

The
Blessed
Winter

by
Cheryl Okimoto

The Shepherd Series:
Seasons of Change
A Gilded Sky
After the Storm
Always a Sunrise

The Blessed Winter

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Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

1 Peter 2:18-21

This book is dedicated to my faithful friends and readers – dare I say fans? It hasn't yet been two years since I first imagined a heroine who was an auto mechanic who hated to cook and a hero who was whiz in the kitchen but had no mechanical abilities. Without your encouragement, I would have been tempted to quit much more often than I was tempted. Thank you Gloria, Cari, Vickie, Carol, Ann, Sue, Barbara, Stacey, Abbi, Elton, Emi, Edward, Richard, Dorothy, Aileen and, of course, my wonderful husband Paul. Your eager anticipation of each book has sometimes been the light at the end of the tunnel for me. I hope you believe your faithfulness to my story has been rewarded.

I also want to acknowledge the readers who have begun the series but have not yet read all the books – you are too numerous to list. I hope you will stick with the story and be richly blessed.

This is the last book in a series of five. While each novel can theoretically be read as a stand alone book, you will enjoy them much more if you read them in order. If you haven't already done so, I strongly recommend you read *Seasons of Change*, *A Gilded Sky*, *After the Storm* and *Always a Sunrise* before reading this book.

Chapter 1

Abe Lawrence was awakened by a sound that he shouldn't be hearing in his home at one in the morning. He slipped quietly from his bed, drawing his service revolver from the holster that hung on his headboard. The room was cold but he didn't retrieve the robe that was draped over the chair by his closet. The cool air on his bare chest would drive away the last remnants of sleep before he confronted whatever was moving stealthily in his apartment.

He crept quietly down the hall, being much quieter than whoever was in his kitchen. He was tired enough that he couldn't figure out why he wasn't more worried about the noise. The past couple weeks had been very long. He hadn't slept well. Some nights he hadn't slept at all. Tonight he'd been in a deep sleep when the noise had pulled him up to semi-consciousness.

Abe shook his head, trying to clear the sleepiness, but it didn't help. Two feet before the wall opened up into the kitchen, he pressed his back against the cold plaster, shivering and trying to wake up. He was awake enough to confront whatever was in there but not alert enough to remember what he was forgetting.

His gun led the way as Abe pivoted smoothly and stood in the kitchen doorway, facing the noise. A large man turned then stepped back in alarm as he saw Abe lowering his gun.

Now I remember! Abe grunted in disbelief then grinned ruefully.

"If you're going to get up in the middle of the night you may as well wake me," Abe said with a wry grin, shaking his head slightly at his new housemate's wide-eyed shock. "I'm not gonna get used to someone sneaking around my home, so you're bound to get shot eventually if you don't wake me."

"I guess I'll remember that in the future," his friend said drolly.

Abe must be extremely tired to forget his houseguest. Though he'd only moved in today, Abe had known for three days that Greg Shepherd was going to be staying with him. If he was as alert as he should be, he would have immediately known the noise was Greg. On the other hand, he probably wouldn't have trusted it to be Greg until he saw his housemate with his own eyes. He would still have come in with the gun, but he wouldn't have trained it on his friend.

Abe felt a stab of envy for the big man, even though he knew it was strange to feel that way. Ten days ago, Greg had been abducted and tortured for the day and a half he'd been held captive. His arm was in a cast but the bruises were mostly gone and the wounds from the nails in his hands were now fresh scars. Unfortunately, Greg's mind still struggled with the memories of that day, especially since he didn't have very many memories from before. But he had a wife and a son whom he loved deeply, and they had another baby on the way. They were separated now because Greg was facing criminal charges in two separate cases in Missouri so he couldn't leave the state, but he'd insisted that his wife return to their home in Hawaii to finish her bachelor's degree in psychology. They would keep in touch by phone and e-mail, and Beth would return next month during the winter intercession.

Greg also had a large, loving family who were even now picking up the threads of their lives which they had quickly abandoned when Greg had been abducted. Now that the immediate crisis was over, they had all returned home, per Greg's orders. They wouldn't be back in St. Louis until they were able to change the weave of their lives without letting any of their other responsibilities slip, but they would be back to support Greg whenever he needed them.

Greg had troubles for sure, but he had blessings in abundance too.

Abe had hoped that by the time he hit thirty, he would have a wife, but he was pushing thirty-two and it still hadn't worked out for him. He now doubted that it ever would. The woman he still loved had turned her back on him and he didn't even know why. He also didn't have the peace that he saw in Greg, but that was one thing that he thought he could fix. He suspected Greg's peace came from the same source as the peace that Vince Cypriano, Abe's partner, faced life with.

At least for the foreseeable future Greg was staying with him. Abe hoped that his new friend would help him find his way to that peace. He wanted to understand the source of the cheerfulness Greg had shown all evening as he had begun his new life in St. Louis. Abe knew the loss of Greg's family hurt him deeply. After the plane had left with them this afternoon, Greg's loss had driven him to his knees with great heart-wrenching sobs. But even as Abe had watched helplessly, something had given Greg the strength to rise again. The pain wasn't gone, but it was no longer overwhelming.

Joy had shone from the big man again. It hadn't been a hollow shell of joy to disguise his pain from his friends. He'd been truly cheerful when they went to Miller's Rest for dinner with Vince and his fiancée, Dr. Trinidad Kerrigan. Back here at the apartment when Abe showed Greg to his room he had realized that Greg's cheerfulness was an honest choice to make the most of his situation rather than succumbing to his intense loneliness. Greg's joy dwelt side-by-side with his pain.

Greg stared steadily at Abe, wondering if he was supposed to tell his host why he was up in the middle of the night. It was a new thing for him, to wake

in a cold sweat from a nightmare with no one there to comfort him. For as long as he could remember, which was only about two weeks, there had always been someone there for him – his brother, his soon-to-be-father, his soon-to-be-brother or his wife. But he had sent them all back to their homes, back to their lives. He hoped that eventually they would be able to rearrange their lives to visit him occasionally, at least until he got to go home himself, but he was alone for now.

He had to learn to live on his own, so when he'd awakened from the nightmare tonight, he'd laid in bed, trying to pray, to still his racing heart, to calm his rapid breathing. After almost thirty minutes with limited success, he'd gotten up and easily found the kitchen even without turning on the hall light.

He'd tried to be quiet as he searched the kitchen hoping to find things to make some decaf coffee or tea. Something hot to drink would be soothing but he didn't want to wake his host. Unfortunately, Abe had obviously been a police officer for too many years. The unfamiliar noises in the apartment he'd never shared with anyone must have awakened him immediately.

"Nightmare?" Abe asked.

"Yeah," Greg confessed with a sigh of relief. Abe understood. "I was hoping for something hot to drink."

"Coffee?"

"I don't want caffeine."

"I know. I've got both, regular and unleaded." Abe walked into the kitchen and laid his gun on the counter.

"Have you done this before?"

"You mean wake up with a nightmare or sit in my kitchen in the middle of the night drinking decaf coffee with another man and both of us are half-naked?"

"I assume the first would be more likely."

"You would assume right, since the other has never happened before. And let's not do it again. Next time, throw on a robe or a t-shirt. You're going to give me an inferiority complex."

"Don't bother," Greg looked down at his naked, well-muscled chest. "I asked Heather what I do for a living, why I'm built like a football player. She said it's because when I get stumped on understanding something, I always workout until I get it. I have a learning disability, so I get stumped a lot."

"Obviously a whole lot," Abe laughed. "Do you want instant or do you want to wait for the coffee to brew?"

"You have both of that too?" Greg was surprised.

"Sometimes the familiar ritual helps as much as the coffee itself."

"You have lots of nightmares?"

Abe pulled his drip coffeemaker out from the wall.

"The first was after my sister died ten years ago. Then shortly after I joined the force a punk high on ice pointed a gun in my face. Since then I've lost a

partner, been shot twice myself and seen things done to kids and women that no one needs to see.”

“Do the nightmares get better?”

“They do now, since I became Vince’s partner and he’s got me thinking about God. It helps to talk to God when I wake up.”

“Just thinking about God?” Greg asked as he sat at the table. Abe smiled when he heard the speculative tone of his friend’s question. He knew what Greg did for a living. He was a pastor.

“Just thinking.” Abe switched on the coffeemaker and turned to sit at the table too. “But in the past week or so, I’ve been thinking that I might want to do more than think.”

“That would be a really good idea,” Greg said with a small smile.

“I kind of thought you would think that.”

“Lots of thinking for a man of action. What made you think?”

“Meeting you. Hearing Vince’s arguments that you were a Christian even if you didn’t remember it. Seeing your family stand strong, support each other. Hearing Colonel Wolfe at church on Thursday.”

“Lots to think about. You still thinking?”

“Well, I think I’m ready for some action now. Thing is, Vince’s been working on me so long, I don’t know how to go to him and admit he was right.”

Greg suddenly looked surprised and laughed, very happily.

“What’s funny?”

“I just had a memory. Pete told me almost the same thing, but I was the one who’d done the work and Steve was the one he prayed with.”

While they waited on the coffee, Abe prayed with Greg. Then for almost two hours they drank coffee and talked about what it meant to be a Christian. A few hours after that they arose from an all too short sleep. They drained the pot of regular coffee Abe brewed with breakfast and stopped for more on their way to the station.

When Vince arrived, he immediately knew that something was different about Abe. He seemed happier, more relaxed. It didn’t take Vince long to figure out what the difference was. He was overjoyed, giving his partner a brief, brotherly hug even though more than half the other detectives were already in the squad room, watching them.

Vince and Abe had two purposes for bringing Greg in with them that day. The first and most obvious was because they were working on his case and he’d been released into their custody, but Greg was also hoping that he could meet with and apologize to the officers he had fought with almost two weeks ago.

Two of the officers were on duty that morning. Only one of them had been injured. Although this was one of the officers who had already dropped the charges, Greg was nervous. His mind was Swiss cheese but he knew that he’d never had to do anything like this before. Though most of the detectives

didn't understand his need to apologize for something they clearly thought wasn't his fault, he disagreed. Even though he'd been given a drug that causes aggression, he was still responsible for his actions. The only thing that made sense to him or his brothers was that he really did believe that someone was attacking the woman who was screaming about rape.

Greg didn't want this apology to be public, but not because he was ashamed to ask for forgiveness. He'd never had a problem doing that when he knew he was wrong. He wanted this to be private because he didn't want people to think he was trying to gain sympathy and support. He honestly just wanted to be forgiven by the people whom he had sinned against. In fact, he was willing to serve time in jail if that was God's will.

Trinidad had offered the use of her office. She and Vince both waited with Greg while Abe went to talk to the uniformed officers to see if they would be willing to talk to Greg before they went out on patrol. Abe called Trinidad and told her that they were a little leery, but willing. Greg was a very big, very strong man and they weren't one hundred percent convinced that he wasn't dangerous. Vince knew that by the time this interview was over, they would be.

When Abe opened the door, Greg turned from the window he'd been staring out of. A tall young man in uniform stepped into the room, followed by his partner who seemed to hang behind him. Greg suddenly felt lightheaded.

The woman was barely bigger than Rachel, Colonel Wolfe's daughter who would soon be his sister. He could clearly see the still red scar on her jaw line. The look in her eyes was way too close to fear, a wary stare that told him she was ready to pull at least her nightstick if not her gun.

Greg had never considered the possibility that any of the officers had been women. He knew that women made up a good portion of the force, though it was nowhere near fifty percent. He should have known that if he'd fought with ten officers, the odds were great that one or more had been women.

As he faced the small woman with the wary eyes, Greg was deeply shocked and ashamed. He slumped back against the window and stared at the woman, then he turned to Vince.

"How many?" he asked with anguished eyes.

"Three," Vince didn't need to ask for clarification because he'd suspected this was coming. He'd talked to Greg's brother Luke about it. "She's the only one who had to go to the hospital. One of the other ones was the one who gave you that crack on the back of your head."

"Wait a minute!" The woman stepped past her partner and glared at Greg with her hands on her hips. "Are you more upset about the fact that you assaulted police officers or that some of us were women?"

Greg stared at her sadly. He couldn't voice his answer but before he dropped his head the woman was surprised to see anguish that went deep into his soul.

“You think we need to be protected or something?” she sneered angrily. “That we’re not as good at the job as a man? What chauvinistic bull!”

“No,” Greg said sharply and jerked his head up in surprise. “You don’t understand. It’s not that at all.”

“Then what is it?” she glared.

“My father taught me that women deserve my respect because they have to fight so hard to get by in the world,” Greg said with simple sincerity. “It was clear from the day I was born that I was going to be very big. Dad always taught me that there were plenty of men who would use their superior size and strength to intimidate women but I better not be one of them. I should be one who stood in the gap for women. I need to help them find room to grow and achieve whatever they dream about doing.”

Greg stood to emphasize his size, but he bowed his head.

“He also taught me to respect authority, so I am doubly appalled that I violated two of the most important principles my father ever taught me. I deeply respect both of you for the work you do to protect the people of St. Louis. I am ashamed that I fought you. I ask for your forgiveness.”

The two officers looked at each other in surprise. The woman sighed and stepped over to Greg, extending her hand.

“I forgive you and I hope I never have to face someone like you again,” she said.

Her partner stepped up beside her and offered his hand as soon as she dropped Greg’s hand.

“I’ll second Brewer,” he said. “I’ve thought about that night and reviewed the tapes from the car cams. It’s pretty clear to me that you thought you were defending that woman, Jasmine Garcia. And right after you decked Brewer, you got confused like you didn’t know who you were defending anymore. That’s when Rice was able to get in there and give you a solid hit.”

“I agree with Maloney,” Brewer said. “You didn’t intentionally violate either of those principles that are so important to you.”

“Do you really think that makes a difference?” Greg asked them with a troubled frown.

They exchanged a look again then Brewer spoke for them. “It makes a big difference to us. We see lots people who are ready, even eager, to not only disrespect women and the authorities but to also hurt children even though they’re in full possession of their faculties. And they never show any remorse. So yeah, it does make a difference.”

Brewer and Maloney talked for only a few minutes more before they left, but Greg had gained two advocates. They promised to talk to the other officers, assuring Greg that they would eventually convince all of them to talk to him so he could personally apologize.

Chapter 2

On Wednesday morning, Abe was awakened by a call just after three. Last month he and Vince had drawn a rape case. This one was virtually identical, so they were being called in on it.

Abe hated the call for a number of reasons. First, he hated all rape calls. The only thing that kept him going was that he knew his and Vince's compassion helped alleviate some of the victim's pain and humiliation in the post-rape pursuit of justice. It was necessary, but that didn't make it less hurtful for the victims.

There was also the idea of a serial rapist loose in St. Louis. Most rapes were rather easily solved if they were reported right away. There would be plenty of evidence and they would have the guy within days. This guy had eluded them for almost a month already. The only evidence they had was DNA from the semen. It was only going to help once they caught the guy, but they had no leads, not even a tenuous thread. The woman hadn't seen him well enough to identify him. All she could say was that he was probably white and he was average, medium height, medium build, neither very young nor very old.

Abe's personal problems only added to his professional concerns this morning. He wasn't ready to deal with this. He had slept poorly that night. He'd been in bed by eleven but he hadn't slept. A thousand thoughts had skittered around in his head. The woman he still loved. His brother in prison. His bitter parents. His dead sister. How did his new life in Christ change how he looked at all those things? How would he deal with them now? Then there was his new housemate. Abe had never met someone quite like Greg Shepherd before.

He detected that Greg had faced troubles well before his abduction and abuse. He'd lost both his parents, his mother while he was still young, his father only a few years ago. Both had endured lingering illness before they died and Greg had watched them suffer. He'd also seen his brother Luke cope with a gunshot wound when he was a police officer, then his sister Heather had twice struggled to recover from similar but even more debilitating wounds. First she'd been shot over in Iraq when her convoy was ambushed by snipers, then she was shot when she'd foiled a school shooting three years later. Just last spring, Greg had received painful injuries when an SUV had run a red light and hit his motorcycle.

Now the Shepherd family wasn't just dealing with Greg's legal issues, but they were also backing Greg's nine year old niece Kara as she fought leukemia.

These were good people. They served the Lord, just like their parents had. Why did God allow them to suffer so much? Why did they remain faithful through so much suffering? Why were they not bitter like his parents were?

Abe's sister Catherine had committed suicide ten years ago and his brother Kevin had been in prison for over a year now. Both had been the engineers of their own destiny but their fates still colored his parents' outlook on life. That was why Abe didn't visit them anymore. Their anger and bitterness were both irrational and infectious.

Last but not least of his worries was Belinda Carson. She'd dumped him almost two years ago, but he still carried a torch for her. It was as if she'd taken all the joy from his life when she'd left with no explanation. He lived with the pain every day and everyone pretty much knew that he wasn't a happy man.

Greg had experienced deeper pain and suffering than Abe had ever known, then he'd been betrayed by his own mind through no fault of his own. Yet he lived with a deep abiding joy. Abe knew Greg suffered every day, both physically and emotionally, but the suffering never killed his joy. It occasionally muted it for a while, but the joy always bounced back, and it did so very quickly. How did Greg do it? Abe knew it had to do with allowing Jesus to be Lord of his life, but he didn't understand *how* Greg did it.

Those were the thoughts he'd been struggling with last night when he'd heard the soft moans from Greg's room. The big man was having a nightmare. There was no need to let it go on since Abe was still awake.

Abe threw on his robe and knocked softly on Greg's door before opening it.

"Greg, it's okay," Abe said softly, calmly as he cautiously approached the bed. Hopefully Greg would calm without waking. "You're not in the basement anymore. You're visiting me for a while, Greg. I'm Abe, Abe Lawrence. You're my houseguest."

Greg's thrashing calmed and he groaned.

"Houseguest? I thought I was your prisoner," he croaked through dry lips.

"Come on, Greg, don't hurt my feelings." Abe sat on the foot of Greg's bed. "Maybe officially you're in my custody, but you're my friend. You're my guest."

"Don't wanna be your guest." Greg sat up carefully, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "Rather be your brother."

"I'm not sure about that," Abe said cautiously even though his heart cried a happy *yes*.

"Why not?" Abe could see Greg's frown in the darkened room.

"First off, I've seen the way you treat your brothers!"

"But they always start it," Greg smiled slyly.

"Oh sure," Abe rolled his eyes. "I shoulda detected that!"

"So what's second?"

“Does there need to be?”

“When there’s a first, there’s always a second.”

“Second,” Abe sighed heavily, “if you’re my brother, Heather’s my sister!”

“Good point!” Greg laughed. It was a genuine laugh, but still a little shaky.

“How about a cup of coffee?”

“What time is it?”

“Just before one.”

“So it’s too early to call Beth. I’ll interrupt her evening rituals. Yeah, I’ll take that coffee. Decaf.”

“But of course.” Abe stood, ready to give Greg a hand if he needed one. When Greg swayed slightly after he was upright, Abe quickly stepped closer. Greg rested his right hand on Abe’s shoulder then closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths before smiling sadly at Abe.

“Can’t believe how weak I still am.”

“I can’t believe how strong you already are,” Abe said sincerely. Greg looked at him in surprise. “A week ago you were dying, Greg. I think it’d be reasonable to expect you to be much weaker still.”

“I was?” Greg frowned then shook his head. “I wasn’t dying.”

“Yes, you were,” Abe said firmly. “You weren’t interested in where Beth or Danny were when they weren’t with you.”

Greg’s eyes opened wide as he thought about that. He sighed heavily. “I think I really need that coffee.”

Abe sat down at the table with Greg while they waited for the coffee to brew. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Other than the one you just asked?” Greg smiled slightly.

“Yeah, other than that one,” Abe shook his head. “That pretty much illustrates my question.”

“I’m clueless, brah,” Greg frowned.

“Where do you get the strength to virtually rise from the dead? How do you keep your sense of humor?”

“Since you’re my brother I’ll point out that you asked two questions but you only requested permission to ask one,” Greg smiled slyly.

“Since you’re my brother I understand that you’re messing with me,” Abe snorted softly, “so I’m not going to get offended. I’ll just wait until you decide to answer both my questions.”

“They’re really the same question so I shouldn’t mess with you.”

“You’re right. You shouldn’t, but I guess you just can’t resist,” Abe grinned. “From what Luke says, you’ve been like that pretty much your whole life.”

“Which is good to know.” Greg looked over at the coffee pot. It was gurgling the last few drops into the carafe. “How about you pour while I start answering those questions?”

As Abe got mugs out of the cabinet, Greg started talking. “You’ll understand this a whole lot better than you would’ve two days ago because it has to do with knowing Jesus as your savior. It’s really a matter of learning about God so you can see yourself as he does.”

“Okay,” Abe carried the mugs to the table, “I understand *what* you’re saying, but I don’t understand *how*.”

“Well, the first thing you have to do,” Greg took a grateful sip from his mug, “is put yourself in a position to learn. You have a bible?”

“Vince gave me one a few years back when I first started occasionally going to church with him. I appreciate the gift much more now than I did then.”

“You need to read that bible and study it. You can do it on your own if you want, but it’s way better if you have someone to help you learn how to study it. It’s not just any old book that you can pick up and memorize, you have to process it properly.”

“I suppose that’s why you’re my houseguest for now.”

“I suppose you’re right on that,” Greg nodded. “It’s at least one of the reasons why I’m here.”

“So you’ll teach me how to read the bible right?” Abe mused more than asked. “When do we start?”

“I could say no time like the present, but that would be corny beyond belief.” Greg stared thoughtfully into his mug. “This really isn’t a good time. Reading the bible at night for comfort is one thing, but trying to study it?” Greg shook his head. “No, you need to be at your best when you study the bible, especially when you first start. And I need to be a whole lot sharper than I am right now to teach you.”

“I think my questions were ‘where do you get your strength’ and ‘how do you keep your sense of humor,’ so the way I’m understanding your answer is that it’s going to take time and hard work on my part.”

“You understand correctly,” Greg nodded. “With so little knowledge about God, it won’t help you in any practical way if I tell you that I know God has a plan for my life and that he has never asked me to go somewhere he hasn’t already gone. Because I trust him with the very essence of my being, I can be what he intended me to be. That’s a joyful, slightly crazy man who easily sees the humor in life.”

“What if God didn’t create me to be as joyful as you?”

“He did brah, guaranz ballbaranz!” Greg stared at him intently. “The joy comes from knowing the I AM! *Everyone* gets that. We just express it differently.”

“But what if I don’t know what the me I was created to be looks like?”

“No worries,” Greg shrugged, “the more you learn about God, the more you’ll learn about yourself too. You’ll never be just like me, but you’ll learn to be like God intended you to be, at least most of the time. And in that way, you will be like me.”

“I think I can handle that,” Abe grinned. “I know I couldn’t handle being crazy.”

“Hah!” Greg rolled his eyes. “You mean crazier!”

“Whatever makes you feel better about yourself,” Abe heaved a long-suffering sigh.

“Shall we polish off that pot of coffee, oh most sane one,” Greg smiled and rose to get the pot, “while you tell me about the concerns that led you to start this conversation?”

“You shouldn’t study the bible in the wee hours of the morning but you can bare your soul?” Abe looked up at Greg as he refilled their cups.

“Absolutely!” Greg rinsed the now empty pot before he sat down again. “When you’re studying the Word, you need to be sharp and focused. That same sharp focus often puts a brake on your words when you’re baring your soul. We’ll both hear your words tonight, honest words virtually unfettered by your intellect. We’ll process them later. You’ll be surprised by how much you learn through the simple act of telling the story.”

“My sister died ten years ago,” Abe said abruptly. “She committed suicide. She was a college sophomore in Columbia. We didn’t know until after she was dead that she’d started doing drugs. Her boyfriend broke up with her the afternoon that she killed herself. That night she got high, parked her car on an overpass and jumped into the path of a semi.”

Greg stared at Abe in shock. “I see why you want to know about getting strength and keeping a sense of humor, but I don’t understand how I’m any help to you. I’ve never had to deal with anything that bad.”

“But what you have had to deal with doesn’t make sense. Catherine’s suicide actually does.” Abe leaned toward Greg, resting his forearms on the table. “See, my parents thumbed their noses at the faith of their parents and decided to be atheists and anarchists. Whatever you want to do is okay as long as you don’t hurt someone else. My sister’s suicide was a product of a life lived without God. The world revolved around her because that’s how Mom and Dad raised her. When someone wanted out of her orbit before she was ready to let them go, she couldn’t handle it. She chose her fate, a fate that makes sense when you know how she lived. But the things that’ve happened to you and your family, they don’t make sense. You all have always lived a mostly good life, dedicated to God. How can you have to deal with gunshots and abductions and torture and cancer? What’s the benefit to being a Christian if through no fault of your own you go through all these bad things?”

“Bad things do happen to good people,” Greg nodded slowly. “They even happened to the God-person, the Son of God. He suffered but he never did anything to deserve it. That assures us that while suffering is a bad experience, it’s not necessarily a bad thing because good can come from it.”

“That almost makes sense,” Abe said in surprise. “You mean that your time in the basement was not a bad thing because Jasmine Garcia met Jesus in that basement.”

“That’s right. The experience was something that still gives me nightmares, but good did come of it. The other thing we have to remember is that as a Christian, our suffering brings us into closer fellowship with God. Peter and John rejoiced when they got beaten for sharing the Gospel. They saw it as sharing in the suffering of their savior. And in Romans Paul tells us that suffering brings perseverance which brings character which brings hope. If suffering leads to hope, doesn’t that make it good?”

“That makes sense except for one thing,” Abe frowned thoughtfully. “Not all suffering leads to hope. My parents have been suffering for at least ten years and they just get more bitter and hopeless.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Because they don’t know Jesus?”

“In his first letter, Peter talks quite a bit about how it’s good to suffer when you haven’t done wrong but no real benefit to suffering when you’ve messed up. There’s a very real blessing when you suffer through no fault of your own, but when you’ve earned the suffering, it’s just taking the consequences for your actions.”

“I’ll have to think about that some, but I think I kind of understand it,” Abe nodded thoughtfully. “One more question, then I’m hitting the sack.”

“Shoot,” Greg drained the last of his coffee.

“What we just did wasn’t studying the bible?”

“No way,” Greg gave Abe a tired grin. “I just told you what I remembered. Studying is when you get the bible out and see if I was right. It’s digging deeper to see what else the bible says about suffering.”

“That seems interesting,” Abe stood. “How about tonight after dinner?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Greg stood too. Abe took both coffee mugs to the sink. “Right now I’m going to borrow your phone to call and see if my wife will talk to me, then I’m going back to sleep.”

“Sleep well for what remains of the night.” Abe turned off the light as they left the kitchen.

“You too.” Greg waved tiredly as he disappeared into his room.

Abe had fallen asleep within minutes of his head hitting the pillow, but it had been barely over two hours before his phone was ringing, calling him to an early day. Abe left a note for Greg then slipped quietly out of the apartment. As he had headed over to pick up Vince, he wondered if God was giving him a practical lesson to go with that bible study he was going to do tonight.

Chapter 3

Abe and Greg didn't get to their bible study until Saturday night. It turned out to be one of those weeks when all the crazies came out. Abe had never believed that the full moon really had an effect on the insanity of mankind, and this week proved his disbelief. The new moon was on Sunday so if the full moon theory was valid, they should have had a respite from lunacy. Instead they had a steady stream of bizarre cases. The blessing in it was that, except for the rape case on Wednesday morning, everything else was relatively easily solved and arrests made. But Abe was home late each night and out the door early in the morning. By Friday evening he was dog-tired. He returned home early enough to have dinner, but he knew he was much too tired to study the bible.

As Abe drove into the parking lot of his apartment complex, he was surprised to see Greg sitting on the front steps of his building.

"I'm going to guess that you locked yourself out," Abe shook his head as he approached.

"You would guess correctly." Greg stood and turned to follow Abe.

"Good thing I came home when I did."

Greg merely grunted. Abe dropped his hand from the door and turned to frown at his friend.

"How long've you been waiting?"

"A while."

"How long a while?"

"Don' wear a watch brah," Greg shrugged.

"Why didn't you get a neighbor to at least let you into the building?"

"Did, but wanted to see the stars come out."

"So you sat out here in the cold?"

"Gotta get used to it," the shrug again.

"Why didn't you call?"

"No phone," Greg frowned. "Can we go ahead and go in? You can continue your inquisition upstairs. It is rather cold."

Abe turned back to the door, shaking his head. He was getting a deeper understanding of Greg's family's almost perpetual frustration. Either the man

didn't think about his own needs or he simply refused to talk about them. Abe certainly would continue his questioning once they were in his apartment.

"Why don't you have a phone?" Abe asked as he slipped out of his coat.

"Feds have it. Evidence."

"Why didn't you get another one?"

"Don't really know how." Greg hung his jacket up next to Abe's coat.

"How? What do you mean?"

"Unfamiliar with the area." Greg dropped down onto the couch. "No wheels to get anywhere. Don't even remember how I got the other one."

"We can take care of that tomorrow morning," Abe frowned, moving on to another topic he should have asked about earlier. "What've you been doing with yourself the last few days?"

"I've been out and about," Greg said rather evasively.

Abe growled in frustration. "Where's 'out and about'? You have no wheels."

"Walking."

"Where did you walk to?"

"Dunno."

Abe wondered if this was how it felt to raise a teenager. Maybe he needed to apologize to his parents.

"You were there. How do you not know?"

"I can get there, but I couldn't tell you place names or streets," Greg sighed. "Aren't you hungry?"

"You're not distracting me yet, Greg," Abe said sternly. "Are you telling me you've been wandering around lost without a phone?"

"Not lost." Greg's frown looked suspiciously like a pout. "I'm here."

Abe stood over Greg with his arms crossed. He knew something about interrogations. It was time to apply some of those techniques. "Tell me what you did on Wednesday."

"I'm not a child you know," Greg frowned. "Or are you interrogating your prisoner?"

"My friend, Greg." Abe refused to be hurt by Greg's accusation. He was indeed interrogating his friend, besides he knew it wasn't personal. Luke had warned him that Greg sometimes acted without really thinking about his choices. He hated to be asked about things that he suspected might have been foolish choices on his part. "A friend whom I detect has needs he hasn't shared with me. You talk so I can figure out your needs and help meet them."

Greg sighed. "Wednesday. Got up. Saw your note. Made some coffee. Went for a walk."

"And?"

"Just wandered around, watching people, seeing if anything was interesting, going wherever."

"Did you see any street signs?"

“Saw plenty,” Greg said derisively, “but didn’t read any.”

“Why not?”

“Still too hard to read,” Greg sighed.

“Will you remember the streets if you know them?” Abe asked, dropping down into the armchair.

“Prob’ly,” Greg frowned thoughtfully. “Other than when I was drugged by Manly, the only thing I’ve had real trouble holding onto since the incident is what I read.”

“I wonder why.”

“I think it’s because of a learning disability.”

“Please ask the doctor about it when you see him next.”

“I can do that,” Greg gave a relieved sigh.

“Speaking of the doctor, didn’t you have appointments yesterday?” Greg nodded. “How’d you get there?”

“Walked.”

“Walked? The hospital’s over four miles from here!”

“No wonder I walked the kinks out,” Greg muttered dryly.

“Why didn’t you call a taxi from my land line?”

Greg shrugged. “I told you exercising helps me think. With a broken arm I can’t do much of anything but walk.”

“But four miles there and four miles back?”

“So it took me an hour to get there,” Greg shrugged again. “I woulda been walking anyway.”

“I guess you’re right about that.” Greg sighed with relief. “Back to that walk on Wednesday.”

Greg scowled at Abe. Obviously he’d thought he was off the hook. Not yet he wasn’t. “Since you’re going to walk, ask someone to read the street signs to you when you get into unfamiliar territory, okay. Most people are friendlier than we give them credit for, as long as you don’t walk up to a gang.”

“I can do that too!” Greg looked surprised. How had he gotten so bad at problem solving?

“How long did you wander during your walk?” Before Greg could give his evasive ‘no watch’ answer, Abe amended his question. “How far across the sky did the sun travel before you headed home?”

“Almost to the horizon that I now know is the western one.” Greg was getting that mulish look. He obviously suspected Abe wasn’t going to like where this conversation seemed to be headed.

“How did you get home?”

“Walked.”

“How long did it take you to get home?”

“The kitchen clock said it was nine.”

“You walked for twelve hours?” Abe was shocked.

“Didn’t walk the whole time. I met a really nice priest in a Catholic church, Father Ramon, and in the afternoon I stopped for about an hour at a pink diner and talked to the waitresses, Lisa, Anyssa and Hazel.”

“Where are these places?”

“Can’t tell you, but I can find ’em again.”

“Okay,” Abe looked thoughtfully at Greg. “One last point of concern before we adjourn to the kitchen for dinner. Sunset was before four, which means you walked for at least four hours after you headed home. Since you walked the four miles to the hospital in an hour, that means you walked sixteen miles to get back home. Were you wandering around or were you that far out?”

“I guess I wandered around,” Greg confessed.

“Why didn’t you grab a taxi to get home when it got so late? I know you know the address here.”

“Yeah, I know the address,” Greg sighed, “but no cash.”

“There are ATMs all over the place! Why didn’t you get cash? I know you have a bank card. I also know it wasn’t evidence because Manly never touched it since you left it in your hotel room before you went to Grant’s place.”

“I tried,” Greg sighed, “but couldn’t remember the PIN.”

“So you’ve been wandering around St. Louis with no phone and no money?” Abe tried to keep his voice calm.

“I used the Visa to eat when I wanted to,” Greg said defensively. “I do remember how to sign my own name.”

“There is that!” Abe shook his head. “Tomorrow we get you a cell phone. Tonight, you call Beth on my phone and get your PIN.”

“Yes sir!” Greg grinned hopefully. “We pau now?”

“You hungry?” Abe stood.

“You got any Spam?” Greg stood too.

“Spam? Why would I have Spam?” Abe shuddered in disgust.

“No way brah!” Greg stared at him in shock. “You no like Spam?”

“Are you talking about that meat-like substance that comes in a can?”

“Of course! Spam da bess!” Greg sighed. “At least I’m pretty sure it is, but I haven’t had any here in Missouri, so I’m not so sure.”

“Well, there’s none in my kitchen. What else you want?”

“Whatevers brah,” Greg shrugged.

“I’m big on frozen food and box mixes.” Abe opened his cupboard. “How about some macaroni and cheese?”

“Try wait,” Greg frowned, “you won’t eat a meat-like substance but you will eat a cheese-like substance?”

“You have a point,” Abe grinned. “You share my cheese-like substance tonight and we’ll go to the grocery store tomorrow. Then I’ll share your meat-like substance too.”

“You got a deal!”