that he and the hospital were not willing to face possible criminal charges, loss of license and the real likelihood of never being able to practice medicine again. He said he was sorry, but there was nothing they could do.

Larry and Matthew got off of the phone dumbfounded. They could not believe that Rita, a person experiencing an immediate and life-threatening medical condition, could be so summarily dismissed. They thought a hospital should be the place you go to when you needed urgent, medical attention. That, apparently, was not the case. It appeared that this was a case where the hospital and its doctors cared more about themselves than the life of a patient. Matthew was determined not to give up. He said to Larry that they should try calling the Women's Health Clinic. They would surely be able to help Rita out.

While Matthew was busy looking up the phone number of the clinic, Larry went upstairs to check on the condition of Rita. He opened the door and looked in to see that Rita was awake, but still down on the bed. He asked her how she was doing and she said her back pain was about the same but her cramping seemed to be getting worse. She pointed down at her vagina and said the bleeding seemed to have lessened but there was this slight discharge coming out. Larry encouraged her to lay back down and try to get more rest. He reached over and gave her some more pain

medication before leaving. She laid back down and closed her eyes.

Larry returned to Matthew to see if he had made any progress, but it was obvious he was still waiting on the phone. He said to Larry that he had reached the clinic and was talking to a nurse named Angela. She had left briefly to talk to the doctor. Just then Angela got back on the call and Larry listened to see if he could figure out what was going on. Nurse Angela was telling Matthew that she had talked it over with the doctor and that, from a legal standpoint, there was nothing they could do for Rita. Angela said she was sorry but, because of state law they were without legal standing to handle any cases involving the potential termination of a baby. She said that the information the hospital had given them was correct, even though it was not, in her opinion, the expedient thing to do. She told Matthew that, the hospital being a Catholic hospital, probably wouldn't have helped them anyway. Angela said their hands were tied as well and they were in the process of shutting down the clinic. She added, much to the pleasure of the hospital. She said that she and the doctor were only there to tidy up things and begin the process of closing down all operations.

As Matthew hung up, there was this look of helplessness and defeat on his face. Larry expressed to Matthew that they were going to be forced to make a decision on their own. They both looked towards the bedroom and resigned themselves to the fact that Rita's fate was in their hands. Matthew added that her fate was now in God's hands.

MISSING PERSON

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It had only been a week or so but Rachel and I were settling into the routine of being a married couple. Not that it was getting boring. We were adjusting to each other very well. We would wake up in the mornings, eat our breakfast together and then head off in our separate directions to go to work. Late in the afternoon, we would meet up again at the house to talk a bit, prepare dinner, go to bed and then start the whole process over again. One day I thought I would change it up a little and surprise her by having lunch with her. She was still working at the visitor entrance to the Quartz State Historic Mine so I stopped on the way over and picked up a couple of sandwiches and chips for us to munch on. If she had the time, we could even take a short hike, although I kind of doubted she would be able to.

I arrived at the Park and walked through the front door of the visitor entrance, acting as if I was just another tourist. Needless to say, she was surprised to see me when she looked up to welcome me to the Park. She thought there was something wrong at first but soon realized that I was just paying her a special visit. I think the bag of sandwiches and chips gave it all away. After getting approval to break for lunch, she packed up a couple of things, cleaned her desk and away we went for a walk over close to where we were married. There was a nice green, grassy area in front

of the old mansion, so we settled down there, laid out a blanket and had ourselves a real picnic. We reminisced about our time spent nearby just a little while ago when we were wed. It was quite a good time and the appearance of Jeremy was something we vowed never to forget.

After about an hour we wandered back over to the visitor entrance. Rachel took her seat behind the desk and I decided to check things out a bit. I had never really played the visitor before, so I took my time to look at the memorabilia and examine all the pictures. I was standing close to Rachel when I noticed a flier hanging on the wall. The flier indicated that there was a missing person, someone who went by the name of Rita. Rita purportedly worked at The Newsroom and had been reported missing for a little over a week. I turned to Rachel and asked her if she had seen the flier? Rachel said that was the first she had seen it and turned to ask the other Ranger how long the flier had been posted. The other Ranger said that she had just put it up while Rachel and I were having lunch. I only knew Rita by name, having never met with her. Rachel, on the other hand, had talked with her at length about the wedding, so the flier indicating that she was missing meant a lot more to her than to me. I could tell Rachel wanted to talk more about Rita, but I had to get back to work and said that when she got home we would talk about it some more if that was what she wanted.

I got home from work before Rachel and was anticipating how our conversation was going to go. I decided to lighten things up a bit by preparing a special candlelight dinner, complete with a good bottle of wine.

Once Rachel got home I could tell that she was just waiting for the opportunity to bring up the missing person flier. During our dinner she couldn't wait any longer and I thought, alright, here it comes. Rachel started out by saying that what she was about to ask was something that didn't affect her so much as it would affect me. She said the flier about Rita had got her to thinking that something else needed to be done. Something beyond the normal process of calling the police and putting up fliers everywhere asking for help. That was when it became clearer to me. What Rachel was about to say to me was that she would like my help in locating Rita. I could see the tears welling up in Rachel's eyes when she asked if I would get involved? I got up and put my arms around Rachel, while telling her that I would do whatever I could. I said that what she needed to understand was that there were no guarantees. What I was able to do with Old Man Franklin and Jeremy may not happen with Rita, but I was willing to give it a go.

The first thing Rachel and I decided to do was contact George at The Newsroom. George knew the story of Jeremy and seemed like the kind of person who would appreciate the offer of our help in finding Rita. I also knew that by talking with the people at The Newsroom, I might get a better feeling for Rita, a perception, awareness or, what some people may call, a sixth sense. We each got up from the table and called our colleagues informing them that we were going to take a few days off. They were very understanding. We didn't have to give them all the details and they accepted our requests without issue. The next item was to contact George and set up a meeting between

us and the others at The Newsroom. They needed to be convinced.

The next day we arrived at The Newsroom and were greeted by George and, presumably, his boss Trent. Turns out that it was only Trent and George who knew Rita much at all. Trent and George were, of course, very curious as to what we thought we would be able to bring to the table. Trent and George had written the article together on the wedding, so they both understood my involvement in finding Jeremy. That certainly helped, but I could tell they were still skeptical of our motives. Or at least my ability to help find Rita. I told them the story about Old Man Franklin and that was when, I think, they finally embraced our offer.

I turned and asked George to finish why it was that he, instead of Rita, had covered our wedding. I said that was something that George mentioned he would tell us about later, but because of all the distractions we never got around to it. George said that, yes, we never did get back to that. George said that days before the wedding, he and Trent were expecting Rita to go over with them what her plans were for writing the wedding story. The only problem was that Rita was nowhere to be found. She had left early one day and never showed up for work the next day or any day after that. George said that she just disappeared without a trace. Trent said that was why he made the last minute decision to substitute George for Rita at the wedding. George said that was why he was late and they found him running up at the last second to take pictures.

Trent said that after a few days of not seeing Rita, they decided to call the police and file a missing person report. I

asked if they didn't find it odd that Rita would just not show up for work? Trent and George said that Rita had her quirks that they never really questioned. Those included going on long walks at lunch and leaving work early on a regular basis. Trent said they never asked her where she went or what she was doing. They just figured that was her business and her business alone. I got up and walked around the office a bit. I stopped in front of one of the desks that George said was Rita's. He said that, over there by the door, was where Rita would hang her coat and purse. Then, she was gone.

Rachel and I walked out of the front door and I turned to her and said that I had nothing. There wasn't that feeling that I usually got when I seemed to know something that I shouldn't know. I said that there wasn't that scent that, somehow, I knew I was supposed to follow. Rachel looked at me and said that she understood. She said it had been quite a while since I had done this kind of thing and that, maybe, I just needed to relax. Rachel suggested we go back inside and sit down for a while. She said no more talking and no more questions. I just needed to clear my mind and let things happen. We opened the door and stepped back in to see Trent and George grateful that we came back. The first chair I came to, I sat down and Rachel pulled up a chair next to me. I was sitting in Rita's chair. I was in front of Rita's computer. I looked over at the wall by the front door and there were Rita's coat and purse. They were just hanging there, but something was going on. They weren't there before. It was as if they were beckoning me to come over to them. I felt compelled to get up and go over to them. I got up and walked over to the rack, hesitated a little

bit, then turned and blindly walked out of the door. Rachel slowly got up, looked around and followed me out. George quietly followed her. Trent got on the phone and called the police.

When I got outside I turned around a few times and then started walking down one of the streets. In talking with Rachel later, she said that I started walking as if I had a purpose. I couldn't really attest to that. All I knew was that I was just walking down the street, looking at the trees and watching all the houses go by with, what I assumed were people inside carrying on their regular business. This went on for a few blocks and then I came to an intersection. I had my choice to go one of four ways. I chose the street to my left and continued on just following whatever seemed right at the moment. Unbeknownst to me, Rachel and George were not far behind following in my footsteps and keeping well out of the way. I was headed for the river. I could tell because that was where I lived and worked. I was somewhat familiar with going that direction. I came down this one street and was about to cross over to another when I stopped. Something told me I was close. As I stood there I looked up at the street sign that read "Redemption Alley". I had never seen that street before, but it called to me like Rita's coat and purse called to me from her desk. I turned and looked up the street, the alley as it was called. I knew that was where I was supposed to go, but I caught a glimpse of Rachel and George. I pointed and said to them that Rita was up there.

Just about that time Trent arrived in a police car. He was accompanied by Captain Nolan and one of his

deputies. They got out of the car and Rachel and George pointed up the street and said that was where they would find Rita. I chimed in and said that Rita was at the top of the hill. Captain Nolan and the deputy responded that there was only one house at the top of the hill. Their reports indicated that the house had been converted into a church, but that not much had changed other than that. Captain Nolan and the deputy got back in their car and drove up the hill leaving Trent, George, Rachel and I waiting at the bottom of "Redemption Alley".

Arriving at the front of the church, Captain Nolan and the deputy walked up the steps and knocked on the front door. The door slowly opened and out stepped Matthew. They all introduced themselves and exchanged the usual pleasantries. Matthew wanted to know what would bring the police to his church? The officers responded that there was a report of a missing woman named Rita having being seen there. Matthew assured them that there was no woman there and that they were welcome to come inside and look around. Matthew escorted them inside and they sat down at the front of the church to talk. Captain Nolan gave Mathew a full description, including the name of the missing woman. He said they were looking for Rita. Once again, Matthew reiterated that there was no woman in the house, especially someone named Rita. He said there was only one other person in the house and he was downstairs recovering from a debilitating illness and should not be disturbed. Captain Nolan looked around and could see that his deputy was busy checking the place out. He was about ready to open the door to the downstairs when Matthew objected. So instead, the deputy flipped around and changed his

direction to go upstairs. Once again Matthew objected and asked to see their search warrant. Of course there was none, so Captain Nolan and the deputy decided they had better leave. They thanked Matthew for his time and got up to leave. Matthew walked them over to the door and escorted them out. Walking down the steps, the deputy turned around to see Matthew looking suspiciously out the window at them.

As they got back in their car, the deputy said that he thought that Matthew was acting overly nervous. He said it was the way he objected to letting them look around the place after saying that they could come in and do so. The way he watched them as they left. It just seemed like he was trying to hide something. Captain Nolan agreed but said that Matthew was correct. They had no search warrant, Rita did not appear to be present and that was just the way it was. They arrived down at the bottom of “Redemption Alley” and met up with those of us who were impatiently awaiting their return. Upon hearing their story, I felt like the bottom kind of fell out of my credibility. Trent and George looked at each other as if they had been conned. Rachel was not about to be that easily dismissed and neither was I. I asked the officers if they were able to look anywhere outside of the house? They said they hadn’t, as I had told them that Rita was inside of the house. I turned around and said that I had never said that Rita was inside the house. Trent, George and Rachel all agreed. I told them that all I said was that she was at the top of the hill.

Where this impulse came from I didn’t know, but I told them that in my mind I could see that there was this

overgrown backyard of dead vines and weeds. Over in the corner of the backyard there was this large oak tree. The deputy responded that he did, in fact, notice that there was this very large oak towering over the corner of the backyard. I continued and said that, next to that oak tree was a gravestone that was pretty much hidden from view due to the dead vines and weeds. Turning to Captain Nolan and the deputy I said, that is where you will find Rita.

Captain Nolan turned to the deputy looking for his opinion as to what to do. The deputy said that, given the suspicions he had about the conversation they just had with Matthew and hearing a very detailed description of where Rita was from someone who had not even been to the property, he was inclined to believe that they needed to go back up there. Captain Nolan concurred and they got back in the car to pay Matthew another visit. Once again, Trent, George, Rachel and I waited down below.

Captain Nolan decided to park the car half way up the hill and walk the rest of the way. They didn't want to be noticed. As they approached the church they identified the large oak tree growing in the backyard. There were two people heading into the backyard from the house. Quietly making their way around the house and into the backyard, the officers saw that the two individuals were standing underneath the oak tree, doing something to the ground. The two individuals cleared away some of the debris and the officers could see that, in fact, there was a headstone marking an assumed grave.

Captain Nolan and the deputy decided to make their move. Drawing their weapons, they approached the two

individuals and yelled to have them put their hands up. Matthew and Larry did as they were commanded to do and the deputy moved up, cuffed their hands behind their back and sat them down on their knees. Captain Nolan walked up and looked over to where the two were working. Next to the headstone marking the assumed grave, was another, more freshly dug grave. Captain Nolan presumed that was where Rita was, just as I had described. They would have to wait for confirmation, but Captain Nolan was convinced. The deputy stood up both Matthew and Larry, read them their rights and told them that they were being arrested for Rita's murder. Matthew and Larry were walked down the hill a ways and placed in the backseat of the patrol car. Captain Nolan and the deputy got in and drove the rest of the way to the bottom of "Redemption Alley". When they got to the bottom they slowed down and came to a stop. Captain Nolan rolled down his window and said that they were on their way back to the station for booking and, he was sorry, but we would all have to walk our way back to The Newsroom. We watched as they slowly drove away, two individuals clearly visible through the window in the backseat.

EPILOGUE

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was a long walk back to The Newsroom for the four of us. We took a few stops for breaks, but we didn't do a whole lot of talking. I think we were all a little shell shocked, not quite sure of what had just happened. At one point Rachel stopped, turned and wanted to know where Rita was? The three of us looked at each other indecisively, not sure how to respond to her. We admitted that we had not seen any sign of Rita. Rachel seemed very concerned. I knew I needed to say something more to Rachel and I remembered a conversation I had with myself a long time ago. It had to do with this so-called ability I had of being able to find people who went missing. I turned to Rachel and said that my being able to locate missing people usually resulted in happy endings. The person being looked for having been found successfully. I held Rachel in my arms and confessed, that may not always be the case. I said to her that in this case, I didn't have a very good feeling about the outcome. We didn't have an answer about Rita and that weighed heavily on our minds, but we eventually retraced our steps back to The Newsroom. Going inside we each found our special spot to plop ourselves down. Trent was at his desk when he got a call from Captain Nolan who said he was on his way over to fill in some details for us. It wasn't long before we heard a car

pull into the driveway, a door slam and Captain Nolan walk inside the door.

Captain Nolan said that they had completed their first interrogation of the two suspects. Trent, George, Rachel and I looked at each other and wondered what Captain Nolan meant by suspects? We knew damn well of course that suspects implied a crime. We just didn't know what the extent of the crime was. Captain Nolan said they had questioned the two, Matthew and Larry, in separate rooms and it appeared that their stories matched almost identically. Captain Nolan could tell that we were more interested in whether they had found Rita. He skipped the rest of his spiel about the suspects and went straight to it. He said that they were pretty sure that Rita's body lay in a small, shallow grave in the backyard, next to the big oak tree. He looked at me and said, exactly as you had said. Trent slammed his fist against the desk in angst. George laid his head, face down, upon the table. Rachel looked at me questionably and I nodded my head back at Rachel. We had our answer. Rita did not survive.

Captain Nolan had more to say about the suspects. He said that both Matthew and Larry confessed to having buried Rita in the backyard. Interestingly enough, they both adamantly refused confessing to having killed her. They said that Rita was impregnated by Matthew and from all indications, she was having a miscarriage. She was in a lot of pain, having severe contractions and loosing some blood. Then, she started loosing a lot of blood. Larry said that it was his turn to watch her for the night while Matthew rested. Larry said that when he woke up in the morning,

Rita wasn't moving. Rita wasn't breathing. Larry went downstairs and got Matthew and they both confirmed that she was in fact dead. Matthew and Larry both said that they didn't know what to do, but, eventually, decided to try and hide her death. So they, in the dark of night, carried her cold body out to the backyard and placed her in a prepared grave next to the one that was already there. They thought that by doing so, others would think that there had been two graves there all along.

Captain Nolan said he had one more point to make and he wanted to make it very clear. Both Matthew and Larry said that they had tried everything they could to save Rita's life. They had called the hospital looking for help and had been turned away. Apparently, the hospital didn't want to take the risk of facing a lawsuit of illegally terminating a pregnancy. Matthew and Larry said that they had also called the Women's Health Clinic and were, once again turned away. Captain Nolan said that one made a little more sense. They had already been shut down, prevented by law from serving the community of River's Run any longer. Captain Nolan said the key take away was that, in all likelihood, Matthew and Larry did the best that they could under the circumstances. That was the reason why they refused to confess to murdering Rita.

Captain Nolan said, changing the subject a little, that this was going to be a big news story for River's Run. He wanted to make sure that we all knew what they were able to piece together but that he was in no way giving The Newsroom exclusive access to confidential information. In other words what Captain Nolan was saying was that his

conversation with us never happened. With that, Captain Nolan said he had to return to the police station and walked out the door.

Trent commented that he was pretty sure they were going to be hearing from The Newsroom owners when and if they published the story of Rita's demise. The last story they did that painted the hospital in a negative light got a lot of publicity and that press was not appreciated. The owners were quite upset and adamant that it should never happen again. Trent and George knew the real reason why the owners were so upset. They had been pressured by the Catholic hospital to stop smearing their name. Trent looked at George and said he didn't care anymore. The truth was going to be told and if there were consequences to be had, then so be it.

Later that evening Rachel and I were trying to settle down and process everything that had happened that day. It had been a very long last couple of days and we were both exhausted, depressed about Rita's fate. Rachel apologized to me for having ever brought me into it in the first place. I said to Rachel that what she did, what we all did, was the right thing to do. There were no apologies necessary. I told Rachel that what I was able to do, my ability if you will, always came with consequences. Some times those consequences were good and everything turned out for the better. Those times were celebrated. Rita was one of those times when things did not turn out so well. Rita would be missed immeasurably, but that should not be the end of trying.

When I was very young, I was told I had a gift. I felt special that I had such a gift, especially once I figured out what it was. Particularly when it was put to good use. Sometimes I wonder though, was it really a gift?