

The Judge and Jury

by
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Prologue

The hill had been there long before the barn but to the people who lived in the area it seemed that the two were one. Indeed, the large barn had been there over a hundred years now and it seemed that it would be there a hundred more. The barn looked up at the hill on one side and on the other ran a small stream that trickled in a larger riverbed. The hill was just large enough to be seen above the buildings in town and was well known throughout the area.

The barn was faded red with a whitewashed foundation and a bit larger than average. It had seen floods, tornadoes, and hailstorms and although the forest fire that burned through the area in the late 50's never came closer than a mile, people would always say it survived that as well.

Inside on the largest pillar against the north wall, near the stairs to the loft, there are painted and carved various lines and dates. The lines marked the water levels of various floods and the dates were the years that corresponded to those lines. Richard Johnson would always point out with pride the line marked in 1892, the first time the barn saw water which was marked by his great-grandfather. It made him feel sort of connected with his past in some way and he kept up the tradition until 1969. That was the year that the dams were put in place and since the downstream dam was finished first and the state was just a bit new at operating it the floods that year were the worst ever. The 1969 flood was a full six feet above the floor of the barn's main level and the highest it had ever been. His father lost all his horses that year and vowed never to use the lower level to house livestock again.

The dams have been perfected since, and that was the last year the area flooded. Now the once lazy river is just a bubbling stream and people are even building houses along its course again.

Even older than the barn was the monument at the top of the hill. Nobody knows who put it there or why, but it seemed that whoever put it there intended it to last forever. It looked as if it were carved out of the trunks of trees and two large men couldn't touch fingertips around it. It was a cross. Standing a full twenty-five feet high it could be seen towering above the treetops even where the hill couldn't be seen. There were no local legends to explain it and even Richard's great-grandfather never questioned it. It just always was.

The surface of the cross was charred black and hard as stone. Of course, anybody living nearby could tell you that during a thunderstorm the cross would get struck time and time again by lightning. Sometimes, as a kid, Richard would go up after a storm and the cross would seem to vibrate with life. He could almost smell the electricity.

It wasn't until 1972 when an arts instructor from the nearest university took a time-lapse photograph of the cross with several lightning strikes that the area became famous.

It was yet another photographer who mentioned to Richard that if the barn had a big stage, the hill would make a perfect set of bleachers. Richard's father had died some years before and since he didn't like farming as much as his father did, Richard was always looking for something else to do. He didn't waste any time.

He cut the side out of the barn and extended the floor and it did indeed make a great stage. He wired it, lighted it, and even made an access road with a loading dock at the back. Underneath in the same stalls that held cattle and horses he made dressing rooms and storage areas. He left the loft untouched and old saddles and blankets still lay on the floor along with other equipment of days gone by. On the other side of the hill he smoothed his fields and made a large campground. The whole town was behind him, it badly needed a new source of revenue.

It wasn't long before the site became a normal stop on many unknown country singers' tours. Once or twice a summer a two or three day concert would be staged and the hill would be covered with thousands of people and the town shook with the echo from the amplifiers. The campground was noisy with children and the shops downtown would fill with people looking for batteries, bread, and other supplies. Most shops survived on the summer months alone.

It was a few years later that a famous promoter saw the site and was impressed by the cross. He brought in Roy Clark, who was on a gospel tour, and then the throngs followed. The hill, now known as Christian Rock, was the place to play if you were a Christian band. The area became host to several festivals, fairs, and concerts with Christian themes.

Richard was now comfortable that he had given up farming for good and signs directing people to Christian Rock and the formerly unknown town were now all over the state.

But that was well over twenty years ago, now, and the excitement has faded. What the area needed now was a second discovery to boost its reputation and cement its place in the music world. The barn was faded once again and road had grass growing on it. Richard's income was now solely based on the campground and the one or two large festivals that still came back faithfully every year. It was enough for him and his young daughter to survive on after his wife died, but the town was looking to him once again to bring in a big name...

I

The car pulled up to the hardware store and bumped against the log that marked the end of the parking space. It was old enough to be out of style but not so old as to be noticed yet but was still rust free due to the loving care of the owner, who had bought it brand new ten years earlier.

Stephen Pike got out and brushed some crumbs off his blue overalls. He looked at the sky and wondered if the rain had finally stopped but it still hung heavy with deep bluish gray clouds. The air was fresh and clear and seemed washed by the rain, which still dripped from the trees and lamp posts.

Even though the store wasn't opened yet the front door was unlocked and it squeaked as it closed.

"Morning, Stephen." said the old man behind the counter. Like many men in the area his name was John. "Mrs. Coleman's water heater came in late yesterday, it's already on the truck."

"Good." said Stephen. He was about twenty-six, largish, tallish, and as polite as any grandmother could hope for. He was considered cute but shy by the locals and kept mostly to himself. He had lived in the town his whole life and like most other town folk had become a sort of fixture.

"And don't bother her about the bill," John added. "I'm taking care of this one."

"Your heart is going to drive you out of business." John knew that Stephen wouldn't bother her about any bill unless she offered and he would accept far less than the job was worth. He smiled as he gave him the work order.

"You'd better stop by Richard's place first. He said he needed some work to get the barn up to snuff for the big festival. Something electrical."

"I'll come back for the heater."

Stephen was a licensed electrician and plumber and when he wasn't being a handy-man for most of the retirees in the area he would work with some of the general contractors in neighboring cities.

He didn't need much to live on and even though he had a good reputation he never charged much for his services as a handy-man. He loved working for the old folks and it was their company that brought about his kind and polite manner. They also enjoyed his company as well and sometimes just invited him over for pie.

Stephen walked back out to his car and looked towards the hill.

This was a small town with just a few two-story buildings making up the downtown section followed by a bunch of houses. The two main routes crossed at a blinking red light and between the cafe and supermarket across the street Stephen could see the cross.

He drove up there slowly, taking in the fresh morning air and the quiet of the countryside. The sun poked through the clouds for a moment and it seemed like the whole world was glistening.

Richard was already working on the barn when Stephen pulled up. Richard was tall and lanky, in his early forties, and had just a touch of gray already showing in his hair.

"Stephen, glad you could make it," he said in his slow drawl.

"No problem. What's up?"

"It's this new promoter. They're bringing in state of the art equipment and lots of it. I'm told my power supply is inadequate for their stuff and was hoping you could tell me what they want. They sent me some specs." Together they walked to his pick-up and Richard pulled out a much-folded letter.

"Maybe you could know what they're talking about."

Stephen looked at the letter and shook his head. "No problem. This really isn't anything. I could have it done in a day. What's the gig, anyway? I hear it's four days this time."

Richard looked at Stephen. "It's called the 'Praise unto the Lord Festival' and it runs from Thursday to Sunday. They have their own set up crew and everything. It's big, really big. Over three thousand people."

Stephen was really impressed. He looked at the hill towering over the barn and tried to imagine three thousand people sitting on it. He knew to the town it meant three thousand customers who needed food, lodging, motor oil, and whatever else for over four days. For some, it could mean half a year's income. But for Stephen it just meant a day's work and maybe more if he helped the set up crews. For the most part, though, he would sit in his house and wear headphones to try to drown out the thumping of the bass echoing off the hill. Crowds made him jittery and the crowds at the Christian concerts doubly so.

His train of thought was interrupted by a short squeal as a small car slammed on its brakes near the access road to the barn. It backed up a few feet and turned in. Richard and Stephen just watched as it struggled up the wet, puddled path and stopped right in front of them.

A young woman wearing a well-cut dress stepped out and Stephen was suddenly aware of the fact that he hadn't shaved that morning and how dirty his coveralls were. Her dark hair was a bit longer than shoulder-length and very curly and her pale skin seemed flawless. She looked as if she just stepped out of a JC Penny catalog.

Stephen thought she was gorgeous.

"Good morning," she said, "Do either of you know a Richard Johnson?"

"I'm Richard."

"Well, hello. I'm Cindy Bayler from Baytech."

Richard's face lit up. "Oh, yes. Of course. I was just giving the ol' barn the once over to see what it needs."

Cindy eyed the barn and the hill. She froze when she saw the cross. "That must be the cross I keep hearing about. It's, well, it's really something. I've never seen anything like it." She finally broke her gaze and looked at Stephen.

Stephen wanted desperately to look at her but was afraid if he did she'd think he was looking at her. "That's stupid," he said to himself. He tried to remember what he did with his hair that morning.

"This is Stephen, my electrician."

"Um, hello." he said, quickly eyeing the barn and then the cross to avoid her eyes. "I just got your sheet and was going over it with Richard."

"Sheet?"

"The sheet I was sent with the requirements for the equipment." put in Richard.

"Oh, yes. Well I don't see a problem. The stage is much bigger than I imagined. It really is a beautiful set-up. I sure hope the sun comes out soon." She paused and took in the site again. "This site is just perfect for concerts. Is everything up to snuff?"

It took a minute before Stephen realized she was talking to him. "Oh, sure. I'll put in some more outlets with their own, um, you know," he tried to motion with his hands while his brain was trying to remember what he was talking about. "Circuit breakers." he said with relief. "Yeah, circuit breakers and some wiring and it'll be just what you ask for." He looked back and forth between the others who seemed to be waiting for more.

"Um, I have to go. I've got to put in a water heater and then I can work out here this afternoon." Without waiting he waved and walked to his car.

When he pulled away Richard smiled a broad smile and lightly laughed. "You got to forgive poor Stephen." He said, shaking his head. "He really is the best around."

"Is he?"

"Oh, sure, he's just really shy." He chuckled again. "It's funny to see him all tongue-tied like that. He'll be alright once you get to know him." Richard held his arm out. "Why don't I give you the royal tour?" he said, and spent the rest of the morning touring his beloved hill.

Stephen rounded the corner onto the road and started to beat on his steering wheel.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid..." he mumbled. "I'll be alone for the rest of my life." He then tried to convince himself that he'd never stand a chance with a girl like that anyway, she probably thought him a country hick. He then tried to convince himself that he was good enough for anybody, he just needed some self-control around women. It didn't matter, he would never see her again, anyway.

He was many miles from town before he realized that he wasn't driving the truck with the water heater in it.

II

Mrs. Coleman ran one of the many bed and breakfasts that dotted the area. It was considered one of the better ones and she entertained about a dozen or so regulars yearly. During concerts and festivals she charged twice as much as normal to keep her income up. She did feel a bit guilty about it but chalked it up to necessity. She never had a problem guest but considered herself lucky--she knew what kinds of problems other inns had.

The house was large and very well kept. Although it looked like new it smelled of dust and mothballs and was furnished with the same furniture the house's first owner had used. Guests would always comment on the quality of her fine antiques but to her it was just furniture. As long as it served its purpose she'd keep it around.

No one really knew how old she was and no one tried to guess. She was short and fragile and sometimes looked older than she was, sometimes younger. That's what made her so hard to pin down. Sometimes she would busy herself in the kitchen or just sit by the fire, other times she'd be seen throwing a fifty-pound sack of seed over her shoulder or jumping over a fence. She was farm girl born and raised and it showed on occasion. There was still a lot of life left in her.

She didn't do much of that anymore, though, and could be seen rocking on her porch watching the sunset every night. Stephen always thought of her as the grandmother he never had and indeed even lived with her for several years when he was younger.

"Good morning, Stephen." Mrs. Coleman said, stepping down from the porch and eyeing the box in the back of the truck. "That's a pretty big box for you to handle all by yourself. Why don't I call John to come help you?"

"Don't do that," said Stephen, getting out of the truck, "It's not that heavy, really, and I have a dolly and a lift..."

"If you're sure..." she said, eyeing the box up and down. "Yep, that's the one I asked for. I drained the old one already."

"Mrs. Coleman, you didn't have to do that. I said that I'd take care of everything." He didn't like the thought of this sweet old lady mucking about in a dark basement not to mention the fact that she probably didn't do anything helpful anyway.

It took awhile but Stephen finally convinced Mrs. Coleman to busy herself elsewhere. He didn't mind her looking over his shoulders but not when messing with gas lines and water. Not to mention the precarious moments when he was yanking the old, very heavy heater up the stairs. By the time he was through he was sweating profusely and had black, greasy stains on his arms and shirt.

After wiping the sweat off of his forehead and realizing his hair stayed up without falling he decided to go home and shower before going back over to Richard's. What if that woman was still there? What was her name again?

He tried to remember her name as he double-checked the area around the heater to make sure everything was set and that he didn't forget anything. He also wondered where Mrs. Coleman had got to.

Well, it looks like I'm all set, Mrs. Coleman." he said loudly while climbing the stairs.

"All right, Stephen." he heard her say from outside.

Stepping outside through the open door it took a second before he saw her. His first impulse was to run back inside but it was too late, she was looking right at him.

"Oh, hello again." said Cindy.

"Hello, Stephen, this is Cindy. She'll be staying with me until the concert's over."

"It's still three weeks away." he said, almost as a protest, then wished he hadn't.

"Well, it's sort of a vacation for me. Anyway, where else do I have to go?"

Stephen just stood there, waiting for the ground to open up.

"And if I don't have hot water," she said teasingly, "I'll come looking for you."

Stephen just stood there bobbing his head up and down desperately trying to think of a witty reply. "Okay." he said, then mentally slapped his forehead.

Much to his relief Mrs. Coleman stepped forward at that moment and presented him with a check. "Now you tell John not to worry. I'm perfectly capable to pay in full. And here's a little something for you." She tucked a ten-dollar bill into his hand.

"Well, thank-you very much, Mrs. Coleman, but you really didn't have to." He knew it was useless to protest, so he just accepted it gracefully. "Well, I really have to go." Noisily, he practically threw the old water heater in the back of the truck, heedless of his tools or anything else that was back there.

Again, when he got on the road he hit the steering wheel. "Okay? That's all I could come up with was okay? Someday I'll meet someone after a fresh shower and shave."

Cindy and Mrs. Coleman stood on the porch and watched him pull out.

"There's really a lot more to him than meets the eye." said Mrs. Coleman in a gentle voice.

"Oh?"

"He'll open up, you'll see."

"Well, if I ever see him again..." she said, picking up her lone suitcase and walking into the house. She vaguely wondered if old Mrs. Coleman was going to try to play matchmaker.

But Mrs. Coleman already knew the answer to that.

III

Richard eyeballed Stephen as he walked up to the barn. Stephen was busy with pulling his toolbox out of the back of his car and smiled as he saw his old friend walk up.

"Did you take a shower?" Richard asked.

"Um, well, I got kinda dirty with the hot water heater."

"Are those new jeans?"

"Oh, yeah. I thought I'd break them in."

"Is that perfume I smell?" Richard smiled broadly.

"It's aftershave." It took Stephen a minute to catch the smile on Richard's face. He waved him off and hopped up on the stage. "This won't take long. I got the stuff I needed already and John said he'd put it on your account, I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. As long as you didn't charge those new shoes."

"Alright, alright."

If it were possible, Richard smiled even more broadly. It was all he could do to keep from laughing. "She left, I don't think we'll see her again."

Stephen cocked his head to one side. "What makes you think this has anything to do with her?"

Richard shook his head and let out a chuckle.

"Besides," said Stephen, "She didn't leave. She's staying at Mrs. Coleman's."

A crack of thunder interrupted Richard's next jibe. "Well, at any rate, let's put off the electrical work for now. That seemed pretty close."

Stephen agreed. After he unloaded the supplies he gave himself the rest of the day off to unwind and fell asleep early to the sound of the rain on his roof.

IV

When he arrived at Richard's the next morning the sun was still hiding behind heavy clouds. But the air was sweet and fresh and he could see a million insects dancing in the field around the barn. As he pulled in he noticed he wasn't alone, a VW van pulling what looked like another VW van pulled in behind him.

Stephen parked next to the barn and sat in his car eyeing the strangers. He wasn't in the mood for this and was relieved to see Richard and his daughter striding down the hill, their boots sticking in the mud that was forming on the side.

When they were close enough, Stephen got out and watched as Richard greeted what looked like a cross between two hippies and two yuppies. They were wearing polo shirts and khaki shorts which looked reasonable enough, but one was wearing square sunglasses and had his long hair pulled back into a pony tail and the other had on wrap-around sunglasses with a single slit for both eyes and was completely bald. The van itself was festooned with hippie flower stickers and had several overlapping coats of paint, not as a design or decoration, but it just looked as if it had been badly painted several times.

The trailer was better off as it looked well painted and shiny. It was the back end of a VW van, cut off behind the front seats and both sides had latches and hinges of different configurations but it was unclear what for.

"I'm Charlie Brownridge, but my friends call me Charlie Brown." The bald man said. He looked in his late 20's and was short and chunky.

"He's Chuck," the other man said. He, too, looked in his late 20's but was taller and thinner. "He's been trying to get people to call him Charlie Brown for years." They exchanged a squinty-eyed glance then he went on, "I'm Doug, but everyone calls me Scooby."

"He's been trying to get people to call him Scooby for months. Before that it was Shaggy." Again they exchanged the glances. It was apparent that it was some kind of shared joke between them.

Richard raised his eyebrows. "Well, I'm Richard and this is Stephen."

"Everyone calls me Stephen," he quipped as he shook hands.

"And this is little Becky." Becky, who was only five, shied behind her father.

"This is some place you have here," said Chuck. "Cindy wasn't kidding."

"And that must be that big cross." Doug said. "It really is impressive. Really."

"Why, thank-you."

Richard explained to Stephen while the two men hiked up the hill that they were roadies, according to Cindy. They wanted to set up the sound system and generally get things ready for the rest of the crew, who would arrive a few days before the actual concert. He had given them permission to camp right next to the barn for now but to move back to the camp ground as the concert grew near. Richard always felt he could trust the Christian roadies and Doug and Chuck proved to be just as kind and considerate as any, in spite of the way they looked.

The four men took the rest of the day planning the next three weeks and getting familiar with each other's equipment and set-up. The trailer, it turned out, was a sound booth. On the stage side the window section lifted up and on the rear the entire side opened upward. Inside there were soundboards, computers, and various other equipment used during the outdoor concerts. Being inside a body like that kept the whole setup protected from the weather and made it mobile to boot. It was also full of scaffolding that would hold the amplifiers when they arrived at which time, if all went well, all the wiring would be in place so the amps could go up and be tested the day before the concert.

While the men planned, Becky played by the creek that ran behind the barn, not thinking to mention to her father that the water was well over the banks and flowing through the tall grass.

V

Cindy walked out onto the front porch to catch the sunset she first saw through her window. The sun, setting behind storm clouds, cast brilliant rays over the woods and farmlands as far as the eye could see. After a moment she was startled by a creak on the porch next to her and was surprised to find Mrs. Coleman sitting on a weatherworn rocking chair on the corner of the porch.

"I'm sorry," Cindy said, "I didn't mean to intrude."

Mrs. Coleman smiled. "It's no intrusion, dear. I think that next to the sunrise, the sunset is one of God's greatest gifts. Have a seat."

Cindy sat on the porch swing that, too, was weatherworn but creaked only slightly with her weight. She noticed for the first time that Mrs. Coleman was holding a large, black bible on her lap.

She turned back towards the sunset. "This really is a spectacular view. You must have the highest house around."

"Yes," Mrs. Coleman said after a pause. She seemed in no hurry to speak. "I can remember when it was all forest. In the morning you should join me on the back porch. When the sun rises over the cross it'll make your heart stop."

"The cross?"

"You've seen it. By Richard's barn. It's been there as long I can remember."

Cindy looked at the brilliant red and orange colors, and took in the silence of the countryside. It had been a while since she was actually out of a city. On a whim she said, "Red sky at night, sailor's delight."

Mrs. Coleman chuckled quietly. "I hope so," She said, "It seems that it hasn't stopped raining in weeks. But that keeps the air fresh and the grass green. I'm afraid you're going to have a bit of a muddy concert if the sun doesn't dry the ground."

A thought struck Cindy. "Does it bother you, I mean, to hear the concerts at the barn? It seems so peaceful around here. I can't imagine loud music echoing through the hills right now."

"Oh, no. It doesn't bother anyone around here, I don't think. After all, you're spreading the word. It's a bit different than in my day but I guess the world changes. Besides, it's just right here. It's not so loud that I can't stand it but it's not so quiet that I can't hear the words. It's just right."

"It really is a beautiful sunset."

"It's more beautiful each and every night. And each and every morning."

"Do you watch them often?"

Mrs. Coleman smiled and was silent for a long time. As the last rays disappeared she stood up and brushed off her dress. As she looked down on Cindy she nodded. "I haven't missed one in sixty years." she said, then walked into the house.

Cindy sat there and watched the fireflies dance around the trees. "I believe her." she thought. "What a beautiful life."

VI

The next day Stephen actually unloaded his tools and started to work on the electrical system. He discussed things with Doug and each was impressed by the other's knowledge of all things technical. It took a while for Stephen to get used to Doug and Chuck and their constant bickering. It wasn't that they couldn't get along, it was just that they made a joke about everything and the bickering at least seemed to be good-natured. Well, most of the time.

By noon the two roadies, a name they seemed to enjoy, had the amplifier tower on one side of the barn assembled. It was clear that they had done this several times before and used shortcuts that Stephen would have never thought of.

The sun was actually shining but the mud was still glistening with moisture on the hill. The trailer was parked about a quarter of the way up, which made it just about level with the stage. It had built-in levels and jacks which impressed Stephen even more. He was clearly dealing with professionals.

Stephen heard them mention Cindy several times and it seemed they must have known her pretty well. He was dying to know more and kept his ears peeled as they talked. Around noon they sat on the stage and made sandwiches and Stephen saw his chance to strike up a conversation.

"So, how's it going?" he started.

"Well," said Chuck, rubbing his head, "for one thing it's really humid."

"But it's a dry humidity." Doug put in.

Stephen desperately wanted to sound cool in front of these two but had no idea how to follow their wisecracks.

"Did you get any sleep last night? I mean with the rain and all?"

"Oh, sure. It was the wolves that kept us up."

"Those weren't wolves," Doug shook his head, "They were cows."

"Then how do you explain all the chickens disappearing?"

"UFOs."

Stephen decided to just dive in. "So, do you guys work for Cindy? Or for the company or what?"

Doug was taking a bite of his sandwich but answered anyway. "We work for Cindy, kind of. We're not officially employees, but they pay us for using our equipment and stuff. Man, this bologna is soggy."

Chuck was fingering a piece of the round bologna. "Yeah, but it's cold." He slapped a piece on his head. "That's the ticket."

Doug lost it. He busted out laughing and Stephen started to, but tried to hold it back. Would Chuck be offended? Was he seriously putting bologna on his head?

"You're gonna have big round pale spot there by the end of the day."

"Yeah, but I'll also have a hot dinner."

When Chuck started laughing Stephen couldn't hold it in any more.

"We got through to him." Chuck said.

Stephen felt that honesty would work best in this situation. "I just don't know what to think about you two."

"Then you'll be fine."

"Oookay." Stephen said, and decided to change the subject again. "So, all this is your equipment? Pretty impressive."

"Thank-you. We've put our lives into it. We really love doing this." It was the first serious thing Doug had said all day.

"Yeah," said Chuck, peeling the meat off of his head, "and the bands are great, the fans are great. Plus we're doing our part. It's a great feeling."

"Doing your part?"

"Yeah, you know, spreading the gospel. That's short for 'good word'" Stephen gave a mental sigh, he forgot these were Christian roadies. "When the speakers give testimonials or the bands finish playing and there is an invitation given, well, I'm not ashamed to say it sometimes brings tears to my eyes."

"Not unlike this lunch." Doug smiled. "No, really, he's right. We had a little hand in a lot of great moments. Just like you. You take care of this barn and it takes care of people's souls."

"I'm just making a living." Stephen said. "Richard is an old friend of mine, and if this were a heavy metal concert or a Christian concert, I'd be here just the same."

Doug and Chuck exchanged glances. Here it comes, thought Stephen.

Chuck looked up to Stephen, "Do you believe in God?" he asked.

Stephen thought about all the other Christian concerts that he had seen over the years and realized that this was the first time he had been asked this question directly. Oh, he had heard it a thousand times from the stage, but never one-on-one. Instead of feeling the personal touch Chuck tried to convey, he felt defensive. He didn't want religion crammed down his throat.

"I, I just have trouble believing in God, any god." He looked up the hill at the cross trying to avoid their faces. "To be honest," he said, not believing that he would go this far with strangers, "I think that religion is just mankind's way of dealing with death. Without it, we'd all be afraid to die."

He braced himself for the reply. This was where they were going to try to convince him otherwise, he'd seen it before. But all that came was, "Interesting point."

For a split second he thought he'd ruined their faith. Then Chuck took the slice of bologna that had previously occupied his head and threw it at the van. It stuck neatly to the side. "Here comes Cindy."

Stephen was so mesmerized by Chuck's shot he forgot to run to his car. She walked up in cut-off jeans and a t-shirt but still managed to look refined. "So, what are you all up to?" she asked as she approached.

Before anyone could say anything Stephen blurted out, "Oh, hello, I was just on my out to meet someone for lunch." He then took a hop off the stage right into a large patch of mud. Cindy jumped back and Stephen knew before he even landed that a mistake had been made. He watched in what seemed to be slow-motion as little dots of mud landed all over Cindy.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." He said, barely able to keep his jaw up. His face turned bright red.

Cindy looked down at herself and brushed some of the larger chunks off. "Oh, it's okay. I was just on my way back to the b-and-b anyway to change."

Stephen was still shaking his head. "I'm just so, so sorry. Really." He waited for the earth to turn to quicksand but the moment never came.

"Um, it's okay." Cindy said, checking out the damage. "It's just mud, it'll wash out."

"She was planning to wrestle in it, anyway." Chuck added.

"No, really, I'm sorry." Stephen's face was so red that it looked like it was going to pop.

"I'm fine." Cindy said, shrugging it off. She felt terrible that he felt so terrible.

"Well, okay, I, well, I have to go." He waved his hand in surrender and wandered off to his car. He pulled out and down the road as calmly as he could even though he wanted to spin his tires and scream at the top of his lungs.

Cindy smiled after him. "How cute."

"We can fix you up," Doug said, "just let us know."

"Yeah, he has to come back." Chuck said pointing to the spot Stephen landed. "He left his shoe."

VII

Things proceeded slowly for the next few days. Doug and Chuck assembled the second amp scaffold but the relentless rain returned and they ended up spending their days sitting on the stage watching lightning strike the cross over and over. They were amazed that all the stories they heard were true. It really was unreal the way the cross seemed to suck the lightning from the sky.

Cindy was just enjoying her first vacation in years. After visiting some garage sales and flea markets she settled in and did some reading and checking out the one local channel that would come in on the little black and white TV that was in her room. She shared some more moments with Mrs. Coleman, who seemed like everybody's

grandmother all rolled in to one. Even when the clouds hid the sky she could be found on her rocker watching the start or the end of each day and always with that large bible on her lap.

One evening, when the sun was peeking through the clouds Cindy found herself once more on the swing chatting with her. She found the courage to ask her about the bible.

"My grandmother gave this to me," she said slowly and softly. "It spent many years on a shelf, being used just enough to keep it from getting dusty. When my grandmother passed on, God rest her soul, I used it a little more. I used it a little more when my parents passed on, and it wasn't until my dear John passed on that I decided it was better to use it in the good times, and not just wait for the bad. I began reading it more and more." She paused to smile and Cindy could almost see all these memories passing before her eyes.

"When Stephen moved in I used to read it to him at least once a week, when he wasn't out being a boy. Heaven knows he never set foot in a church again."

Cindy looked at Mrs. Coleman. "I think you lost me."

"Oh, well, Stephen was just eleven years old when his parents died. It was Easter Sunday and his church was packed. His father was the pastor, you see. A fire had broken out in the church and it spread rather quickly. His father had gotten everyone in the chapel out and realized he couldn't find his wife, Stephen's mother. She was trapped in the nursery, which was in the basement. She had passed all the children out through a tiny window but couldn't fit through herself. They found them together, the only two who died in the fire. They were heroes but Stephen could never see that. All he knows is that a man of god died a horrible death, and that man was his father."

Again there was a long pause. "He lived with me for a number of years and was the most polite, kind, and caring person you could ever know. He moved out after he got his first job and now mostly just takes care of himself." She gave Cindy a sideways glance. "He does very well, and has been alone for a long time."

Again, Cindy watched the fireflies skip across the fields. It was getting quite dark. Mrs. Coleman stood and started towards the door. "So, getting back to the point, I used to make sure I peeked between the covers each and every day. But I'm getting old and it's getting harder to see the words on the fragile pages, but it still gives me comfort." She paused before she went through the door. "I guess I keep his word because he's always kept it. The Lord's been good to me, I've had a good life and it's the least I can do. And I'm glad to meet a young person such as yourself who's also keeping his word."

"Yeah, I guess."

Mrs. Coleman looked at her. "You don't seem too excited."

"It's just that sometimes I wonder what my motivation is. I mean, on one hand I'm doing what I think is right, on the other hand I'm making a lot of money for the corporation."

Cindy could see Mrs. Coleman tilting her head. "You see, the Christian concerts are just a division of a large entertainment conglomerate. My job is to make money for the corporation. I'm doing it to bring people the gospel, but then again I'm doing it to earn a living."

"That's quite a dilemma, dear. But how do you feel?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think as long as I see people coming forward...well, I'm thinking it's worth it. Then again, I feel offended by it."

"I'm reminded of something I read in the Bible. It was Jesus himself that said 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.' I know he was talking about conflicts with governments and the teachings of Christ, but in today's modern world it could apply to your company. It's one of those things that have a timelessness about them in the Bible."

Cindy looked into the darkness that covered the forests. "I guess that could apply."

"There's another passage," Mrs. Coleman said, continuing, "One that said 'If thine eyes offend thee, pluck them out.' Oh, that may not be quite right, but the gist is that if something is leading you away from Christ, then it is better to do without it."

"You're not making this easy." Cindy said, smiling. "I guess I better keep praying and thinking about it."

She pointed a finger at Cindy. "You keep promoting those concerts. You may not realize it, but I've seen many a person come forward at the barn. It's people like you that keep the word going. In this day and age it's a rare thing. However it is done." As she finally walked through the door she mumbled mostly to herself, "A very rare thing indeed."

VIII

Stephen didn't hear the phone ring the first time and wasn't sure he heard it the second. But by the third ring he was awake enough to realize what the noise was and answered it.

It was Mrs. Coleman.

"Yes, what I can I do for you?" he said, still trying to shake the dreams from his head.

"Well, Stephen, do you remember those twice baked potatoes you used to like?"

"Remember? I still try to make them, they never come close to yours."

"Well, I was making up a batch today and just couldn't stop. I made some pepper steak and corn on the cob, and well, I just didn't realize that I could never eat all of this. How would you like to come over for dinner, it's been a while."

Stephen's mouth was already watering. He could almost smell the cooking that he knew as a kid. It had been a long time since he sat down to dinner with the woman who took him in when his parents died. In his sleepy state memories started to drift into his consciousness.

"Just try to stop me."

"Dinner will be ready in an hour. I'll see you then."

Stephen said good-bye and hung up the phone. He lay back to his nap and started to imagine the taste that he tried so hard to duplicate, but never could. In his daydream he imagined Cindy drifting into the picture then sat up, in shock.

He had been conned.

IX

Stephen pulled up to the house with his lights off and came in through the kitchen door. He took a deep breath when he saw that the table was indeed set for three and told himself that it was just a normal dinner with Mrs. Coleman and her guest. He would not be shy, he would not embarrass himself.

He nearly jumped when Mrs. Coleman came through the door.

"Stephen, coming in through the kitchen?" she said with a smile. "What on earth for?"

"I always come in this way."

"No you don't."

Cindy walked passed the kitchen door and seemed surprised to see Stephen there. "Oh, hello." she said, then added, "Nice shoes."

It was the second pair he bought in as many days. He should have just acted cool and pulled his shoe out of the mud when he had the chance.

Even though they had met Mrs. Coleman made proper introductions. She kept asking questions, trying to get Stephen to loosen up and was not making much headway until Cindy, knowing full well what Mrs. Coleman was up to, started in as well.

Eventually a conversation did start up as Stephen impressed Cindy with his knowledge of the kitchen and not only the dishes he could make but how he experimented as well.

"Well, so far there's no complaints on the water." Cindy said.

It took Stephen a minute to realize what she was talking about. "Oh, so it's good and hot, is it?"

"So far."

For an awkward moment they just stood there.

"Supper is on." Mrs. Coleman chimed in, to the relief of both of them.

They sat down and Stephen asked Cindy how her stay was and other safe questions. Eventually he asked her just what she did for Baytech.

"I just take care of business." She replied. "Check out the talent, coordinate equipment, make sure the checks get out. Mostly leg work and checking off lists."

"That Doug and Chuck are quite the pair. Where'd you dig them up?"

Cindy smiled and chuckled at the mention of their names. "They are quite a pair, aren't they? We've known each other for years. They could make a fortune doing what they're doing for big names, but this is the path they've chosen. Personally, I think they should become comedians."

The Doug and Chuck stories lasted well into dessert and all were smiling and laughing the whole time. Stephen even forgot to be shy.

"So, enough about them," Cindy said, sampling the apple betty Mrs. Coleman set out. "Tell me about yourself." The smile almost faded from Stephen's face but he forced it to return. The expression was not lost on Cindy, however, and she remembered the tragedy of his childhood.

"There's not much to tell, really. I just do what I do and everything works out."

"It seems so peaceful here." said Cindy, anxious to change the subject. "I was even pulled over and instead of doing background checks or running my license the officer chatted about the concert and just asked me keep my speed down. In Chicago or Detroit they just write a ticket, or just charge the fine on the spot. Thank goodness they take credit cards."

Stephen smiled. "Sounds like you're an expert on getting pulled over."

"Weeell..." Cindy looked down. "I know not whether laws be right or whether laws be wrong."

Stephen's jaw dropped, but he managed to say, "All that we know, who lie in Gaol, is that the wall is strong."

Cindy cocked her head and lowered her voice. "And that each day is like a year, a year whose days are long."

Not believing what he just heard, Stephen stared for a moment. "Oscar Wilde. I didn't think anyone read Oscar Wilde but me."

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"Oh," Mrs. Coleman said, "Stephen has that poem practically memorized. In fact, he has a rare first run copy bound in leather. It's the prize of his collection, if it's the one I'm thinking of."

"Your collection?"

"I sort of collect books. I do have a few rare ones."

Mrs. Coleman shook her head. "Sort of collect books? My word, he bought a three-bedroom house and made two bedrooms into one library. Floor to ceiling. With glass doors and antique accents. You really should see it."

"I'd love to. I'd love to see that copy of 'Reading Gaol' you mentioned. I have most of his works myself."

"Well, it's nothing, really. Most of it's just, you know, books. Sometimes during the winter work gets kind of slow and I like to read."

Mrs. Coleman stood up and started to collect some of the empty dishes.

"So, what do you read?" Cindy said leaning forward, and with that the conversation turned to more familiar ground for Stephen and they talked well into the night without even realizing that Mrs. Coleman had left.

X

The house looked normal enough as Cindy pulled up to it. It sat on its own on the side of one of the main roads in the area. It was the kind of house you'd pass without ever noticing it. But when she walked in...

"My goodness," she said after the hellos, "Just how much money do you make?" Cindy composed herself a bit and smiled at Stephen. She knew it was an effort for him just to have a guest in the first place. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't ask a question like that. But just look at this house."

The house was sparsely furnished but what furniture was there was top of the line. A large archway lead to the library which had another large archway halfway through that. Stephen explained that those were the two rooms Mrs. Coleman had mentioned and the arches were where the walls had been knocked out. The bookcases were dark mahogany and were as dark as the fancy trim that adorned the ceiling and walls. In the center was a huge, beige table with several chairs around it.

"Yes, it's from a library in Chicago." Stephen confirmed. "I got it at an auction. I did all this work myself." He walked her under the arch to the second room. Hidden by the arch from the first section was another bookcase with glass doors covering the books. Like the rest of the library it was fancy enough for a queen.

"This is my antique collection. It's hermetically sealed to keep them safe and dry."

Cindy just couldn't believe it. There were thousands of books around her. Everything from encyclopedias to romance novels.

"This looks like the library in my home town." Cindy said, still wide-eyed and reading titles. "You really did all this yourself?"

"Yeah." Stephen said, trying to not start bragging. "When my parents passed away the house and land were sold and the money put in a trust. When I was 18 I bought this house with money left over, which I just saved. Little by little I kept adding on until,

well, until this. It's just me so it's not like I need much to live on. And it's nice to get away every once in a while and read a good classic."

"Which, I see are hermetically sealed." Cindy said, peering through the glass.

"Well, I did that on sort of a whim one weekend when I had a lot of time on my hands. A customer returned a roll of magnetic tape, like what's on a refrigerator, to John's store and he let me have it. So I sealed the cracks, tiled it, added a vacuum pump, and viola, an air tight cabinet. It's really too much for what I have in there but I get crazy sometimes." He reached up and pulled on the door. It took a second but it opened with the same sound as a jar of peanuts but with a much mustier smell. Once opened he pulled out an old, worn leather bound book and handed it to Cindy. "The Ballad of Reading Goal, signed by the author." He opened it up to the faded signature.

Cindy stared at it. "This must be worth a fortune." She carefully flipped through some of the pages.

"Well, it only cost about six hundred dollars. It's worth about eight or nine."

Cindy carefully set the book down where it had been and another caught her eye. It was a largish book that looked as if it had been burned. "What is that one?" she asked.

Stephen paused. "Well, that's my father's bible. I found it after his church burned down. He and my mother passed away in that fire. It's one of the few things I have left of his. Most of our stuff was sold at auction when the house was sold. I sometimes wish I could go back and stop them, but I was just a kid. I guess no one thought that I'd want some of those things when I got older."

After a moment Cindy said, "Mrs. Coleman mentioned the fire. It must have been hard on you."

"Well, things happen I guess. I just hope that he found the afterlife he was looking for."

Cindy never quite heard anyone put it that way before. "Found the afterlife he was looking for? What do you mean?"

"You know, all that religious stuff. He believed that there was one true god and that god loved everyone. And when you die you go to a place where you are just so happy that you forget about everything else. You know, he was a devout Christian."

"Forgive me for saying this, but you sound like you don't believe in Him."

"Well, it's just hard for me to believe that a caring and loving god would let..." he stopped himself, then recomposed his thoughts. "Would let a thing like that happen. My dad helped a lot of people. He ran homeless shelters, gave money away..."

"And he was also your father."

"Yeah, well, he was a good father, too. So why would a man who did so much good in his life die so young and so...horribly."

Cindy knew she opened up an old wound with Stephen. She saw that he not only missed his parents but felt bad for all the people they were helping as well. How unselfish,

how understanding. She wondered how such a kind, intelligent person could see all the good in father's life, but not see how God knew it was his time to go. She put her arm around him. "Don't blame God for your father's death. Surely you know that his plan is much bigger than two people's lives?"

Stephen looked down at his feet. "I don't blame God for my father's or my mother's death." he said calmly and quietly. "I just, I just," he forced a badly formed smile. "I think we should just change the subject. That was many years ago."

"Yeah, I think you're right." They stood there for a moment until Stephen realized he wanted to kiss her. They were so close and so personal at that moment he felt as if she had crossed a bridge into a very personal part of his life, and that maybe she actually cared about him. Instead, he composed himself and walked out of the room.

"You'll like the kitchen," he said as cheerfully as he could manage. "I think I have every gadget from the Home Shopping Club."

Cindy finished her visit and excused herself after a glass of milk and some of the best homemade cookies she ever tasted. Stephen smiled as she left and for the first time in his life felt like he handled himself like a man in front of company. Not that he ever had any.

Feeling tired he went to his bedroom and could hardly open the door. He had spent all night cleaning and his room was where all the junk went. Thunder shook the house as he dozed off but the steady rain lulled him into a quiet, easy sleep.

XI

"You should have seen it," Cindy said, swinging her feet over the edge of the stage. "He had everything. And I mean everything. One whole wall was nothing but encyclopedias. Old ones. He showed me an entry in one where vitamins were thought to have no nutritional value. There were books with gold in the cover and he has a signed copy of an old Oscar Wild ballad and one signed by Edgar Allen Poe..."

"Didn't he write for Scooby-Doo?" Doug chimed in.

"Sounds like you're impressed with the man's stuff," Chuck said from his perch on some half-completed scaffolding. "Now how about the man?"

Cindy smiled and stared up at the cross. "Well, you know. He's kind of quiet and shy. Except when you talk books with him. And he is cute, you know."

"There's something you should know." Doug said. "I think he's a bit of an atheist. He did mention the other day about religion being man's way of coping with death. Didn't sound kosher with me."

"Well, I don't think he's so much an atheist as just, well, just being mad about losing his parents. It was really sad. With his most valuable books, the really cherished ones, he had his father's bible. I think that spoke volumes, no pun intended. I think it's

ironic that Mrs. Coleman cherishes her bible and reads it every night and Stephen cherishes his bible but keeps it locked up and closed. I wish he'd open it every once in a while." She paused. "You know, I think I'd like to ask him out to dinner." She grinned.

As if by cue both Chuck and Doug started with "Cindy's got a boyfriend, Cindy's got a boyfriend..."

"Oh, cut it out."

"You know what I think," Doug said, "I think we wasted another whole day just hanging around."

"Well," said Chuck, laying back on the damp stage and looking at the gray sky, "sometimes you work, sometimes you hang out."

XII

Stephen spent the day just hanging out as well. He called John to confirm that there was nothing pressing and then sat in his big easy chair, his reading chair, and thumbed the old bible. The pages were fragile, the cover was burned, and after all these years it still smelled like smoke. He hated it when the past cropped up like this, consuming his day.

He wondered if Cindy had never come to town would he be holding this bible right now. Of course not, he thought. He hadn't held it in years. She had said that Mrs. Coleman told her about the fire. For a moment he smiled. They were talking about him, which was good sign.

Well, that was a foolish thought, why would a girl like Cindy, who was perfect in every way as far as he could tell, be interested in him?

Stephen carefully put the bible back on the shelf and ran the vacuum pump until he heard it labor just a bit. It was just a book, he told himself, a book full of advice and old stories. He took a deep breath and sat back down. Something was suddenly missing in his life and he felt terribly lonely.

XIII

Stephen pulled up to the barn and saw to his surprise Chuck and Doug sprawled out on the stage, only half covered by sleeping bags and blankets.

"Er, good morning." He said as he approached.

"I'm awake." Doug said, sitting up. "Just thinking about my van."

"Oh, good grief." Said Chuck, still prone, "I think he's going to paint it again."

Stephen leaned against the stage. “Did you guys really sleep on the stage last night? Isn’t it kinda, you know, hard?”

“The hardest part was this dream I had.” Chuck said, still failing to sit up. “I dreamt that I woke up and there was this huge crowd on the hill and they wanted me to give this great speech. So I stood up and suddenly realized I was naked. So, I didn’t know if I should cover myself with the speech and talk like an idiot, or read the speech and sound great but look like an idiot. And then, when I woke up, my pillow was gone.”

“I think you got your dream jokes mixed up. Besides, I was laying on it. This stage is hard.” Doug blinked at Stephen. “And what brings you out?”

“Well, Richard asked me to check over the bleachers to see if any need replacing. Not that there’s many to begin with.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve seen all the groups that are coming. The crowd will be on its feet the whole time.”

“Amen.”

“Well,” Stephen said smiling, “In that case the bleachers will keep the crowd from sliding into the stage. If we don’t get some sun soon this will be known as...well, as a big muddy concert.” He wished he could have thought of something just a bit wittier.

“Don’t worry, whatever happens, Cindy will put a spin on it. She’ll call it the Christian Mud Revival or something. That’s why she gets the big bucks.”

Chuck moaned. “Mmmmmm, The Praise Unto Mud Festival. No, The Mudfest Rockin’ Somethin’.”

“Make a Mudful Noise Unto the Lord Festival.”

They all were silent for a moment. Then Chuck got up as far as his elbows. “You know, I’ve been praying about this and I think everything’s going to be alright.”

Stephen raised his eyebrows.

“No, really. I have a good feeling about this. God has something special planned. I don’t know what, but it’s going to surprise us all.”

Doug smiled. “Well, my birthday is coming up.”

Nodding his head and laying back down Chuck muttered, “You just wait and see. Just wait and see...”

Just then a pickup pulled off the road and Stephen was quite surprised to see Mrs. Coleman riding with Richard and his daughter.

After Richard introduced her to the roadies she took a few steps back to admire the whole setting. Chuck and Doug had completely changed personalities and stood quietly as she turned back towards the stage.

“This must really be a big one.” She said, looking at the scaffolding. “Are those for the amplifiers? Oh, my.”

Richard handed Doug a folder. “Cindy asked me to give these to you. It’s the lineup, I guess, and other things. She tried to explain how you program the mixing board for the different groups but I just didn’t follow. In my day, you played an acoustic guitar and just sang at the top of your lungs.”

Mrs. Coleman nodded. “I remember those days. I also remember getting postcards for reservations, now I just get e-mail. Anyway, Richard told me what a wonderful job you boys are doing and I thought you’d like some good old-fashioned cooking for a reward. So tell me, are you the meatloaf and potato types, or would you like fettuccini with stir-fry?”

“You really don’t have to...”

“Meatloaf.”

Doug looked at Chuck then nodded. “Okay, meatloaf.”

Mrs. Coleman’s face lit up. “Oh good, because I already have the bread dough rising. I expect you to be there, too.” She added, pointing at Richard and Stephen. “We’ll break out the fine china and make an evening of it.”

Richard and Stephen nodded at each other. They knew it’d be just like Thanksgiving, except with meatloaf.

XIV

Stephen arrived a little early and this time came in through the front door. To his surprise he found everyone already there and on the back porch with Mrs. Coleman discussing her long history of watching the beginning and end of each day. Once again the clouds made the sunset spectacular with hues of red, orange, pink, and purple fading into the blue-black clouds. Cindy, who was sharing the swing with Richard and little Becky, was the only one who noticed Stephen standing behind the screen door and smiled at him. He smiled back and looked back towards the sunset, which now seemed pale in comparison.

It wasn’t until Chuck and Doug started swatting mosquitoes that Mrs. Coleman got up and ushered them all in.

“Well, hello, Stephen.” She said politely, “Glad you could make it. Even I thought it was truly special tonight.”

Stephen glanced at Cindy. “Yeah, it was.”

“Mrs. Coleman, I got to tell ya, you did way too much work here. We really appreciate what you’ve done.” Doug said, being a perfect gentleman, which was hard for Stephen and Richard to fathom, but for Cindy was a side of the roadies that she knew well.

There were so many smells in the air that it didn’t take long for the table to be surrounded by the guests but even then everyone sat quietly for a moment.

“I’ll do the honors.” Richard said, bowing his head and taking Becky’s hand. “Father, we thank you for the plentiful gifts you have placed before us, the gifts of new friends, old friends, family, and for the love we all share. May it forever be shared with you, for yours is the greatest love of all. In your name we pray, Amen.”

“Thank-you, Richard,” said Mrs. Coleman, “And now I believe the only thing left to say is, dig in.”

Stephen, who was probably the most comfortable sitting at the table he grew up at, started the dishes around, passing them to Cindy, who sat next to him, before he took any himself. The table held more food than anyone thought they could eat and Mrs. Coleman assured everyone that as host of a bed and breakfast she was quite used to cooking for large numbers. Chuck and Doug kept the conversation lively and for the first time in his life, Stephen ate with strangers and did not feel uncomfortable. Well, not that these were total strangers, but growing up in this house he had many a meal with unknown guests and he always felt shy and in the way. He actually felt he was among peers this time. That is, until Mrs. Coleman brought up the subject of the upcoming concert.

“I used to go down to the hill if one of my favorites were playing.” She said, reminiscing of past concerts. “I went down one night after a few bands had finished because I heard the most beautiful piano music. A woman was playing for a few fans while the crew were wrapping things up. Turned out to be Amy Grant. Course, nobody knew her back then but I did get a tape and a few pictures. I seemed to have lost them now that she’s famous, but it was the music I remember the most.”

“Um, I sort of have them.” Stephen admitted. “They got mixed in with some of my pictures and I just sort of thought that since I had every one of her tapes the pictures would make a nice addition to the collection. I’m sorry, I didn’t know you wanted them.”

Richard leaned down and smiled at Becky and almost whispered, “Remind me to call the piano tuners tomorrow.” He gave her wink and she started giggling.

Mrs. Coleman smiled at Becky. “Well, as long as I know they’re safe.”

Cindy gave a sideways glance at Stephen. “You have all of Amy Grant’s tapes?”

“Well, there’s this big Christian book store down south of here and they sometimes set up a booth by the campground. And, well, I pick up some now and again.”

“But I thought...” Cindy stopped, suddenly feeling embarrassed at bringing up a private matter in front of everyone there. “Oh, never mind.” Her face was turning red. Stephen just smiled and for an awkward moment chewed some meatloaf.

“I’m just a fan.” He said simply. “Have you ever met her? I mean in your travels setting up concerts and all?”

This took the conversation in a new direction and everyone enjoyed themselves until long after the once piping hot food was cold.

Finally dessert was served and Chuck and Doug insisted on helping with the clean up. Richard excused himself to take Becky off to bed and Stephen and Cindy ended up on the back porch.

“It’s full moon.” Cindy said, gazing at the world around her. “I never realized the moon could light up the countryside so brightly. It’s almost like day. Guess I’ve been in the big city too long.”

“I remember as a kid, when the moon was full, I would walk along that path down along that line of trees,” he pointed, “and there the river flows over rocks into a small pool and even though I’d seen it a thousand times it always seemed magical in the moonlight. Of course, time marches on and the rocks are dry now and the pool is sort of murky and Mrs. Coleman built a gazebo for her guests there so it’s not quite the same.”

They were quiet for a long moment and just as Stephen was going to sit on the swing Cindy said, “Show me.”

For a moment Stephen panicked. “Well, since they dammed the river it’s really not the same.”

“But I bet it’s still magical.” She said, holding out her hand.

He looked at her hand and took a deep breath. “Um, okay.” And together they walked into the night.

XV

Inside the house Chuck was washing dishes with Mrs. Coleman while Doug was wiping up the table. “You know, Mrs. C, there’s this Christian magazine called Stone that would probably just love to do a story on you. No, really. I know the editor and he would love it.”

“Oh, what’s so impressive about an innkeeper? You two are the real heroes. You’re out there everyday working for Christ. And I actually mean working. I’ve kept quiet all these years and just did a bit here and there. It’s the doers in this world that I’ve always admired.”

Chuck looked down and gave a wry smile to Mrs. Coleman. “Well, they actually did do a few stories on us.” Then he became serious again. “No, really. You and your story of watching the sunset and reading the bible, that could really inspire a lot of people. Please at least consider it.”

Doug walked in and shook some crumbs into the wastebasket. “While we’re on the subject, do you mind if I ask a personal question?”

“No, go right on ahead.”

“Well, you seem to be so wrapped up in Christ. I mean, you seem to be a true believer and I can really feel his presence in this house. And you raised Steve when his parents died...”

“Stephen, dear. He hates to be called Steve.”

Doug nodded and continued. "His dad was a preacher. And he seems to be friends with Richard, who also seems to be close to the word. I know about the fire and all, Cindy told us, but I just can't help to wonder why Stephen is so...so..."

"So much a non-believer?"

"Yeah, to put it mildly. He told us that he thought religion was man's invention."

"And he's right. There are many religions in the world. I consider myself a believer in Christ, and the crucifixion, and the resurrection. I follow his word as best as I'm able, but I don't consider myself religious. I think Christian is a more proper term."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I agree completely."

"Me, too." Chimed in Chuck.

"But I'm just wondering how someone who grew up with such loving people could, well, could not at least feel something."

"You know, I've had conversations like this before but always with the older folks. The seniors at the church and such. It's so refreshing to see someone so young asking such profound questions. I used to think Christ was a thing of the past in this modern world, but you two have renewed my faith. And Cindy as well. I think I'll rest in peace tonight knowing the world has at least a few good hands left to lead it."

There was long pause filled with the clinking of dishes.

"And Stephen?"

Mrs. Coleman smiled. "I think deep down inside Stephen truly believes. But there is an anger within him that blocks his love for Christ and a weight on his back that prevents others from reaching him."

Chuck nodded. "Cindy told us about how his parents died."

"If it were only that simple."

"What do you mean?"

"The weight on his back is much more than that."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Tell me, have either of you ever lead a person to Christ? I mean, I know you help at the concerts and from what I've heard it's a labor of love. You know and I know how many people are given the choice to follow Christ or not through music, but I mean have you personally ever witnessed to somebody?"

Doug and Chuck exchanged glances. Doug sat down on a kitchen chair. "I was pretty messed up when Chuck found me. I think I can honestly say that I'd be dead today without him."

Chuck was blushing. "I was only the messenger."

Mrs. Coleman actually slapped her hand on the counter. "Exactly. That's all anyone can be, the messenger. It's up to each individual to decide or not. That's the free

will God gave us. Stephen has received the message and every night I pray for him. God knows what burden he carries and only God can lift it.” She looked at each of them in turn and nodded. “All we can do is be messengers.”

They all stood there for a moment when suddenly Doug started nodding as well. He smiled at Mrs. Coleman and turned to Chuck. “You know, I think we need more help on the equipment.”

Chuck smiled back at him. “And I think I know just the man for the job.”

Mrs. Coleman smiled and started back in on the last of the pots. “Yes, I think I’ll sleep very well tonight.” She said, then thought to herself that she had some thanking to do first.

XVI

The sun was actually shining and the sky, for the first time in weeks, showed no sign of rain. Cindy walked up to the barn and found Doug and Chuck tinkering on the front of the stage in the sunlight. The side of the barn was opened up revealing the entire setup. Cindy looked at the marks on the main beam by the stairs but thought nothing of them.

“So, what are you two up to today?” She said, smiling at them both from the base of the stage.

“We might ask the same of you. Didn’t see you come back last night.”

Cindy smiled broadly and covered her face with hands. After a moment she looked back up, still smiling.

“Oh,” said Chuck, “Not one to kiss and tell, are we?”

“Let me guess,” put in Doug, “He lost his shoe, but read about a new one in a book somewhere but was too shy to get it...”

“No, actually, it was so beautiful. There was a waterfall and a pool of water and a full moon. The water was so clear that you could see all the way to the bottom and we could see fish swimming around.” She rolled up onto the stage, smiling. “He said it hasn’t been like that for years. He said it was like some miracle from his childhood. I’ve never seen anyone so excited. And, well, you know, in his excitement...”

Doug did his best Monty Python impression. “Say n’ more, say n’ more. Nod, nod, wink, wink.”

“Oh, cut it out.”

She finally looked at the parts laying about him. “So, what are you doing? That looks like a speaker.”

“It’s a practice amp for my guitar. I’m rigging it to fry the stage wiring. See that conduit?” He pointed to a faded silver conduit running down the wall. Cindy nodded.

“That runs under the stage to this outlet.” He indicated a weather resistant outlet towards the front of the stage, beyond where the stage doors could protect it. “I’ve rigged this amp to blow the circuit breaker on demand. Then, when the witnesses are here it’s going to fry the wires all the way to the box. Should take about two days to fix. Two person job, minimum.”

Cindy cocked her head sideways and looked at Chuck. “So, what is he really doing?”

“Well, rigging his amp, as he said. I wanted to just fry the wires outright, but he insisted on having witnesses and an alibi. Personally, I think this is a wild Lucy scheme gone too far.” He waved his hands frantically. “Oh, won’t Ricky be sore if he finds out. Oh, oh.”

They were interrupted by the sounds of Richard and Becky coming over the hill. Both were smiling and chatting happily and playing as they approached.

Richard was smiling as he walked up. “Good morning. That was some meal last night, don’t you think?”

“I can’t remember the last time I ate like that.” Doug said, nodding. “I still feel full.”

Richard agreed. He, too, commented on the speaker and parts on the stage.

“Uh, well, at first the circuit breaker for this outlet kept blowing so I started to see if there was something wrong with the speaker when it hit me that I should try it on other outlets. Well, it didn’t blow the other breakers so I’m assuming it’s just this outlet. Now I’m just putting everything back together again.”

“Oh, that’s no problem, I’ll give Stephen a call. He’ll swap it out in no time. Well, I’m off. Can you do me a favor and pull that old piano out of the corner? The tuner will be by later today to give it a once over and a tuning.” Richard turned towards Cindy and smiled. “As per your specs. That’s a lovely old grand, everyone loves it when they play here.”

Cindy looked over her shoulder but the piano was covered with a tarp. “You know, I’ve heard that.”

Richard waved and walked off with Becky still laughing and playing.

Chuck looked at Doug and waved a finger at him. “Lucy, you have some ‘splainin’ to dooo.”

Cindy was still with Chuck and Doug when Stephen arrived later in the afternoon. Although the day started out bright and sunny, dark, swollen clouds were rolling in casting a pall over the countryside. It had been raining for weeks but this looked like a real storm rolling in.

Stephen met Cindy in the driveway. Before he could stop her she threw her arms around him and gave him a quick kiss. “That was for last night.” She explained.

Turning redder than even Stephen thought was possible, he just shook his head and smiled. Chuck and Doug clapping on the stage didn't make him feel any more at ease.

"So, what have you been up to?" Cindy asked as she walked with Stephen up to the barn.

"Just put in a ceiling fan and cleaned a carpet. My fault, I put some greasy parts down on the carpet and stained it. I was really embarrassed."

"Looks like you still are." Said Chuck from the stage.

Stephen couldn't even look at him.

Doug took the moment to flip on his amplifier and step back. "What brings you out here, as if I didn't know?" He cast a glance at Cindy and smiled. Then he winked at Chuck.

"Well, just thought you might like to come over. This storm is going to blow through pretty bad. There are already tornado watches and severe thunderstorm warnings and everything seems to be headed right this way. And, well, sometimes the lightning here gets pretty bad."

As if in reply to that statement a crackle of sparks flew from the little amplifier. There was an audible crackle from the fusebox as well. Everybody jumped back except for Stephen, who jumped on the stage and yanked the amplifier's cord from the outlet. He immediately dropped it.

"Man, that's hot."

The smell of melting plastic floated across the stage but was quickly blown away by the rising wind.

"That was unexpected." Said Chuck, matter-of-factly.

Stephen was already checking out the breaker box. "Looks like the breaker blew in time. But it won't hold. The wire must be shorted out somewhere."

"Hmm," said Doug, acting badly. "Looks like we'll have to replace this circuit. With all this conduit it may take a while."

Stephen smiled and shook his head. "It'll take half an hour, tops. Richard still has plenty of this gauge wire downstairs and we'll just pull it through and wire it back in."

Chuck and Doug exchanged glances. "A half hour? Won't you have to take apart the conduit?"

A huge crack of lighting split the air and startled everyone present. It was several seconds before anyone breathed and many more before they caught their breath and shook off the scare. Thunder bounced around the barn like a thick liquid and thumped their chests.

After a deep breath Stephen continued. "All we have to do is tape the new wire to the old wire and pull the old wire out. And, Wallah! New wire. Hook up a new outlet and breaker just to be safe and we're done. All the parts are here."

“Rats, I was hoping it would take longer.”

Stephen looked at Doug. “What do you mean?”

Doug threw up his hands and sat on the amplifier. “Well, to tell the truth, we were just hoping to spend some time with you. To, uh, deliver a message.”

Stephen looked back and forth between Chuck and Doug. A little disbelief tainted his voice. “You did this on purpose? Why?”

For the first time since their arrival, Chuck and Doug were speechless.

“Did you know about this?” Stephen said, looking down at Cindy.

She put her hands up defensively. “I had nothing to do with this.” She stood up by the busted pair, like a lawyer for the defense. “They really meant well.”

Stephen just shook his head. “What is going on here?” More anger was creeping into his voice.

Chuck spoke up first. “Well, we just wanted to, you know, spend some time with you to, uh, you know, talk to you about your feelings for, uh,” he took a deep breath, “Christ.”

The three looked at Stephen and to him it felt as if three cannon balls had just hit him in the chest. He was absolutely stunned and had no idea what to think. He wanted the ground to open up and swallow him but instead another crack of lightning first flashed, then flooded the barn with thunder.

The clouds now filled the sky and it was getting so dark that the automatic lights were coming on.

“You guys sabotaged the stage in hopes of spending time with me to lead me to Christ? That’s just great. That’s really rich. What a message that was.”

“Stephen, they didn’t mean it like that...”

“I have a job to get to.”

As hard as it was to walk past Cindy, Stephen did it. Cindy felt helpless as he got in his car and sped off. As if to break the tension the heavens picked that moment to drop an ocean of rain which chased the three back through the stage doors. Doug was nearly in tears.

“How could I have been so stupid? What was I thinking?”

Cindy patted him on the back while more thunder rolled through.

“Your heart was in the right place. There’s a reason for all this.”

Chuck wanted to add to that but the thunder was almost steady now and the lightning flashed faster and faster until it was like a giant strobe light up in the sky. He walked towards the front of the stage until he could feel rain on his face. The cross stood tall, silhouetted against the constant lightning.

“Sorry,” he said, low to himself and to God. “I guess we should have just tried the direct approach.” He looked down at the water flowing down the hill and settling in deep puddles at the base of the stage. “Rats.”

XVII

The wind started blowing harder and Cindy, Chuck, and Doug found themselves sitting along the back wall of the stage watching the storm. Night was falling darkly despite the almost constant lightning. Their camping equipment was semi-set up there and Cindy wrapped herself in a blanket. The lights had flicked off and on a few times and she was contemplating braving the rain to get to her car. There were a few bright flashes then funny lights on the ground. Cindy thought her eyes were playing tricks on her but it turned out to be headlights.

Cindy felt almost relieved that it was Richard. He pulled up to the stage as close as he could and made a dash for the stairs at the side, rather than brave the large puddle that was forming.

“Glad I caught you all here. I thought you were at Stephen’s but he said you never went over. At any rate, I think you guys ought to either go to Mrs. Coleman’s for the night or come on up to my place. This storm is just the tip of the iceberg. It’s been raining north of here like this all day. We’re under a flash flood warning and they’re saying anyone under the Northwood Dam better head for higher ground. It’s mostly an earth dam and it’s already waterlogged and ready to blow.”

“Where would that leave us? I mean, you know, the barn?”

Richard looked at the marks on the pillar. “Just imagine how much water it would take to reach that mark.” He pointed to the highest mark. “That dam holds back ten times as much.

For the first time it hit them. For water to reach that mark half the hill would be under water. Doug eyeballed the mark out to where the sound booth stood. The line seemed equal with the top of the trailer. “Man, that’s a lot of water.”

The lightning was flashing harder than ever and the thunder seemed almost constant. Richard almost didn’t hear Becky scream. For a moment he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him but then he realized that his truck was moving.

He moved as fast as only a protective father could and reached the passenger door of the truck, the bottom of which was already under water.

Pulling Becky from the truck he yelled at the trio on the stage. “Too late, let’s get out of here.”

Doug and Chuck helped Cindy first jump from the stage then waded up to only slightly higher ground. It was about then that lightning started to strike the cross for the first time that evening. The rain was so heavy they could hardly see it.

Regrouping by the sound booth trailer they paused for a moment to watch the water rise up around the barn. They had all heard about floods and seen floods in the news, but the reality was so much more awesome and terrifying that it froze them. Torrents of water washed around the barn and it filled their senses with smells and sounds that they would remember as long as they lived. It was Richard who brought them back to their senses.

“This is just the beginning. That water’s going to rise a lot more and a lot faster. We’d better get out of here and fast.” But the sight of his pickup slowly disappearing in the darkness and rain mesmerized him just a few moments longer.

“C’mon!”

They all ran towards the van but out of the rain another figure was running towards them. Another thing to temporarily scare the willies out of them.

“Thank god I found you.” Stephen yelled as he ran towards them. He was totally soaked and blood was just barely visible running down the side of his face. Cindy ran up to him and threw her arms around him.

“What happened?” she said, reaching up towards his hair. Stephen winced and blocked her hand.

He looked over at Richard. “I just lost my car up the road. It’s completely washed out.” He tried to catch his breath. He pointed up the road towards the small town. “The bridge up that-a-way is already gone. I had to go clear around the county to get here. I thought I could make it but the current was too strong.” He breathed some more. “It dropped forward and flipped. I thought I was a goner.” Cindy hugged him tighter.

“Stephen, look, we’re all so sorry...”

“There’s no time for that now...”

Doug and Chuck exchanged glances. “Do you mean we’re trapped here?” Chuck shouted. Just then three bolts struck the cross one after another. The thunder was deafening and Becky buried her face in her father’s shoulder and plugged her ears as tight as she could.

“We’ll just stay on the hill, we should be safe here.” Richard shouted back.

More lightning. Doug was just about to herd everyone into the van when he saw the water rushing around its wheels and Cindy’s little car as well. All he could say was, “Look!”

Another bolt hit the cross.

“Richard,” Stephen shouted. “I don’t think we’re safe here either.”

Richard nodded his head. “We need to get back into the barn. We’ll be safe in the loft.” He hoped.

But his heart dropped when he turned back towards the barn. The water was just below the level of the stage which meant that it was at least belly-deep. But it wasn't the depth that bothered him for the current was rushing by faster than what seemed possible.

"That's it. The dam must be gone."

Cindy started to panic. "What do we do? We're not safe if we stay here but there's nowhere to go."

Doug snapped his fingers. "I know what to do. Chuck, Stephen, help me."

He led them over to the sound booth and kicked away some wood that covered some cables. He looked up at Stephen.

"We ran these cables to each amp tower. They're tied about halfway up. We'll pull one down and make a bridge."

Stephen looked at the towers on each side of the stage. Even on their sides it seemed like they'd be washed away by the current. He ran calculations in his head.

"That one!" he shouted, pointing to the one upstream. "It'll rest against the stage and your van and hopefully that will hold it until we get across."

Doug looked at Stephen, then Chuck. "Last chance for a better idea."

They just shook their heads.

Chuck and Doug reached down and lifted the bundle of wires that were bigger than one man could hold. They started to expertly sort them until they had about six wires sorted out. Chuck ran inside the sound booth to get a wire cutter with his weight the trailer started to topple. Cindy screamed when she saw the trailer falling towards the two men.

But it never hit the ground. It stopped at about a forty-five degree angle. Chuck was white as a ghost when he came back. He snipped the wires as close to the booth as he could then they all stepped to the side.

"The whole hill is coming down. It's like a mud slide." Stephen shouted. The rain was still hammering them and he could only barely see Richard handing Becky over to Cindy through the downpour. The lights on the stage lit up the area in an eerie yellow glow, as if the light itself had trouble penetrating the storm.

The four men started to pull on the cord as if in some bizarre tug-of-war with the barn. It was hard at first because the six strands they were pulling on were still tangled in cords leading to the stage and to the other tower.

As it started to tighten Chuck yelled at Doug, "I hope you tied those up there pretty good."

"It's just looped around a couple times. But it should work."

"Shut up and pull, the water is getting higher."

The men pulled and the tower started to visibly tip away from the side of the barn, then back.

“Let’s try jerking it. On three. One...two...three!”

They all pulled as hard as they could. It started to tip.

“Keep pulling...”

With their feet buried in the mud they pulled until it seemed the cables would snap. It was just at that moment that gravity took over and almost in slow motion the tower came down. As soon as it hit the water the current took over and the tower washed against the side of the stage. The top half seem to be mired in the mud but sliding slowly towards the back of the little VW van. The scaffolding was similar to construction scaffolding and had a sort of ladder built in all four sides which did indeed make a good temporary bridge. Chuck climbed up first and took a few wobbly steps.

“We’d better hurry.”

Cindy went up next followed by Doug and Richard, who was carrying Becky. Stephen came up last and by that time Chuck was already on the stage.

As Cindy got on the stage she turned around to wait for Stephen. She stared at the raging water and could almost see it rising. Something caught her eye in the gloom.

It was a telephone pole.

“Watch out!” she screamed but it was too late. Like a battering ram the pole struck the scaffolding and toppled it over. Doug was thrown on the stage and Richard and Stephen managed to fall forward grab hold. But as the tower was forced on it’s side the current caught the two men and the little girl. Stephen let out a cry as he tried to hold on.

Then the tower rolled again, twisting against the stage and ripping the corner off in its wake. The pole was forced up on top and the current rolled it over until it stopped.

There was no sign of anyone in the water.

Cindy was frozen.

“I can’t see anything.” Doug said, on the verge of a panic. Lightning was still striking the cross but no light could penetrate the dark, muddy water.

After a few frantic moments Doug jumped into the scaffolding. He thought he could hang on but was unprepared for the force of the current. It slammed him against the pipes and held him there until he could regain his senses. Then he started to make his way to where Richard was last seen.

Cindy started for the edge but Chuck grabbed her.

A hand came up out of the water and Doug grabbed it. Pulling with all his might he was surprised when Stephen came up out of the water, gasping for air.

He was coughing wildly but managed to say, “I got Richard...By the collar. He’s pinned.”

Without wasting time he pulled Doug’s hand down to where he had a hold on Richard. “Hold him!”

Doug held the fragile cloth as Stephen braced his legs against the scaffolding then took a deep breath and went under. He got his arms under Richard's shoulders and with a strength he never knew he had he pulled. He used every muscle in his body until they screamed in pain and he was sure he was breaking Richard's legs but was hoping he'd forgive him. Then suddenly, with no warning, Richard was free. Stephen and Richard came up, both coughing and gasping for air. Still in Richard's arms was Becky, but she was limp.

With a mighty thrust Richard passed Becky on to Doug, who was surprised by the move.

"Get her to the stage," Richard screamed.

Holding Becky with one hand and holding on for dear life with his other he passed Becky on to Chuck, who was laying on his belly reaching for her. Cindy was holding Chuck's legs.

Stephen was on the stage before Doug had even figured out how to get out of the rushing water. He took Becky and with a dozen first-aid books running through his head all he could think of was to give her the Heimlich maneuver. He did it three times before the water stopped gushing from her mouth. But she never breathed.

He laid her on her back and pulled Chuck down with him. He lifted her head and blew in three quick breaths then listed to her chest. Tears were stinging his eyes but his first-aid training was all coming back to him.

"There's no beat. Chuck, it's one breath for every five beats. Do you know what to do?"

Chuck shook his head as Stephen felt Becky's chest for her rib cage. He put his hands down and almost gently started the compressions.

"One, two, three, four, five, breath."

Chuck blew in her mouth.

"One, two, three, four, five, breath."

Chuck blew again.

"One..."

"A little harder Stephen,"

"Two..."

"A little harder."

"Three..."

Stephen realized this wasn't a practice dummy.

"Four..."

It was little Becky...

"Five, breath."

It was all a blur. Richard was kneeling next to Becky holding her hand. “I’m here, Becky, I’m here. Just hang on.”

“One, two, three, four, five, breath.”

Cindy had buried her head in Doug’s shoulders. She couldn’t watch, but prayed with all of her might.

“One, two, three, four, five, breath.”

“Check for a pulse...”

“One, two, three, four, five, breath.”

Richard just shook his head as he stared into Chuck’s eyes.

“One, two, three, four, five, breath.”

“No, no...” Richard cried, over and over.

“One, two, three, four, five, breath.”

Whether hours, minutes, or years had passed, Stephen couldn’t tell. He was not giving up. Wild thoughts ran through his head. Why did Richard bring Becky? Why didn’t they wait out the storm on the hill? Why did they try this? Why didn’t she start breathing again? Why do people live? Why do they die? Why, out of everyone there, was it her? He would trade his life in an instant for hers.

“One, two, three...”

He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Richard’s.

“Four, five...”

Tears were streaming down his face but he seemed calm. “Stephen,” he said, “It’s over.”

Chuck blew his last breath into her lungs. She was painfully still, and painfully cold.

Stephen shook his head.

“One, two, three, four, five...”

Chuck was looking at him. “Breath,” Stephen shouted at him. Chuck slowly shook his head.

“Damn you.” Stephen said threw gritted teeth. He blew into Becky’s mouth.

As he repositioned himself the hand on his shoulder grew firmer. “Stephen, no, it’s over.”

Through tears and gritted teeth Stephen yelled at him. “No, it’s not, we’ve got to keep trying. One, two, three...”

There were other hands on his shoulder now. It was Cindy. “Stephen...”

He whipped around, almost knocking Cindy over. “No, it’s not over.” He yelled. “It can’t be. There must be a chance...”

Richard raised his voice. "Stephen," he said in a tone that made him freeze. "It's over. God has taken her home." He started sobbing. "Let her rest in peace. She's with her mother already."

Water was starting to crest over the stage. It washed into Becky's hair before her father slowly picked her up and headed for the stairs.

"No," Stephen cried. "This can't be happening."

XVIII

They all followed Richard into the loft. He lay Becky down on some old horse blankets and covered her up. She looked just as if she were sleeping. Richard lay over her and cried.

Stephen was still in disbelief. The lights started to flicker and he had to force himself to point to an electric lantern plugged into a recharger on the wall. With his head hanging low Chuck picked it up and tested it. He then went and sat in a corner. Everyone was cold and wet and completely heartbroken.

Water was on the second stair and already passed the first mark in the pillar. Stephen turned and punched the wall. "No, this just can't be happening."

Cindy tried to get close to him again. She just wanted to hold him, to calm him, but he slapped her hands away.

"No, why is this happening?" he said through tears. "Don't you see now?" He pointed an accusing finger at Chuck and Doug. "You wanted me to talk about God? What God?" He looked back at Cindy. "What kind of God would let this happen? Why would he take the life of a little girl?"

"Stephen, don't..." Cindy started, but Richard interrupted her.

"Don't blame God, Stephen," he said almost angrily. "God has a plan for all of us. I believe with all my heart that Becky is safe. That all this is happening for a reason."

Stephen threw his hands up in exasperation. "Is this the God you want me to believe in? One that lets the innocent die and the guilty live?" He was starting to cry uncontrollably.

"You can't blame God for this." Cindy said. "Just like you can't blame God for what happened to your parents." The word guilty tried to connect with something in her brain but she found nothing.

"Blame God for my parents?" Stephen said in disbelief. He started to shout through his tears. "Don't you understand? I don't blame God for what happened to my parents."

Cindy shook her head. She didn't understand what he was trying to say.

“Don’t you get it? I blame myself.” He was still yelling through gritted teeth, “I was the one who started the fire. I did it.” He thumped his chest. “I was playing with candles in the cloak room. I killed my own parents.”

He turned and slammed his head into the wall. “I prayed for them to come out. I begged God to take me instead but he never did. I had no one to turn to, no one to beg for forgiveness. All I wanted to do was to tell my dad I was sorry, but I never could. He ran back inside before I could say anything. Everything was taken away from me that night. Everything.”

He turned back towards Cindy. “That’s why. That’s why I don’t believe. There’s just nothing to believe in. Nothing to show me. No proof, no help, no reason at all. If he did exist I’d hate him for allowing me to do that, for not giving me the chance to say I’m sorry, for taking away everything I believed in, and,” he pointed towards Richard, “for taking the life of that little girl. Give me one good reason not to hate God. Or believe at all.”

Cindy just shook her head. “He loves you more than you’ll know. He...”

Stephen threw up his hands to stop her. “Then let him prove it.” He turned and walked down a few steps and sat down. “Just leave me alone.” He buried his head in his hands and sobbed. “Just go away and leave me alone.”

The water was on the seventh step. A few moments later the lights went out completely.

XIX

That night was the longest night anyone had ever lived through. Through the dim light of the dying lantern each person was lost in their own thoughts. Each had a struggle to win, a thought to wrestle with, or memories to relive.

Richard was thinking about Becky. How she loved to play around the barn, how she looked in the sunlight, how peaceful she slept. He thought about all the times he had yelled at her and regretted it and how she never got to meet her mother, and how tightly she held on during the storm. At times he cried, other times his fatigue and grief lulled him into fitful waking dreams. He prayed hard and long that Becky was safe and wondered when he would follow her into the Kingdom of God.

Cindy found herself sitting between two old smelly saddles. She had never experienced death firsthand before and the whole night gnawed at her. She was wet and miserable and thought that already this day brought enough hardships for an entire lifetime. She found herself caring for Stephen in a way she never cared for anyone before. From where she sat she could see him still sitting on the stairs, picking splinters from the

wall. Just to touch him. To heal him. Why did she have to come to this little backwater burg? From this day on, her life would never be the same.

Doug just stared at the ceiling, at the spider webs and dusty rafters. Life is so fleeting, he thought, in an instant it's gone. If he died today, would his life have mattered? Would there be a big funeral or just Chuck and Cindy and few others? Did he help enough people? He could hear the water flowing just beneath the floor and the fading thunder and wondered just how safe he was. He vowed to himself and to God that if he survived this night he would do more. He thought about asking Cindy for time to do a testimonial during the festival, if there was one now. He wanted his voice to be heard, he wanted the message to get out. That night he felt Christ nearer to him than he ever felt before. He would never be the same man again.

Chuck lay by himself by the big door that opened to the back of the barn. He was wishing he could turn back time and like Stephen, wished that it had been him instead of that little girl. He thought about the van and the equipment and how it was at this moment washing away. Wet and cold, he felt completely wretched and small. He felt sorry for Stephen and made the connection that Mrs. Coleman must have known that he started the fire. She knew he was carrying this weight around and somehow she knew that he and Doug were the ones that were meant to reach him. He thought that Stephen must be completely convinced now that there was no God, how could he fight that? How could he make him see that Christ, at this moment, was crying with them? How could he make him see that there must be a greater plan that was bigger than all of them? Chuck thought that as far as he was concerned, he would never see through the same eyes again.

Stephen could barely see the water rising above the highest notch on the beam. He couldn't believe little Becky was gone. He should have kept going, he should have kept trying. He also couldn't believe that he had confessed for the first time in his life that he had started that fire so long ago. Why was he even alive? What purpose did he serve except to be alone and carry all this excess baggage around. Did Cindy really care about him? And if she did care, did he care that she cared? Of course he did, he admitted to himself but she would never become attached to someone like him. His life was a punishment for past crimes as far as he was concerned. Why would anyone care about someone who didn't have the courage to tell anyone that he was playing with fire? Plus she was a Christian. Why did that bother him? His own father was a preacher, and he had once believed in Heaven and Hell. Now everything was so confusing. Why did Becky have to die? He finally broke down and prayed.

"God, if there is God, save me, if I'm worth saving. Let me understand. Let me believe. You've sent some people to open my eyes, now let me see. Why did Becky have to die? Why Richard, Lord? He's a good friend and neighbor. He didn't deserve this. No one does. Just...just let me understand."

XX

Light was streaming in through the cracks in upper loft doors before anyone started to stir again. Stephen walked over and spent a full five minutes forcing the rusted latch loose then pushed the door to the side. It creaked and squealed in protest and let in the blinding light of the sun peeking out at the horizon under still dark, rain-soaked skies.

The whole world outside had changed. The field behind the barn was a lake, although its level had already dropped several feet from the night before. He could see glimpses of buildings in the downtown area and they seemed to be on dry ground, but they still looked a little too quiet. No cars moving, no trees blowing. The only movement was the slow moving water still swirling around the barn and the light rain that was just beginning to fall.

Stephen leaned against the opening and tried to take everything in.

From where she sat, Cindy watched Stephen. What a night they had all lived through. She glance over at Richard who was kneeling with his hands over his mouth. She couldn't tell what he was doing but thought he might need someone at the moment. She stood up and almost fainted.

Chuck looked up from his light sleep and looked at Richard, then at Cindy. She had a strange look on her face. He tried to follow her eyes then saw it. He elbowed Doug in the side and together they stood up, jaws dropping.

Hearing the rustle of people behind him, Stephen turned around. He had a thousand things to say to these people and it might as well be now. He froze when he saw what the light had revealed in the dusty loft. Like Richard, he dropped to his knees and gasped.

There, sitting in the old pile of blankets blinking towards the sunrise was Becky, looking as if nothing had happened and wondering why everyone was staring at her.

Richard scooped her up and holding her as tightly as only a father knows how, he stood there just crying into her shoulder. "My little girl, my little girl. Thank God you're alive and alright."

Cindy, Chuck, and Doug were right there, joining in the hug. They were simply overjoyed and wanted to embrace the father and daughter that had just been reunited. They were laughing and crying at the same time.

Stephen just shook his head. "This can't be happening..." He took a few steps forward. "This is impossible. It's..."

Cindy turned and looked at him standing there in disbelief. This time she didn't stop herself. Breaking away from the joy Richard was feeling she walked over and threw her arms around Stephen. She hugged him for the longest moment then looked him in the eyes. After another long moment she said quietly, "Now do you believe?"

The whole universe seemed to swallow him up at that moment. Not only was the joy of having Becky back and smiling at her dad just creeping in to him but the realization of what made that happen was coming to him as well. She was dead just seven hours ago. No heartbeat, nothing. He knew she was, there was no doubt in his mind. But there she was, laughing and kissing her dad. The true meaning of miracle started slamming into his

brain. This was truly a miracle of God, the one God, the living God. He really was here. He really did care.

“Forgive me,” he said through his tears. “Forgive me for all these years.” He looked Cindy in the eyes and she touched his face.

“He has already forgiven you. And I think,” she said, trying to smile, “that Becky is alive because of our prayers, because of our love and her dad’s love. And...” she paused to rub the tears out of her eyes, “And I think maybe he’s winking at you right now, sort of just to say, ‘Yes, I’m here.’”

Stephen smiled. “I know that. I know that now. He is here, I can feel his presence.” He gave Cindy a light kiss then let her go. He walked over and threw his arms around Richard, who still held Becky in his arms. After yet another long moment he stood back and smiled at Becky who finally got a chance to speak.

“Why is everyone so happy?”

The tears of joy finally gave way to laughter and smiles. After some patting on backs and group hugs they all quieted down and without saying a word they formed a circle and prayed. Each prayed silently to God thanking him for his generosity and love and kindness. It was a very private moment for each person there. They all knew that they shared an experience that would change them all. They were each reborn that morning, reborn into new lives and new paths. They found themselves staring at each other, knowing that a bond was created between them all, and with God.

Tearing himself away, Stephen walked over the other loft door and slid it open. He looked up at the cross, but this time it was not alone.

“Look, daddy, a rainbow.” Becky said so innocently.

“Yes, dear. It’s God’s promise that he’s still looking over us.”

The rainbow framed the cross and it was the perfect vision to round out a perfect morning.

Richard sighed and surveyed the landscape. The sound booth was now laying on its side, covered with muck. At some time in the night it must have been covered with water. The twisted scaffolding complete with telephone pole still lay by the stage, but the water swirling around it was much calmer now. Water still flowed over the stage leaving trails of sand on the formerly waxed boards. The poor old grand piano was gone.

“We have a lot of work to do.”

Doug looked out beside him. “Yeah, if the water ever goes down. All the equipment is shot. I’m not sure how the electrical system could have survived...”

Stephen was shaking his head. “I don’t think that’s what he meant.”

Chuck and Doug looked at him. “Well, we’re not the only ones under water. There’s a subdivision north of here that is mostly retirees and then there’s the apartments south of here that were right on the river.”

Richard spoke up. "I'm sure Mrs. Coleman already has every cot and roll-a-way out and ready and Jim down at the IGA store is probably putting together care packages and rationing out his bottled water."

"We should shake out these blankets and get them to Cindy's car or Richard's boat and get them to the high school. That's where they'll be needed. And guys..."

He looked at everyone. "I just want to say, thanks for caring about me. I, well, I just feel..."

Doug put his hand on his shoulder. "We know, Stephen, we know."

Epilogue

Stephen came out on the porch and sat in the old swing and watched the sun slowly sinking into the horizon. Behind him fifty or sixty people murmured quietly in the crowded house which was surrounded by cars and trucks from all over the county. He reached over and placed a large, black Bible on the worn old rocking chair and looked back towards the sun. He didn't cry, he'd had enough of that.

Cindy came out shortly afterward and sat next to him and when he put his arm around her she sank into his shoulder and sighed heavily.

"That was a beautiful service." She said. "I'm glad you were able to get that plot."

Stephen squeezed her just a bit. "I pulled some strings. It only seemed fitting that it be on a big hill like that."

Richard came out with Becky and together they sat on the stairs. Becky leaned against her dad and was almost falling asleep. It had been a long day for her.

"That was just beautiful." He said. "There must have been a thousand people there."

Chuck walked out next, followed by Doug who leaned against the porch railing.

"We thought we'd find you guys out here."

They all watched the sun for a long moment then Doug, glancing at the rocking chair, said, "It just isn't the same, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know." Said Cindy, "I was once told that each sunset is more beautiful than the last. And I think that's right."

Chuck looked down on Cindy. "So, when's the big date?" he asked quietly.

She smiled. "I don't know. With the big shake-up at Baytech everything's up in the air right now." She waited for the questioning glances that she knew she'd get. She had been saving this news for some time. "Well, it seems that Baytech decided that it's contemporary Christian division was not making enough profits and has decided to

liquidate the whole thing. So somebody is going to pick it up for a song and, um, launch it as its own corporation.”

Chuck smiled broadly. “You mean you got what? 3 employees and an old desk?”

“No,” said Cindy, shaking her head, “I also get contracts, copyrights, and a whole bunch of other legal stuff. Smart alec. You’re in college now, you should have a little business sense. When you’re ordained you’ll have to know how to run a church, you know.”

Chuck nodded and shrugged his shoulders.

Richard turned around and looked at Cindy and Stephen. “Well, congratulations you two. So now all you have to do is get hitched. And finish the church.”

Cindy patted Stephen on the leg. “Stephen just may do that all on his own.”

Stephen looked over at his friends. “Well, when the inspector came out to look at the foundation and said that after all these years that old thing was still solid and up to code, I knew that it was a sign that it was time that dad’s church was rebuilt. I’m sure he’d love the idea.”

Doug smiled. “A church with a solid foundation. Imagine that.”

They all quieted down for a moment and watched the colors that were glowing over the countryside.

“Do you know,” said Chuck quietly, “that it was exactly a year ago today that we spent that night in the barn?”

Richard brushed the hair out of Becky’s peaceful, sleeping face. “I know.”

“That was the greatest concert ever. I can’t believe the way everyone in the whole town pitched in to help fix up the barn.”

“And then all the bands came early and helped paint and put all the bleachers back on the hill. It really was incredible. It really was a very special time.”

There was a long pause.

“You know, I never told anyone.” Cindy said thoughtfully.

“I think Mrs. Coleman knew.” Stephen said. “She seemed to be at peace after that night. Like she knew that everything would be alright from then on. Right up until the end.” A single tear ran down his cheek. “I never told her. It was kind of a private thing.”

They all looked at the Bible that rested on the rocking chair.

Becky stirred. “Maybe she was an angel.” She said, almost in her sleep.

Richard was startled by her words, he thought she was sleeping.

“Are you ever going to tell her?”

“Oh, I will, when the time is right.” He said, brushing her cheek. “I just hope I go next because I could never live through that again.”

“Don’t say that.”

They all tried to chuckle then silence fell over the little group. They all said silent prayers for what they had lived through, for Mrs. Coleman, and for each other. Stars dotted the sky and fireflies dotted the landscape. Stephen reached over and picked up the bible.

“It seems that from the beginning,” he said, almost whispering, “God had plans for us all.”

One by one they nodded and walked back inside the old farmhouse.