

Moe

A Novel

Jim Hamlett



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This is a work of fiction. All characters are of the writer's imagination. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is strictly coincidental. While some geographical places mentioned in the novel do exist, certain details may be different.

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For the late Mel Stratton

It's not your words we remember,
But the work of your hands.
You taught us the meaning of excellence,
And showed us the good and faithful servant.
No, not the words, Mel, for they were few.
But we'll never forget your sermon;
It was the best we ever saw.

Two are better than one,
because they have a good reward for their toil.
For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow.
But woe to him who is alone when he falls
and has not another to lift him up!

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 ESV

A man of many companions may come to ruin,
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Proverbs 18:24 ESV

Greater love has no one than this,
that someone lay down his life for his friends.

John 15:13 ESV

Prologue

George Wheatley insisted their operation be covert. As a solicitor to Lords and Ladies, he regarded privacy as a way of life, and he was keen to protect the Earl's reputation.

I will handle all the legalities, Stewart. All you need do is make the delivery.

Stewart, the Earl's butler, knew he had little choice. So he exchanged his tails and pinstriped trousers for plain clothes and left the Bentley behind in favor of a rented Ford. In a secluded location north of Glasgow, he waited as instructed. Though the August weather was mild—and more pleasant than in England—he kept his windows up and ran the car's air conditioning. He thought that would be better for the tiny bundle on the seat beside him.

You're a good butler, Stewart. Surely you understand why it must be this way.

As a good butler, Stewart knew the Earl did not pay him to understand. In this case especially, understanding proved to be elusive. He was doing something he found hard to grasp. In the end, his fidelity alone saved him. The Earl had helped him see that.

Don't let me down, Stewart. You're the only one I can trust.

While he waited, Stewart perused a newspaper. He needed the distraction as much as something to pass the time. The front page confirmed the world as a troubled place: the American President was embroiled in an investigation—Watergate, they called it; there was unrest in Chile; war between Egypt and Israel seemed inevitable. The little lad in the basket beside him would remember none of it. He had his own bit of trouble, and most of it still lay ahead of him.

Stewart adjusted the blankets over the baby and looked up when he heard an approaching vehicle. The sign on the side of the car advertised the courier Mr. Wheatley had told him to expect. The car skidded to a

halt, bumper to bumper with the Ford, and the uniformed driver jumped out. As he approached, Stewart ran his window down.

“Waitin’ on a package?” the man asked.

“I am.”

The man handed Stewart a large envelope, and then a clipboard with a paper attached. “Sign ’ere.” He offered a pen.

Remember to use the name on the envelope.

Stewart glanced at the name as he retrieved his own pen. He scribbled the pseudonym he and Mr. Wheatley had agreed upon, and then he handed the clipboard back. “Thank you.”

As the man returned to his car, Stewart opened the large envelope and found two smaller ones. The first bore his name, the second “Hilda Montgomery.” From his he unfolded a small map and a set of handwritten instructions. He read them, examined the map, and then found his way back to the main motorway. He drove northward toward Glencoe and Fort William. The mountains opened their beautiful, mysterious arms to embrace him in weather that was unusually clear.

Not far out of Fort William, Stewart stopped in a lay-by to feed and change the infant. He then continued past a portion of Loch Ness and followed the crude map north into the countryside. After a while, Stewart became worried that he’d misread the directions, but soon he saw the sign he was expecting: Children’s Cove. Taking the turn-in, he crossed a small, stone bridge and followed the single, spruce-lined lane.

He parked on the graveled lot just below the orphanage compound and stepped into the dim light of dusk. A hound bayed, and Stewart prickled as he glanced toward the sound. When he was satisfied there was no danger, he removed the basket and walked toward a light that shined from the largest building. The infant fussed a little, so Stewart shook the basket gently. He followed an old, stone wall, about five feet high, which appeared to enclose the compound. An iron gate near the center of the wall creaked as he opened it.

The main building, the one with the light, rose before him in three levels of heavy stone. On each end, canted back, were single-level wings about twenty yards long. Little faces peered from the windows on each side. Stewart walked up the stone steps and rapped on the oak door.

It opened almost immediately on a wholesome, big-boned woman, shorter than Stewart by a head. She greeted him with a genuine smile and blue eyes bright in the dark shadows of her face. A set of eyeglasses hung from a cord around her neck.

“Please come in.” Her plain calico dress was neat and comfortable looking, its bright flowers subdued in the low light. “I’m Hilda Montgomery, matron of the home.” She closed the door behind him and offered her hand.

“Very pleased to meet you, Ms. Montgomery. Mr. Wheatley speaks well of you.” Her strong grip did not surprise him, nor did its coarseness.

“George speaks well of everyone, Mr.—?”

“Pruitt,” he blurted after a second. A flush came to his face.

“Mr. Pruitt,” she repeated slowly. Her intense eyes lingered on him. With a small gesture, she led him into an open room of exposed beams. He saw the back of a worn sofa that faced a large fireplace. He could see a woman sitting there and a second person whose head was barely visible. To the side of the fireplace hung a large portrait of a Highland gentleman in military regalia. Mid-eighteenth century, Stewart guessed.

A tall, slender girl, still young enough to be shapeless, appeared like an apparition. “Shall I fetch tea, Mum?”

Stewart interjected. “Thank you, but I don’t have time.”

Ms. Montgomery dismissed the girl, but then pulled her back. “Has little Mary stopped crying?”

“Yes, Mum.”

Ms. Montgomery hugged the girl. “You’re such a wonderful help.” She released her, and the girl floated away.

“You have a lovely daughter.”

“I’m not married, Mr. Pruitt. All the children here call me Mum.”

Stewart nodded. "Of course."

"And now I have three more. We've had a busy day." She reached for the basket. "Let's have a look at our newest member, shall we?" She set the bundle on a nearby table. When she opened the blankets covering the boy, an odor wafted up. "I believe he needs a change."

"I'm terribly sorry, madam. I'd thought, uh—I thought I'd changed him recently enough."

"Don't fret, Mr. Pruitt. We'll see to him." She looked again into the basket. "A darling little lad, isn't he?"

"Indeed. A shame he'll always be that way." Her incredulous look surprised him. "Are you not aware of his condition?"

Her eyes widened. She stopped blinking. "*What* condition?"

"Why—he is a dwarf, madam."

For a while she simply stared at him. Then her eyes blinked again, and she turned back to the basket. Cupping the baby's head in her hands, she bent down and kissed his forehead. She called out, "Miss McDonough, would you bring Winston here, please?"

The woman on the sofa rose, and with her a young boy, about four years old, Stewart judged. The boy approached with his head down. When he stopped beside Ms. Montgomery, she placed an arm around him and worked her hand into his hair.

"This is Winston MacReynolds, Mr. Pruitt. He arrived this morning, right before little Mary McIver, and we've been having a lovely first day. Isn't that right, Winston?" When the boy did not respond, Ms. Montgomery turned back to Stewart. "I don't suppose the baby has a name."

"You'll find it in these papers." He handed her the envelope bearing her name.

She opened it with a working-class fingernail and plucked her eye-glasses from her chest. After a quick perusal, she settled on a spot. "This sounds like an invention of George Wheatley. I doubt this is the boy's given name." She looked over her glasses at Stewart.

"I can't say, madam."

“Of course not.” She looked down at the infant, who fussed and kicked at the covers. “Welcome to Children’s Cove, Moses Mackenzie.”

The last name caught Stewart unawares, but he held his composure. Mackenzie was the name of the Countess’s family, some of whom had been upset with her when she married an Englishman.

Young Winston peered into the basket. “He stinks.”

“We’ll tend to that shortly.” Ms. Montgomery looked into Winston’s upturned face. “This is an important day for you. We take care of one another here. So I’m going to ask you to take on a bit of responsibility for little Moses.” She looked into the basket. “Shall we call him Moe?”

Winston nodded.

“Good. You’ll have help in the beginning, but eventually, Moe will be your charge until he’s old enough to do for himself. Do you think you can handle that?”

The boy shrugged.

“Of course you can.” She rubbed Winston’s head again. “Miss McDonough, let’s take our newest member and see if we can’t get Winston a bit of help with him.” She folded the blankets back over the baby. “We’ll return shortly, Mr. Pruitt.”

Stewart wandered over to the portrait by the fireplace. The man in the painting stood in a forceful stance and looked sternly away to some hopeful victory, one hand resting on the hilt of a bejeweled sword. Stewart admired the work until Ms. Montgomery returned.

“The portrait is on loan from Mr. Wheatley,” she said. “He’s a faithful supporter and has helped us dress up the place a little. The man in the portrait is a member of the Mackenzie clan. They started this orphanage many years ago. If my suspicions are correct, that’s where Mr. Wheatley got his inspiration for the boy’s last name. As for *Moses*—” She raised her eyebrows and slowly shook her head. “George has a flair for the dramatic.”

Stewart absorbed the information with an appreciative nod. “The little Winston chap—seemed a bit young to be caring for an infant.”

“The sooner the children learn to take care of one another, the better off they are. He’ll have sufficient help. You may be sure of that.” Her blue eyes lingered on him.

Stewart pressed his lips into a thin smile. “I really must be going, madam.”

She took him by the arm, and he gratefully followed her lead toward the door.

“We believe in Providence here, Mr. Pruitt. No child comes to us by accident. And no matter how they come, I promise you they are all loved and cared for dearly.”

She opened the door and turned on the light for him. “We will do our best for the child. And I assure you that the task will be guided and safeguarded—as it has from the beginning—by the Almighty’s hand.”

Stewart nodded. “Thank you for your help, Ms. Montgomery.”

“You’re quite welcome. Good night—Mr. Pruitt.”

Stewart stepped through the doorway into the cool, night air and roused the hound again. When he reached his car, he slid into the driver’s seat and sat for a moment, looking back at the dark silhouette of the orphanage. He felt relieved, happy even, that his part was finished. And though he did not consider himself a praying man, he felt as though he’d had one answered.

Kirk Vaughn stumbled across the racquetball court, his feet as unsure as his mind. Like flies on a carcass, worries crowded out any notion of what to do with Rob Cantrell's blistering shot that rocketed from the front wall. Kirk's sneakers squealed across the floor as he struggled into position, but when he planted his feet, a pain burned down the inside of his right leg as if he'd been stabbed with a hot poker. Biting a lip, Kirk raised his racquet. The ball was high. Taking the shot would get him a lecture, but he wasn't about to let his gray-headed coach win without some kind of fight.

His pitiful swing barely caught the ball and nearly nailed Rob's left shoulder—the one that ended abruptly, unnaturally, with no arm dangling from it. But Rob glanced back in time to sidestep Kirk's swing. Rob charged the ball, and with a swift backhand, smashed it into the corner nearest him. Kirk tried to return the shot, but his leg kept sending ugly messages to his brain. He faltered to a stop. Flatfooted, he watched the passing shot that ended the game.

He rubbed his sore leg while he inhaled deep breaths of stale, sweaty air. Why wasn't he among the sensible people who were home for the evening by now? The ball dribbled by him. He popped it into the air with his racquet and snatched it with his left hand.

Voices from elsewhere in the gym filtered into the court. Hopping toward his gear bag, Kirk swished his racquet through the air. Rob always beat him, but not that easily. He removed his eye guard and let it dangle from the hand that held the ball. As sweat trickled into his left eye, he squinted at the sting. Then he tossed his gear down and snatched up a towel. He mopped his face, taking care not to disturb his hair.

"You okay?" Rob asked.

Kirk rubbed the towel across the back of his neck, which allowed him to look down. No matter how many times he saw Rob in gym clothes, the stubby shoulder always bothered him. He patted the inside of his right leg.

“I’ll be all right.”

“I didn’t mean physically,” Rob said.

Kirk dropped the towel onto his bag. “I’m fine.”

“How’s Angie doing? Any word on the test results?”

Kirk shook his head. He wished he hadn’t told anyone. Angie had begged him not to.

“Keep us posted,” Rob said.

“Sure.” Kirk pumped his injured leg up and down. “I thought my wheels were falling off.”

“Well, you have hit the big four-oh.” Rob turned up his water bottle for a swig.

“Cheap shot, Coach. Especially from a guy who probably qualifies for Social Security.”

Rob wiped his mouth with his wrist band. “Then you ought to be able to beat him.”

“Okay, I see where this is going.” Kirk smiled as he tossed the ball to Rob and grabbed his racquet. “Let’s go.” He marched to the center of the court.

Rob followed, bouncing the ball with his racquet. “Sure you don’t want the service?”

“You can have it.” Kirk moved toward the back. “I can take the serve of a one-armed relic.”

Kirk instantly regretted the remark. It wasn’t very pastoral of him.

Rob said nothing as he stepped into the right half of the service zone. He continued the rhythmic bouncing of the ball longer than he usually did and caught it in his racquet like an egg in a pan. Without looking back, he asked, “Ready?”

Too embarrassed to answer, Kirk just shuffled back and forth.

Rob flipped the ball into the air with a flick of his wrist. At the apex of the ball's short bounce, Rob's racquet turned into a blur. The ball whizzed to the front and ricocheted off the wall with a sharp pop. Like a laser-guided missile, it flew to the wall opposite Rob.

Kirk lunged left. Only one leg cooperated, but he forced himself into motion. He reached desperately with his racquet before realizing the vanity of his effort. Just past the short line, the ball struck perfectly in the junction of the wall and floor and came skittering across the court—a flawless crotch serve, impossible to return.

Kirk tried to stop, but instead stumbled into the side wall, which vibrated with his ungraceful impact. He wobbled a bit, then shoved the racquet under one arm and adjusted his glove. After a few tugs, he pulled the racquet out and examined the stringing. Finally, he glanced toward Rob, who'd scooped up the ball and walked toward the gear bags.

By the time Kirk walked over, Rob had his own towel out. He ran it across his leathery face and into his crew cut, an Army leftover that hadn't varied in length since Vietnam. More salt than pepper now, its slow retreat each side of center left a tiny peninsula that grew smaller each year with the rising tide of age.

Kirk stood behind Rob, unsure of what to say or do. His leg throbbed and so did his mind. He wished he hadn't opened his mouth so carelessly. And he wished he hadn't agreed to this racquetball stuff. He didn't have time for it, but Angie had been after him to get some exercise. Anything to relieve the stress—hers, he thought, as much as his.

Before Kirk could think of what to do, Rob turned around.

"Look—I'm, uh, sorry," Kirk began.

Rob cut him off with the wave of his hand. "Forget it. You're tired. And you've got a lot on your mind—Angie's condition, not to mention a new church building going up." Rob stepped closer. "But you've got to stop taking those high shots. How many times we gotta go over that?" He grinned. "And you really should be careful not to insult your coach—unless you can beat him."

“One of these days,” Kirk said.

“Right. By then I’ll be in my eighties. Of course, that might be your ticket. But you’ll never beat anybody if you only practice once a month. You gotta play more often.”

“You know I don’t have time for that.”

Rob stared at him a moment. “You gave a pretty good sermon once about practicing spiritual things. You told those of us who didn’t think we had time to practice—if I might quote you—‘Get used to being a loser.’”

The door to the court opened, and a man stuck his head in. “You guys done?”

“Yeah,” Kirk answered. “We’re coming out.”

“We’ve still got the court for a while,” Rob said.

“I’ve had enough.” Kirk patted his right leg. “Another twist of this and someone will have to carry me into the pulpit on Sunday.”

Rob nodded and started packing his racquet. “Maybe when we get an associate, you won’t have to be in the pulpit every Sunday. Should have someone before Thanksgiving. We ought to be able to get through three candidates and make a choice by then, don’t you think?” He motioned toward the court. “You might even be able to improve your game.”

“Sure, that’s what every church wants, a pastor who moonlights as a racquetball champion.”

“Oh, did I say you’d be a champion?”

“Don’t let up, do you, Coach?”

Rob grinned and zipped his bag shut.

With gear stowed, both men sauntered into the hallway. A hint of chlorine hung in the air. As they neared the locker room, a tall black man walked out, his white T-shirt stretched taut over muscles that bulged from a hearty workout. They exchanged waves.

“I think I’ll shower at home,” Kirk said.

Rob nodded. “Didn’t work up much of a sweat myself.”

“Ahh—a little salt in the wound. How ’bout a show of mercy?”

“Mercy isn’t what you need. You need practice.”

They passed through the lobby and nodded at the desk attendant who read an open newspaper clamped in each hand. Kirk tried not to brush Rob's armless shoulder as they pushed through the glass doors to the parking lot. The summer air wrapped around them like a damp cloth.

"Have you looked over the schedule for bringing in the candidates?"

"Briefly." Very briefly, Kirk thought. "Refresh me."

"Mr. Hunter, the young man from Ohio, comes the first weekend of August. Mr. Cohen, a latecomer to the ministry, about your age, will be here the third weekend. And Mr. Mackenzie, the young Scot, comes right after Labor Day. We ought to be in our new building by then."

Kirk clamped his lips together and tried to appear deep in thought. He wanted to call off the whole thing. It was bad timing. He needed to get past all the fog surrounding Angie. But the elders had been pressing the idea of an associate for almost a year. Even Angie had urged him to get help. Her nudging, more than anyone's, had put him in the frame of mind to agree.

"You still favoring Mr. Mackenzie?" Rob asked.

Kirk hadn't said he favored anyone, only that the notion of having an assistant named Moses sounded interesting.

"That was a terrific tape he sent over," Rob continued. "Sally loved his Scottish lilt. Best message we've heard in a long time—present company excepted, of course."

Kirk smiled. "You don't have to patronize me. Anybody can type out a message, get in front of a recorder, and make it come out right."

"Okay, but I'd say he types real good. Reads it back pretty well, too."

Kirk fished a set of keys from his gear bag and unlocked the door of his silver Accord. "Well, whoever is chosen won't be doing a lot of preaching anyway. I've got other things for him to do." He tossed his bag to the passenger side.

"Don't make this guy your water boy."

"Rob, please give me a little credit. Besides, none of them have much experience."

“As I remember, we hired one like that before.”

Kirk drew his lips together again. “Score another one for the coach.” He slid into the driver’s seat. “Thanks for the lesson—or should I say whipping?”



As Kirk drove away, the sound of a clattering diesel engine made Rob turn around. Someone in a new black truck, a “dually,” pulled into the space Kirk had vacated.

With a nod of his head, Rob moved out of the way and ambled to his own battlewagon, an older model of the same truck in a faded forest green. He glanced back for a glimpse of the glistening black beauty and the linebacker he expected to step from it.

Instead, a bantam guy slid from the cab to the pavement. He couldn’t have been much over five feet, toting a gym bag that seemed out of proportion. The guy strutted toward the gym, walking taller than he looked.

Rob smiled. So easy to be fooled by the package.

Angie Vaughn spread more mulch around her impatiens, then popped a few of the seed pods, thrilled as a kid to see them burst at the slightest touch. With the back of her garden glove, she wiped her forehead. Her knees ached, so she sat back on her heels like an Indian and dragged the open bag of mulch a little closer. She loved playing in her garden. Such a wonderful distraction, especially when one needed to be distracted.

Angie heard the phone ringing in the kitchen. She looked toward the back porch for the cordless unit that ought to be ringing, too, and then realized she'd forgotten to bring it out.

Struggling, she worked herself upright, but before she could take a step, her vision blurred. A sharp abdominal pain almost put her back on the ground. She clutched the porch railing for support.

She heard a second ring, or was it a third? Forcing herself to move, Angie tossed her work gloves by the door. She ignored the rule of the house to remove shoes and hurried through the kitchen, leaving a trail of dirt on the tile. As she reached for the phone, her eyes darted to the green digits of the microwave's clock. They beamed brighter than she remembered and reminded her it was a lot later in the day.

Angie lifted the receiver, tucked her auburn hair behind an ear, and stopped the recorded greeting. For reasons she couldn't define, she knew who it was. "Hello," she said in a winded voice.

"Mrs. Vaughn, this is Dr. Sorensen's office. He'd like to speak with you if you have time."

"Of course." She took a deep breath, laid an arm across her stomach, and wondered how much time she had.

Lately time had compressed itself into something almost tangible, something she could turn over in her hand for closer scrutiny, and perhaps a better understanding of why she'd been admonished so often not to waste any of it. She supported herself against the refrigerator while her pain subsided to the soothing tones of Musak.

Dr. Bill Sorensen, her oncologist, was an elder in their church, a very affable man who, like Kirk, had just passed forty. Angie liked him. Kirk did, too, when the two of them agreed.

“Angie?”

She straightened up and ran a hand through her hair. “Yes, Bill.”

“Got those test results back. Can you and Kirk stop by first thing in the morning? Say around eight?”

“It’s bad, isn’t it?”

“Angie, you know I’d rather discuss it in person—with both of you.”

Her eyes surveyed the Birds-of-Nature calendar as she pulled a pen from the magnetic note holder on the refrigerator. “I don’t have his schedule in front of me.” She found tomorrow’s date, directly below a bright red cardinal on a branch. She recognized the tree, but couldn’t recall its name. “I’ll have to ask him.” She wrote “8:00 a.m. – Doctor” on tomorrow’s date.

“Tell him he needs to shake free, Angie.”

Dogwood, she remembered.

“If you can’t come at eight, let the receptionist know when you can. We’ll make room for you.”

“Sure, Bill. Thanks.”

She glanced back at the clock on the microwave. The call took less time than popping popcorn. Then she remembered how late it was. Better get supper going—a light one. Kirk didn’t like to eat heavily in the evening. She had no appetite at all.

Angie looked over the dirt on the floor and on herself. Both messes needed cleaning. Kirk didn’t like kissing a sweaty-faced wife or walking

through a dirty house. She plodded to the bedroom, trying to focus on the problems at hand, not on the ones that weren't defined yet.

After a shower, Angie replaced her jeans with a navy skirt. In place of the ragged pullover, she found a white blouse with tiny red buds embroidered on the front, a touch of lace around the collar. Dressier than normal, but she needed—what?—to feel pretty?

After several hard strokes with a brush, her hair settled into its tiny flip at the shoulders. She patted a few misbehaving curls then applied a touch of lipstick. As she rubbed her lips together, Angie heard the car pull into the garage.

A few steps from the kitchen, she recognized the familiar grumbling of a man upset with himself. He'd apparently done poorly at racquetball again. After fifteen years of marriage, she knew it was time to put on her smiley face and be the friend her husband needed.

Angie didn't remember the mess on the kitchen floor until she rounded the corner. Kirk stood by the fridge, a glass of water in one hand, his gym bag hanging from the other. As he drank, Angie marveled at his appearance, even after a round of racquetball. Every hair was still in place; his perfectly matched gym ensemble, though wet with sweat, still looked like it had just been pulled from a hanger. He looked good to her. Not muscular, but still athletic, like the basketball player he used to be. And she loved him.

"How's my warrior?" she asked, maneuvering around the dirt. She wrapped her arms about him and put her head against his chest.

He motioned toward the footprints with his bag. "Somebody break into the house?"

"I forgot to take the phone into the yard, had to run in to answer it."

"And not take your shoes off?" He smiled down at his stocking feet like a good boy and gave her a little bump on the bottom with his bag. "Well, we better get the dirt up before it gets tracked through the house."

She recognized his team-speak: third person plural when second singular was what he really meant. He was already down the hall before her

courage arrived to say something about Bill's call. Angie got the broom and dustpan, but before she made the first sweep, the phone rang again. Startled, she stared at it through the second ring.

"You gonna get that?" Kirk hollered from the bedroom.

She braced the broom against the counter and grabbed the phone.

"Hello. Angie Vaughn."

"Angie, it's Will Masters. Is Kirk around?"

"Yeah," she said with relief, "but he's headed for the shower. I'll see if he's in yet."

She called to Kirk and told him who it was. When he picked up, Angie cradled the receiver and resumed sweeping, reminding herself to tell Kirk about Bill Sorensen's call.



Kirk sighed as he picked up the phone. Will Masters had been after him to play golf for weeks now, or was it months?

"Hey, Will, what's up?"

"Just touching base to see if you had any spare time this week to go hit 'em. Tried to talk to you yesterday after the service, but you had quite a line."

When would the regulars realize he had to spend time with visitors to keep a growth curve going? He wasn't a politician, but there *was* a political dimension to church life.

"I just spent my wad of available time this week," Kirk said. "An occasional Monday afternoon is about it for me, and only a couple of hours at that."

"Doesn't get dark till almost nine. We can go out at six and still get nine in. I bet Angie will give you an excuse slip from supper. How you gonna get better if you don't play?"

More coaching—just what he wanted. "Will, you've been great. I appreciate all the effort you've put into me since you moved down here—a

bag full of clubs, shoes, not to mention the patience.” Kirk understood exactly how clubs ended up at the bottom of ponds. “Look, if you want it all back—”

“No, no, keep it. We’ll get around to playing eventually. I just thought we could get together. Haven’t done it in a while. Long while, in fact.”

“Well, it’s been pretty busy. Building a new sanctuary takes a lot of time. And don’t you have your own hands full growing that branch office? You gonna make partner this year?”

“I wish.”

“The accounting business ought to be full of opportunity right now.”

“Oh, plenty of opportunity, and plenty of pressure to go with it. Makes me miss those old carefree college days.”

Kirk said nothing. He didn’t remember those days as carefree, and he certainly didn’t miss them. But he could see why Will might. He’d come from a severely dysfunctional family. Going away to college would have been a huge move toward “carefree.”

Will broke the silence. “Look, Kirk, we don’t have to play golf. Just hang out a little like we used to. Talk, laugh, tell a few stories. Do us both some good.”

“I’m sorry, Will, but not this week.”

“Okay. Didn’t mean to bother you.”

Kirk shook his head. It was time for the pastor’s hat. “You’re not *bothering* me, Will. But things are really busy right now. Give me a holler next week, and we’ll try to set something up. Okay?” Kirk heard a faint “Yeah” before Will hung up.



Angie stepped down the hallway to see if Kirk was still in the shower. She heard water running, returned to the kitchen, and dropped the last of the carrot sticks into the food processor. She hoped the whine of the machine would help drive away the crazy, annoying thoughts. Like streakers at a

sports event, anxiety ran naked across her mind, an unbelievable parade of idiocy made up of all the things Dr. Sorensen *didn't* say.

A push of a button gave her an orange pile of carrot shreds, most of them slung against the side of the processor.

Stay focused.

Instead of piling the spinach on the plate she created a spiral from the center to the outer rim, each leaf overlapping like fallen dominoes.

Don't think. Just prepare the food.

Now, an orange pillow of shredded carrot piled around the outer edge. Alternating slices of ruby red tomato soldiers and cucumber green ones, heads resting on the orange pillow, feet touching in the middle.

Make it fun.

Camouflage them now with a sprinkling of sprouts. Behold: a stealth salad, the kind of health that could sneak up on you—like the thoughts.

There they went again, streaking across her brain.

She'd dealt before with doubt and suspicion, those ugly cousins of anxiety. They'd plagued her during the earlier years of childlessness. But not until the pain started did she truly wonder. There had to be some reason why she hadn't been able to have children. And how many times had friends urged her to get tested? *Girl, you haven't had a Pap smear?* Kirk had wanted children in the beginning, too, or so he said. However, the church soon became his child.

When Angie brought up adoption, a quirky twist in Kirk's theology surfaced: you didn't know what you were getting with adopted kids. Then why did God refer to *us* as adopted? she'd asked. That was different, Kirk explained; God knew what he was getting—which only made her wonder all the more why God wanted to do it.

They tried taking in young girls who needed help, but that ended with an extremely rebellious teenager. Having grown up as a foster kid herself, Angie thought she could handle the girl. But Kirk put his foot down. He didn't need the burden of shouldering other people's problems all day, only to come home to a bunch of his own. So the effort ended. After-

wards, the desire for motherhood faded, or rather, succumbed, and that chapter of her life closed.

What now? Maybe the *final* chapter, unless Dr. Sorensen planned to surprise her with some good news. She doubted that; but either way, she still believed—truly she did—that the Lord knew what he was doing. She prayed for grace and mercy, however he chose to give it. To be healed would be wonderful; to go *home* even better. She and Kirk had discussed this many times—albeit a little one-sided. She'd made her position abundantly clear: no treatment, especially if it promised very little efficacy. What could be gained by prolonging a life destined to end anyway?

“What’s for eats?” Inspector Kirk asked, his careful eye perusing the kitchen floor.

“Turkey on whole wheat and a salad. All I need is a drink order.”

“Ginger ale.”

She fetched a can from the fridge, started to say something about Dr. Sorensen, but asked, “What’d Will want?”

Kirk chuckled. “He’s trying to turn me into a PGA pastor.”

“Maybe he just wants a little fellowship.” She pulled a glass from the cupboard, opened the freezer, and fetched a few ice cubes. “You ought to go. You two haven’t done anything in a long time. You were thick as thieves in college.”

“That was a long time ago. We’re different people now, with different callings, different vocations.”

Angie poured the ginger ale and waited as the head of foam rose to the lip. She watched the fizz jump into the air like tiny fireworks and mumbled, “I didn’t know friendship was a vocation.”

When the foam died, she poured a little more before handing the glass to Kirk. “Bill Sorensen called.”

Kirk stopped in mid bite. “Test results back?”

She nodded. “He wants to see both of us tomorrow morning at eight.”

“Is it serious?”

“You know Bill. He wouldn’t say over the phone, only that we should call him with another time if we can’t make eight o’clock. But he definitely wants it to be tomorrow.”

Kirk stared down at his sandwich. “I’ll have to make some calls.” He took another bite and stared out a side window while he sipped on the ginger ale. Then he pushed back from the table, stood, and made a single swipe of his mouth with a napkin. “I’d better make those calls now.”

He gave her a long hug and patted her on the shoulder. She exchanged a languid smile for the pat. As Kirk slipped past, her eyes shifted to the untouched salad on the table. One of the tomato soldiers peeked out at her.

Kirk intoned at the car in front of him, “C’mon, green means go.” Bill Sorensen’s office was almost in sight. If they could get through the next light without delay, they’d still be on time. The vehicles in front of Kirk crawled through the intersection. When the light turned yellow, everyone sped up, including Kirk. But the light jumped to red even before the car in front of him zipped through.

They came to a jolting stop. Kirk lifted his hands from the steering wheel in helpless supplication. “This is why I schedule my hospital visits for later in the morning.”

He glanced toward Angie, expecting her to chide him for his impatience. Instead, she sat with her hands folded in her lap and stared through the windshield.

Kirk laid a hand on top of hers. “You okay?”

She nodded.

He squeezed. “Everything’ll be fine.”

“Always is,” she muttered.

More than any other person Kirk knew, Angie had the capacity for singular vision. It had drawn him to her in college, even made him envious. Before big tennis matches, she refused every plea for a date. She needed to concentrate, practice her serves and volleys.

Today would be her Wimbledon.

As soon as the light changed, Kirk sped through the intersection. “I’ve been reading about some new cancer treatments. Things have really improved.”

Angie looked at him for the first time. “We’ve already discussed this.”

They had. Every time someone they knew was diagnosed with cancer and had to undergo a lengthy treatment, Angie made her opinion abun-

dantly clear. No treatment for her. But Kirk had always hoped that, in time, she'd change her mind, see the wisdom of giving medicine a try.

"We agreed to pray for a miracle," Angie said. Her focus had returned to somewhere beyond the windshield.

"You and I both know that God often uses doctors to work his miracles."

"Are you suggesting he can't do one the old-fashioned way?"

"Angie—" Kirk sighed. "Of course he can. But they don't always take on the look and feel of the ones we read about in the Bible."

She looked at him again. "When was the last time you saw one like that?"

To Kirk's great relief, they'd reached the medical complex. He ignored her question and turned his attention to the oncoming cars.

In spite of the traffic, they arrived on time. Kirk had never been to Bill Sorensen's office, an anomaly that made him briefly wonder. He usually got around to the offices of the businessmen in the congregation, especially if they sat on the elder board. Why hadn't he been to Bill's?

The reception area had white wainscoting. The wall area above was painted a forest green. It reminded Kirk of the "green room" at his college's stage, where the actors waited. The color was supposed to relax them before they had to go on. It never worked for Kirk. Even though his parts were always small, he remained deathly afraid of forgetting his lines and being embarrassed.

Aviation prints of WWII aircraft hung around the room. At first, they struck Kirk as odd. Then he remembered that Bill was also a pilot. Had a plane, in fact, though Kirk couldn't remember what it was.

Two people were already in the waiting area. Kirk stepped to the receptionist's window and informed the girl that they'd arrived. She invited them to be seated. Someone would be with them shortly.

They sat together in a corner. Angie folded her legs at the ankles and clasped her hands together in her lap. Kirk thumbed through a dog-eared

copy of an old news magazine he'd already seen. After a couple of minutes, a nurse stepped out and called for them.

She led them down a hallway to the last door. After opening it, she motioned for them to enter. "Dr. Sorensen will be with you in a minute."

The room was obviously Bill's office. Angie sat in one of the two chairs in front of the desk. As Kirk sat in the remaining chair, he felt that familiar sense of abandonment that always came over him as a child. He'd hated going to the doctor's office. Visits often ended in pain.

A bronze nameplate stared back at them: *Dr. William Sorensen*. In the middle of the desk lay a closed green folder. Kirk stared briefly at it, and then at Angie. He wondered if he should offer to take her out for dinner.

Kirk recognized his wife's placid expression. She'd steeled herself, just as she used to for tennis tournaments. Her eyes were fixed now on the other side of the net. He wanted to help her, but as it had been at the college matches, he felt helpless. He was reduced to being a spectator. Angie, by her own admission, preferred it that way.

Unable to sit still, Kirk stood and drifted to the bookshelves packed with medical texts. With his hands folded behind his back, he perused the shelves for some clue to the mystery of his helplessness.

The door opened. Bill stepped in and closed it quietly, as though afraid he might wake someone. He offered Kirk a handshake and gave Angie a soft pat to the shoulder as he walked around her and took his seat on the other side of the desk. As soon as Kirk was seated, Bill opened the folder and regarded them for a moment with a mirthless smile.

Kirk glanced sideways at Angie. She leaned forward in her seat, ready for the first serve.

Bill tapped the contents of the folder, and in his customary fashion, sent the ball flying over the net.

"You have ovarian cancer. Stage four."

Kirk put his arm around Angie.

"How many stages?" she asked.

"Four."

Kirk looked at her, tightened his arm around her. To his surprise, she wore a faint smile.

“So I’m in the final stage,” she said, like someone about to graduate.

“Very much so. Which is why we need to start treatment immediately.”

“What type of treatment?” Kirk asked. He hated being a spectator.

Angie interrupted. “Bill, may I ask a question?”

Kirk knew what was coming.

“How many patients in my condition survive past five years?”

Bill glanced at Kirk. It was a well-formulated question, fired from a patient who had obviously practiced on her own. “Treatments have improved dramatically, Angie.”

“It’s a single-digit percentage, isn’t it, Bill?”

Bill stepped up to the challenge. Kirk watched the brief volley of argument, unsure of which side to cheer. But he knew his wife. He’d seen her play. They’d discussed the possibility of this long before now. Angela Vaughn had practiced her position on cancer treatment. And no doctor—not even Bill Sorensen—would stand up to her.

She pressed the net. “What would you do, Bill?”

“I can’t answer that question for you.”

“I’m not asking you to answer it for me.”

She leaned forward and tapped the folder. The final shot came off Angie’s racket with complete conviction.

“What would you do if those images and tests showed Bill Sorensen’s condition? What appeals to him more? The prospect of heaven in a few months, perhaps weeks? Or months of treatment with all the side effects, both for you and your family? All for a paltry chance of living beyond five years, never really feeling well. And the most you have to show for it are bragging rights that you beat death back a little. Under these conditions, Bill?”—she tapped the folder again—“is heaven so awful that you’d want to put it off? What would Bill Sorensen do?”

Angie's shot fell where the good doctor wasn't expecting it. Bill stared down at the folder. After several moments, he looked up, eyes watery.

"I'd start tuning my harp."

"Thank you, Bill." Angie patted him on the arm and stood.

Bill rose and came quickly around his desk. He pulled her in for a long hug. Then Angie headed for the door. Game. Set. Match.

It took Kirk a moment to realize the stands were emptying. Finally, he followed his champion, stopping long enough to give the loser a handshake. "Thanks, Bill."

Kirk hurried to fall in behind Angie, who was already well on her way to the locker room. He noted her distinctive stress-free gait, shoulders back, arms swinging freely, just like she always walked after a victory. But he wasn't sure this time what had been won, or who the loser actually was.

He opened the car door for Angie. She kissed him on the cheek and got in. As he walked to the driver's side, Kirk pressed his lips together, disappointed with Dr. Bill. But he couldn't tell what had disappointed him most about the doc: the fact that he crumpled so easily, or that his idea of harps in heaven was bad theology.

The gorse-dappled mountain rose out of the Highland countryside like a great bald head and stared down on Moses Mackenzie. He stood at the rear of his ruby-red Renault and waited for the pain in his lower back to subside, squatting a couple of times to speed the relief.

A bloodstained tire iron dangled from his hand. Moe looked down at the flat tire, successfully changed, lying at his feet. He let out a chuff and inspected his busted knuckle. Thankfully, the bleeding had stopped and not gotten on his clothes. He glanced at his watch and sighed—he'd be late for sure now.

Perhaps he should have accepted the offer of help from the two hikers who passed on a nearby trail. No doubt, they were attracted by the spectacle of a little person bouncing up and down on a tire iron, trying to loosen the work of a mechanic with an overly zealous air wrench. They were kind, and he'd thanked them for stopping. Then, as usual, he finished the chore alone.

Taking care not to soil his clothes, he wrestled the flat into the boot, secured it, and slammed the lid. He cleaned his hands with waterless cleaner from his glove box and tended his knuckle out of a first-aid kit he kept under the seat. Feeling a renewed urgency, he rejoined the road. With steady pressure on his pedal extender, Moe drove as fast as he dared, racing toward his past, into memories that held him as tightly as his hands gripped the steering wheel. He barreled across the northern countryside of Scotland, a printed e-mail on the seat beside him:

Dear Moe,

Can you believe it? Our first reunion is almost here. After seventeen years, the orphans of Children's Cove will be together again. I'm so happy I found you, and

*so many of the others. Do keep your promise to come. Mum will be there. And Winston perhaps, but who can say—he's the same old riddle. Attached is a map and directions, though I suspect the closer you get, the less you'll need them. Slàinte!
Mary*

He opened his fingers to relieve their tension, then clasped the wheel again and leaned into a curve. As he rounded the bend, a covey of red grouse burst into flight with a hand-clapping flutter, fussing at him in their indignant cackle. His heart pounded as he swerved; yet he laughed and called out his open window.

“Sorry, girls. Wee bit of a hurry this morning.”

July air whipped his coal-black hair as he zipped through the shadows of puffy cumulus, gliding above him like tall ships in full sail. Soon the ancient hills looked more familiar. And they called to him, called out of their peaceful, verdant pastures cut up with stone walls and sheep scattered over their green slopes like embossed figures on a patchwork quilt.

Moe hadn't seen this part of Scotland since the day the orphanage closed, a tragic day for a thirteen-year-old who'd known no other home. But now, thanks to the efforts of Mary McIver—beautiful Mary—Children's Cove was having its first reunion.

“And I'm late,” he muttered like the White Rabbit.

He and his best friend, Winston, used to sit atop the stone wall that surrounded the orphanage and stare into this countryside. Like desert travelers, they'd see things—mirages of the future, the glory to come.

It's just beyond those hills, Moesky, Winston would say.

They'd made it beyond the hills, but there'd been no glory for Moe. He'd found only the frustrations of foster care and the grapplings of growing up in a world viewed from the height of most men's belt buckle. And he'd had no Winston to soften the blows.

Moe had never been able to chase down his old friend. Mary, however, seemed to know everything. He'd been elated when her first e-mail arrived, hunting him down. He'd responded with gusto and a barrage of

questions. Moe had begged her for Winston's phone number, e-mail address, anything. But Mary had given him nothing—except the promise that if he'd come to the reunion, he could have all the information he wanted.

Finally, Moe saw the turn-in and the old stone bridge that spanned a small stream. The sight sent a sudden tingle through his body, and contrary to his hurried frame of mind, he stopped in the middle of the bridge, slid from his car, and stepped to the edge. He looked down on the chattering water that glistened in the sun. The stream ran into an open field, through patches of heather, tall green grass, and the labyrinth of memories that rose up in him like a dream.

Moe imagined Hilda Montgomery—"Mum" to all of them—leading her brood of orphans along the stream, pointing out new and marvelous things. Mary was there, freckles on her cheeks and a wildflower in her hair. So was stoic Winston MacReynolds. He'd been the closest thing to a brother Moe had known, and a fierce guard dog between them and their nemeses, the Walker brothers.

Moe hurried back to his car and sped across the bridge. He drove past the sign with the name of the new establishment: *Highland View*. Beneath the name, in a smaller script, were the words "Retirement Facility."

Moe slowed as he pulled into the parking lot. It was paved now, not the old grass-spotted gravel he remembered. He searched for an empty spot and found one near a far corner. He hoped all the cars meant a large turnout for the reunion. That would please Mary, and Mum, too.

He adjusted the rearview mirror for a last inspection of himself. He patted a few errant hairs into place and brushed the front carefully across his broad forehead. Nothing lingered in the corners of his eyes. *Grey as river stones*, Mum had described them. *They sparkle, dear heart*.

Moe opened his door and slid to the pavement. With his hands, he ironed the wrinkles out of his yellow pullover, stuffed the shirttail back into the top of his navy-blue trousers, and jerked the pants up a bit. His weight was much better, but still an eternal struggle.

With a joyful sigh, he started up the hill. The old five-foot stone wall that surrounded the campus appeared a little grander, and still taller. Moe topped out at four feet four. Like a welcoming hand, the wall reached out to him. So Moe reached back—back into time.

As he walked toward the gate, he laid an open hand against the rough surface and let his fingers rise and fall with the undulation of the stones. The soft moss tickled his palm and released in him a great collage of images, all quilted into a single thought: *home*.

He'd come home, where he was understood best, accepted most. Home—the place of his greatest friendships. Oh, he'd had his enemies. But in the end, all the children shared a common denominator. Everyone understood their fractured life.

The old, iron gate wore a fresh coat of paint. Yet, to his delight, it still squeaked when he opened it. He stepped through and looked toward the main building, as fortress-like as he remembered. In three levels of stone, it rose up like an ancient monastery. And the two wings looked the same. These had housed the children—nearly fifty of them—girls to the right, boys to the left. Moe glanced toward the window where his and Winston's beds had been, and then continued.

The new oak door pushed open easily. At the end of the short foyer, a huge wooden desk blocked most of the opening. A well-worn ink blotter covered the center in a drab green. On one corner sat a phone and directory, on the opposite a bright bouquet of fake daisies in a plain white vase. No one sat behind the desk. Consequently, the first thing to greet Moe was the smell, one he found hard to describe.

Moe walked around the desk. He stopped at the edge of what they'd called the Family Hearth, a large room with stone walls and exposed beams. The fireplace remained the focal point, but the majestic portrait was gone. A tawdry landscape now hung over the mantel. He peered down the hall that had led to the boys' wing. Everything had been renovated. He recognized nothing.

An elderly woman in a wheelchair approached, pushed by another woman who didn't look very young herself. Mother and daughter, he assumed. They shared the same bulbous nose, the same drooping eyes. Both looked resigned to being here.

"Little man!" the old woman shrieked. A bony hand reached out to touch him, but the daughter maneuvered the wheelchair away, pushing faster as she passed Moe. With a swift glance, she measured him with her mournful eyes.

Around the room, others slumped in their wheelchairs, a gaggle of limp arms and legs. A few sat in the hypnotic grasp of the television, but most slept. Moe's joy swiftly ebbed. For one brief moment, he thought of leaving. Then he heard his name.

"Moses Mackenzie."

He turned toward the voice and saw Hilda Montgomery walking toward him. "Mum," he said and ran to her.

Hilda smiled at him with perfect dentures set in a tired and sagging face. She seemed a little shorter, but still a head taller than him. She would be over seventy now. Hopefully not a tenant here in the place that had once been home.

"I'm so glad you made it, Moe." She hugged him to her side; then she held him at arms' length. "Look at you—such a fine young man. How I wish I could've kept up with you."

Moe felt a flush. "I'm sorry. I lost track of everyone."

"I did, too, Dear. But thanks to Mary, we've found each other. Oh, that girl is a godsend." Hilda hugged him again. "Now that I have you, I don't want to let you go. But you'd best hurry on to the courtyard. They're about to begin the luncheon. I'm hunting the stragglers."

Moe started to leave but turned back. "Did Winston make it?"

"I'm afraid he didn't, Love."

"Where is he?" Moe asked.

"Somewhere in America, I'm told."

"Really? I'm going there in September."

Hilda's eyes widened. "Are you now? Well, we must hear more of this. I want to know everything my children are up to."

"I promise," Moe said. "Do you know where Winston is in the States?"

"Mary has the particulars."

A light came on inside Moe at the mention of Mary's name.

Hilda smiled down at him, the same way she'd always done when she could read his thoughts. "She's in the courtyard with her husband. And a fine young man he is, too."

Moe nodded. "She deserves nothing less." The light in him dimmed to a poignant memory as he reminded himself that Mary's last name was no longer McIver.

In the courtyard, Moe wandered through the crowd, scanning for the lovely face he longed to see again. A few people waved to him. There was a broad range of age, from those near his own thirty years to a few gray-heads, children who'd left the home long before his time. Then he heard the shout, the voice that was a permanent melody to him.

"Moe!"

He spun and saw Mary trotting from a far corner of the courtyard. He ran to meet her. Arms extended, she met him in the middle of the courtyard. They embraced as fiercely as the day they'd said goodbye.

Mary stepped back, held each of his hands, and smiled at him.

Moe's heart raced, his mind hummed. "Mary," he uttered like a man using his last breath.

Tiny freckles still winked from her soft, flushed cheeks. Her long red hair had lost none of its brilliance. Pinned to each side of her head were pewter crosses in a Celtic design that matched the necklace around her thin, pale neck. Her lightweight cotton dress hung loosely from her in a peasant fashion. Its buff color set off the two hazel eyes that now studied him.

"Ciamar a tha thu?" she asked him in Gaelic.

He recognized the phrase, but couldn't remember a proper response. He'd not kept up their "secret language," a few Gaelic phrases they'd memorized as their passage to otherworldliness.

How was he? He decided to answer in his old trademark style.

"I'm either A—marvelous, B—terribly excited, C—overjoyed to see you, or D—all of the above."

Mary laughed. "D, I hope."

"You're as brilliant as ever." They embraced again.

A young man joined them, and Mary reached back to take one of his arms.

“This is my husband, Jordan Campbell.”

Moe extended his hand. “Moses Mackenzie, but all my friends call me Moe.”

“Well, I’m glad to finally meet you. You’re all she’s talked about lately. *Moe* this and *Moe* that.” He smiled down at his wife and leaned closer to Moe. “Had me worried for a minute.”

Mary cut in. “What was there to worry about?” The hazel eyes settled again on Moe. “He’s Moe, just the same wonderful Moe.”

A shout came from the dining hall. “Everyone in for the luncheon.”

“Please sit with us, Moe,” Mary said.

Her attention shifted to Jordan, and they fell in with the others who made their way quietly like worshippers gathering for a service. Lagging behind, Moe saw Mary whisper into her husband’s ear. Jordan pulled her in for a quick kiss.

A wave of envy broke over Moe, followed by the inevitable undertow of inexorable longing. He’d always been drawn to her. She’d been the magnet; he’d been nothing but metal shavings. Besides him, she’d been the smallest person at the home, barely a head taller. Both were early-birds, so they’d worked together in the kitchen helping to prepare breakfast. He helped knead the dough and roll it out for the sweet-scented pastries that were Mary’s specialty.

He’d told her once that he wished they could always be together. *We will be friends forever*, she had said in her kind way—always kind—to help him avoid embarrassing himself.

“Well, if it ain’t the baby Jesus!”

The exclamation jolted Moe from his reverie. The voice had changed, old and raspy now, not quite as taunting. But he recognized it nonetheless. Before he turned, Moe knew he’d be facing his childhood terrors: the Walker brothers, Ronny and Danny, twins in birth and mischief. And this time there was no Winston around to keep them in line.

“Well, Ronny,” Moe said as he turned, “I’d like to say it’s a pleasure to see you...”

“...but all pleasure escapes me at the moment,” Ronny said, finishing Moe’s favorite retort. “Can’t say as I blame you. We did give you a bit of grief from time to time. You’ll forgive, I hope. Water over the dam and all that, eh?”

Moe stared at the wasted figure of Ronny Walker, dressed in ill-fitting clothes. He wore the half-smile of a sober drunk. His gaunt face had a day’s growth of beard and looked a decade older than Moe knew it to be. What had happened to the strapping young athlete? Moe looked around for the other Walker. “And where’s Danny?”

Ronny’s half-smile faded to nothing. He looked upward and away, and then back to Moe with red, watery eyes. “Cocaine, Moe. A lethal attraction, I’m afraid. Lost him last year.”

To Moe’s surprise, he felt genuine grief. “I’m very sorry to hear that.”

“Tried to stop him, I did. But it’s a demon, you know. Got hold and wouldn’t let go till it sucked every bit o’ life from him.” Ronny looked away again and batted his eyes fiercely. “But he’s better off. Won’t be bothered by that demon any more, will he?”

Moe shook his head. “No. I guess not.”

He felt the warm swell of sympathy, something he would not have felt years ago for his tormentors. And he felt a dread, especially for Danny. There was still hope for Ronny, but poor Danny. If he had not repented of his sin and trusted Christ to save him, he was in greater anguish now than cocaine ever gave him.

And what of Ronny? He probably knew a little of the demon himself. Moe knew he should share the “good news” with Ronny. But for reasons he was ashamed to face, Moe said nothing further as he stepped aside and gestured for his old oppressor to continue into the dining hall.

Ronny ambled just inside the doorway. Moe watched him shuffle out of the way of others who searched for tables. Though several people eyed

Ronny, no one spoke to him. He and Danny had made many enemies. And now, in his polyester suit, he appeared woefully out of place.

Moe spied Mary's hand, waving him over. On his way, he touched Ronny's arm.

"Would you like to join our table?"

Ronny looked relieved. "Terribly kind of you, Moe."

As they worked their way to Mary's table, Moe noted the old orphanage pictures that had been tacked to the walls around the room. Small clusters of people gathered in front of different photos. In openmouthed astonishment, they muttered and pointed.

Moe wanted to peek, too, but as usual, could not see past those who blocked his view. He continued on, with Ronny on his heels like a lost pup. Just before reaching Mary's table, Moe glanced up at a photo with no one in front of it. He abruptly stopped. Ronny nearly bowled him over.

Moe stared up at a picture he'd never seen. He and Winston sat on top of the stone wall, their backs to the camera, in a corner of the property behind the kitchen. The spot was their favorite retreat when the weather permitted. The photo was black and white, so it failed to capture the beautiful color of the hills that rose up in the background. It did, however, reveal the contrast of two small hearts against the larger dreams before them. The scudding clouds alluded to an approaching storm.

"Where's your old chum, Winston?" Ronnie muttered over Moe's shoulder. "Don't believe I saw him."

Moe swallowed hard. He turned away from the photo. In a few steps, he stood beside Mary.

She nodded toward the picture. "Like it?"

"Where did you find it?"

"It's one of mine. I took it right before the orphanage closed. Couldn't develop it for quite some time afterwards. Would you like a copy?"

"Of course."

After a prayer, they sat down to a family-style meal, similar to what Hilda had done with them. Food was passed around the table, each person taking a portion. It had been Hilda's method of feeding them while teaching a bit of etiquette along the way.

Seven chairs surrounded their table, but only six people. To Moe's left sat Ronny, completely out of character. He listened quietly to the others while picking at his food as though it was his last meal. On Moe's right sat Mary, with Jordan next to her. On the other side of Jordan sat the brainy Geoffrey MacDonald and his wife. From his pockmarked face, Geoffrey appeared to have lost his struggle with acne.

Between Geoffrey and Ronny was an empty seat, probably by Geoffrey's design—the Walkers had been his tormentors as well. Ronny undoubtedly linked the empty seat with his missing brother. Moe thought of Winston.

Mary's husband began a tale of some legal case in which he was involved. While Ronny, Geoffrey and his wife became entranced, Moe leaned toward Mary and tapped her on the arm.

"I'd like some of that information you promised."

Mary moved her head closer like a co-conspirator. "Would you, now?"

"Like Winnie's whereabouts. Mum says he's in America."

"Florida, though I don't remember precisely where."

"How in the world did you find him?"

"How did I find any of you?" She touched her husband's arm. "Jordan, of course."

Jordan looked briefly in their direction, but then went back to his narrative with the others.

"I met him when I worked up the courage to go to Sir George Wheatley's office."

Moe's eyes widened. "The same George Wheatley who wooed Mum?"

“Yes. He’s Sir George now—got his ‘K’ in the last round of honors. I hoped he’d at least know where Mum was.” Mary leaned closer. “Indeed, he did.”

“They married,” Moe exclaimed in a whisper.

“He wishes. But, no, he’s *still* wooing—and taking care of her.”

Moe nodded. “Someone should. She deserves it.”

“At first, I feared he wasn’t going to help. I think he worried what it might do to Mum. But I begged him and—” She paused. Her eyes glistened. “Meeting Mum changed everything. She was the happiest he’d ever seen her. So he put Jordan to helping us.” Here she touched her husband’s arm again and smiled. “One thing led to another. Jordan had all kinds of connections, through Sir George, of course. And he’s exceedingly clever.” She looked around the room and smiled even larger. “Now, here you all are.”

Moe glanced toward Mary’s husband and felt a pang of envy. “So you found Winnie in Florida? I’m going to the States myself in September.”

“You’re not moving, I hope.”

“I don’t know yet.” He explained his opportunity to candidate for a position as an associate pastor in a rural church. As he spoke, all expression left her face, as though the revelation had somehow disappointed her.

“So—you’re going to be a preacher. You always were a bit like that. You couldn’t find any opportunities in Scotland?”

He shook his head. “Not at present.”

“Will you be anywhere near Winnie?”

“South Carolina. Not too far away, I suppose.”

“Then you *must* see him. You must tell him how disappointed we were that he didn’t come.”

“Did he say why?”

Mary shrugged. “Something about his work. He’s a major-domo or butler or something. Extremely busy he says. I thought I wasn’t going to get *anything* out of him. Just like our old Winnie. I explained that we were

putting together a scrapbook for Mum, and I just kept pestering him. He finally sent a picture and a few notes for it.”

“Was Fiona in the picture?” Moe had often wondered what happened to the dark-haired beauty who’d captured Winston’s heart in their last year at the orphanage.

“No,” Mary said, plain-faced. “And Jordan never found her.”

No doubt, Jordan had not been encouraged to find Fiona McAden. Moe had always suspected that Mary harbored designs on Winston herself. Thankfully for Moe, Winston had paid her little mind.

“Did he mention me?” Moe asked.

“Of course he did. ‘Hellos and regrets to all, especially Moe.’” She passed a basket of rolls at Geoffrey’s request. “There’s something in the scrapbook notes, too. You should look. We’re presenting it to Mum at the end of the luncheon. I’m sure she’ll be happy to show it to you.”

Moe felt a tap on his left arm and turned to see Ronny pointing to the salt shaker. Moe handed it to him and then turned back to Mary.

“I can’t believe you did all this work,” he said.

Before Mary could respond, Geoffrey butted in. “Mary, did you bake anything for this?”

Jordan answered for her. “As a matter of fact, she did. And I was conscripted to help. Been here since seven this morning.”

“You should have told me,” Moe said to Mary. “I would’ve come, just like old times.”

Jordan spoke again. “Wouldn’t have done. Ruined the whole surprise.”

“Jordan!” Mary chided.

Moe’s eyes lit up with that revelation. “Did you make what I think you made?”

Her cheeks rounded up as she smiled like a pixie. “I most certainly did.”

“You made Moe-pies?” Geoffrey blurted out.

“For everyone.” Mary turned to Moe. “And the usual special one for you—a little late for your birthday. Hope you don’t mind.”

As though on cue, servers came from the kitchen bearing trays with Mary’s puff pastry concoction. Moe’s came, as it always did, in the shape of an “M,” each arm of the letter containing a custard filling, topped with a chocolate glaze.

Mary had invented the dessert for one of Moe’s birthdays, and to placate everyone else, had made plain round ones for them with the same filling and glaze. They were a hit that became a regular treat at the home.

Applause started when the pastries were served, and a few shouts of “Bravo, Mary.” A collective “Oooo” went up from the group as Moe pulled her over and kissed her on the cheek.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “You’re the greatest, as always.”

“Friends forever,” she whispered back.

Moe savored every bite of his “birthday” pastry. He listened to the hum of voices around the tables, the clink of silverware. A woman laughed, high-pitched and loud. Mum would have called her down when they were children. Today, no one cared.

“I did love this treat,” Ronny said in his first complete sentence since the meal began. “Even though it had your name on it.”

Moe recognized the mischievous grin. But there was no threat in the dark brown eyes now. Instead, something akin to despair looked out.

Ronnie shoveled the last bite into his mouth, set his spoon down, and ran a forefinger around the inside of the bowl. He pulled up the last of the yellow custard, which lay along the edge of his finger like a squeeze of toothpaste. Ronnie poked the finger into his mouth and pulled it out clean. “Splendid,” he muttered.

Moe turned to say thank you again to Mary, but she and Jordan had slipped from the table. Jordan left through a side door while Mary walked to where Hilda Montgomery sat with a few members of her old staff. Mary faced everyone in the dining hall, folded her hands in front of her, and waited for silence.

“I have dreamed of this day for many years. My husband will tell you that I have talked ceaselessly about it. And now, thanks to his wonderful help, I don’t have to dream any more. We are here—we have come home.”

Moe started the applause that swept through the room. Mary waited again.

“A special thanks goes to the staff of Highland View for letting us use the facility that was once ours.”

More applause rose from the group. As it died, Mary turned toward Hilda's table.

"And, of course, we would've had nothing that resembled a home if it had not been for those who gave of themselves to make it that way. We learned to care for each other, share one another's burdens, and truly love one another. And though we had no parents, we did have...*Mum*."

This time the applause roared. Everyone stood, all except Hilda. Mary put an arm around her, coaxed her up, and led her away from the table.

Hilda kissed Mary on the cheek, smiled at everyone, and gestured toward her staff like a conductor with an orchestra. They'd done it together. Everyone deserved a portion of praise.

When the clapping faded, Hilda took a step toward the crowd. She pointed a finger, and in a mock voice of command said, "Now you children sit down and behave."

Laughter replaced the fading applause. The crowd found their seats again. Jordan, who had reappeared, now stepped next to Mary with a cloth-covered item in his arms. Hilda started toward her table, but Mary gently restrained her.

"I also want to thank you," Mary said to the crowd. "Your cooperation has made this next item possible. Thank you for sending your pictures and filling out the bio sheets I sent you. I've put them all together with copies of the orphanage pictures you see hanging on the walls around you." She turned to Hilda. "And now, Mum, from all of us—Thank you."

Jordan pulled the cover off the scrapbook that Mary had mentioned earlier to Moe. As Jordan held it up, Moe could tell from the cover that it was not a hasty project.

The crowd came to its feet again as Mary handed the gift to Hilda, who stared at it, and then beamed at all her children until the applause receded.

"I feel like singing," Hilda said. She marveled at the album again as she ran her hand across the cover. "Dear child," she said and turned to Mary. She quickly brought a hand to her mouth to stifle an outburst of

crying. Mary, ever the ready one, pulled a tissue from her pocket and handed it to Hilda.

At Moe's table, Geoffrey began singing one of Hilda's favorite hymns in a tenor voice Moe did not remember. Geoffrey's wife joined him, her soprano doubling the strength of the melody. One by one, everyone joined in. Several voices, now mature, fell into the parts. By the first chorus, they'd found their stride, and all their voices swelled with the joy of being one again.

Cheers and whoops went up at the end. A couple rushed to Hilda and Mary, which opened the floodgates on the remaining crowd. Moe tried to move forward but was squeezed out, as he had been so many times at the orphanage. Winston would have plowed a path through for them.

Moe worked his way to the outside of the crowd and around the edge of the room until he could get within eyesight of Mary and Hilda. The wait to speak with Mum would be long, and there remained one place he desperately wanted to visit.

He continued to work his way to Mary until he could give one of her arms a special squeeze, a signal they'd used as children. She instantly turned and leaned toward him.

"I'm going to the wall," he said. "Tell Mum I'll be back."

Mary winked at him as he eased away.

He worked his way back through the crowd and into the kitchen. The equipment had changed—newer, more modern—but the aura had not. He waded through the aroma of fresh-baked bread, a hint of cinnamon, and the rich heaviness of pork. Memories flooded him again: he and Mary kneading bread, sliding pastry sheets into the oven while bacon sizzled on the grill, the two of them slapping their aprons to see the puffs of flour jump.

He left through the kitchen's rear entrance and walked to the corner of the wall where he and Winston had held court in their kingdom of dreams. The ground swelled in the corner, making this the only section of

the wall he could climb without Winston's help. He pulled himself up, sat down, and let out a great sigh.

The landscape had changed little. In the distance, stone walls still crisscrossed the green and rolling hills. Feathery, bell-shaped flowers hung from the purple stems of the heather. Sheep meandered about the hillsides.

The fickle weather was unusually clear, the air clean as fresh linens. Moe closed his eyes and took in a long breath. He and Winston had imagined countless wonders here, all of them on the other side of those hills. They'd dreamed of where they'd go, what they'd do, how the world would bow before them. With eyes closed, Moe recalled the days that played like a cinema against his eyelids.



“Mary told me I'd find you here.”

Moe opened his eyes and turned to see Hilda Montgomery. A few sprigs of her gray hair waved in the gathering breeze. She walked up the swell of ground and stood next to him.

“Winston mentions *the wall*.” She tapped the scrapbook cradled in her arms. “Mary said you might be interested in seeing a portion of this.” She laid the book carefully beside him.

“Magnificent,” Moe said. The leather-bound book had a relief of the orphanage tooled into the cover. The word “scrap” did not fit this album.

Hilda opened it to Winston's entry, which she had marked with a slip of paper. Mary had asked everyone to send in a *Then* and a *Now* picture, if possible. She did her best to provide missing *Thens* from old orphanage archives, which appeared to be the case with Winston.

The *Then* photo was a faded one of Winston at fifteen, dressed in his rugby uniform, hands rakishly at the hips, one foot resting on a ball. Towheaded curls flopped everywhere. A lopsided smile suggested he felt coerced into this snapshot and was merely complying—typically Winnie.

Winston's strong, athletic features repeated themselves in the *Now* picture. Shorts and a tank top revealed a tanned, muscular frame that had become better defined with age. He sat on a balustrade with his back to a supporting pillar, one leg drawn up and held in place with his hands clasped over the shin. His other leg dropped out of sight on the far side of the balustrade.

A snatch of water in the upper right-hand corner of the picture confirmed the address: Sarasota, Florida. With the same wistful blue eyes, he looked away from the camera—ostensibly toward the water. But to Moe, who'd known Winston better than anyone, his old friend was still looking for a future that had not yet arrived.

Mary had sent everyone a clever form: a short series of questions bordered by a collage of images reminiscent of the home. For "Best Friend," Winston wrote *Moesky* in his neat, distinct script. For "Best Memory," he wrote *Sitting on the wall with Moesky*.

Moe looked away and ran a finger across his eyes to check the tears. When he turned back, Hilda had closed the book.

"Did you get your copy of the directory Mary compiled?"

He shook his head to buy more time before speaking. "Not yet."

"Then you'd best hurry. She and Jordan are leaving soon, I think. They've been here all day, you know, and no telling how many trips before now." She tilted her head slightly. "They would probably appreciate a hand packing up, don't you think?"

"Yes, Mum," he said through a smile, and dutifully hopped down from the wall.

As they walked back toward the kitchen, Moe carried the album for her. She brushed at her hair with one hand while the other lifted her skirt from the ground.

"A perfect day for a reunion," Moe said. The cumulus clouds were gone. A thin layer of cirrus had appeared, dry-brushed against an azure sky.

“I suspect any day would have done. It was extremely kind of Mary to do all that work. It’s a miracle she found as many of us as she did.” She tapped the book in Moe’s arms. “And what a treasure this is. I know how to pray better for you now.”

“I would like that.”

“Don’t you ever doubt it, young man.” She laid a hand on his shoulder. “Now tell me more about this trip to America. Mary says you’re going there to be a minister.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “I’m just one of the candidates at present.”

“No opportunities closer to home?”

He shook his head. “I had several interviews, but no one invited me back.”

“I see.” She sighed and stopped at the kitchen’s rear entrance. “You’ve interviewed with the American church?”

“Yes, ma’am. I sent them a resume and a taped message several weeks ago. We spoke over the phone last week.”

Mum looked down at him. She had the eyes of God, or so they’d always thought as children. She could definitely see behind herself and usually *through* them.

“You didn’t tell them you were a little person.”

He hesitated. “They didn’t ask.”

She surprised him with one of her hearty laughs that made her jiggle and squeeze shut her eyes.

“Nor did I when you first came to us as a baby. But I must confess to being a bit thunderstruck when I was told, and overwhelmed with questions. Your medical care gave us some challenges. We nearly lost you a couple of times, and I fell into a terrible depression.”

She cupped his head in her hands, which sent a shiver of warmth through him. He was so rarely touched anymore.

“You remember Miss McDonough?” Mum continued. “She was my very best friend. And she did what all good friends do—she helped me up.

‘Hilda,’ she said, ‘you know the Lord sends every child—and he will help us.’”

She drew him to herself and hugged him.

“Indeed, he did. You were a blessing, Moe. You taught us how near-sighted we are in judging others. And you helped poor Winston, such a melancholy boy. You gave him something to care about.”

“We needed each other,” Moe said.

“Good friends do.” She held him at arms’ length. “Now I must confess to a divided heart. I don’t know whether to pray you get that position or not. We will certainly miss you if you do.”

“I promise to stay in touch.”

Mum raised an eyebrow. “Be careful of your vows, young man. I remember such a promise from years ago.”

Moe hung his head. He’d written only two letters before losing contact with her.

“But keeping it should be easier in this day and age,” Mum continued. “I have a cell phone. Doesn’t that amaze you? And there’s always email. I may be in my seventies, but this old maid has moved into the computer age.” Her face beamed with a puckish grin. “I’m a terror in some of the chat rooms.”



Moe handed the last box to Jordan, who stuffed it into the back of his van.

“Well, that’s the end of it,” Jordan said.

As he closed the rear door, Mary ran up with yet another item. Jordan peered through the van’s side door for an available space. “Don’t know where we’ll put it.”

“This is a gift for Moe.” She handed Moe the flat package wrapped in brown paper. “It’s the picture you wanted. I gave you the one off the wall.”

Moe hugged her. “This reunion was a wonderful thing, Mary.”

“You *will* stay in touch, won’t you? After chasing everyone down, I’ll be very disappointed if I don’t hear from any of you, especially you, Moses Mackenzie. That will be your last Moe-pie if you don’t.”

“I promise,” Moe said. *Be careful of your vows, young man.*

“Do try to see Winston when you cross the pond. This may be your only chance. Tell him we missed him terribly.”

“And when you’re in London next, please stay with us,” Jordan said. “Here’s my card.”

Moe glanced at the commanding script: *Wheatley, Johnstone and Dunn, Solicitors*. Jordan’s name was in the center, addresses and appropriate numbers at the bottom.

Jordan offered Moe his hand. “Thank you for your help. Do come see us.”

“I trust you’ll take care of this flower,” Moe said, smiling at Mary.

“Watered every day,” said Jordan. “My word on it.”

Mary gave Moe a final hug. “Friends forever?”

“Forever,” Moe said. “*My* word on that.”

Angela.
A burst of morning sunlight smacked Kirk in the eye. The road before him vanished. He flipped down his visor and jerked his foot back from the accelerator. His hands tightened on the steering wheel. He entered a curve, and the sun shifted. Kirk moved his visor to dampen the flick, flick, flick of dazzling light that flashed through the foliage. His eyes fell on the landmarks that were becoming familiar. He'd come this way every morning since they broke ground on their new building.

He passed a dirty brick house with a red-mud lawn. A scrawny blue tick hound bellowed as it chased after the car. On the opposite side of the road, a rusty-roofed trailer and muscle car appeared, both on cinder blocks.

Angie.

He wanted to talk to someone about her, but who? She'd been his only sounding board since he entered the ministry. Whom could he trust who wouldn't judge him as weak?

As he rounded another curve, Kirk looked out at Leonard Wadkins's large white farmhouse with a traditional wrap-around porch. The church's founder and main benefactor lived in the middle of manicured pastures with multiple ponds, all of them contained in their own green heaven by a white rail fence. The church could be seen from the back porch, which was how Leonard had planned it when he donated the land. The location was a bit out of the way, but no one could argue with the price.

Kirk definitely could not talk to Leonard. Despite his generous nature, Leonard took a dim view of those he perceived as weak. The word didn't exist in the Wadkins lexicon, nor did it fit the man who'd served several

terms in the state legislature while he built a sizeable real estate empire that spanned several states.

Only one local person had managed to defy Leonard in his attempt to buy up the land surrounding the church. Frank McIver owned the property across the street that ran the length of Leonard's land. On it sat the last two landmarks before reaching the church: a dilapidated barn surrounded by ancient implements about to dissolve into the ground; and a once-red '59 Chevy, anchored in a patch of brown weeds that had grown above the windows.

Kirk passed the Chevy and rounded the last curve. As he crested a knoll, the white cross and steeple of his church appeared like a brilliant vision against a sapphire sky. Four fluted columns held up the front overhang attached to the colonial brick building. The architecture was old school, but so was Leonard. He'd supplied the plans as well as most of the money.

Kirk had marveled for months as construction progressed. His emotions, however, had run the gamut. As the building took on a greater radiance, Angie had lost more and more of hers. Despite her good spirit, the graph of her strength looked like a bear market, each small peak followed by a greater decline. The only things on an upward trend had been the pain and medications to deal with it. Her only reprieve had been the garden. But her interest in that had waned, too. Each day, she stayed in bed longer and longer until the day she didn't get out of it at all. And now, hospice was there.

Orange traffic cones blocked the front entrance to the newly paved parking lot. At the rear sat a large pickup truck and a panel van. Kirk cringed when he saw one set of the van's wheels on their sod that wasn't a month old. The pickup had a machine in tow that looked like a Jackson Pollock painting on wheels. Two men in white paint suits were snapping chalk lines. Another, who looked Hispanic, dragged a handicap template toward the front corner of the church. Their clothes looked as spattered as the machine and made Kirk wonder why many painters wore white.

Kirk turned and took the road that ran down the side of the church. He pulled in at the rear by the Family Center, a metal building attached to the sanctuary by a covered walkway. His secretary's new LeSabre was there. No surprise. Victoria Merriman arrived first to almost everything. Preston Wunder, recent college grad and part-time music leader, had rankled Victoria's feathers by referring to the car's color as "elderly blue."

Preston's silver Civic, with a "gazillion" miles on it, sat to the right of the Buick. To the right of him, as though following a pecking order, was the newer red Celica that belonged to Ruth Hernandez, Preston's assistant—and soon-to-be fiancée, if the gossip had any credence.

After parking on the other side of Victoria, Kirk walked toward the painters. The Hispanic-looking man was getting something from the back of the panel van. Kirk waited for him to turn around.

"You guys gonna be done today?"

"No hablo Inglés."

With one hand, Kirk pointed to the asphalt. With the other, he pointed straight down, hoping to set the time frame. "Today?"

The man shrugged and looked toward the other two who squatted over their chalk line at the far end of the parking lot. Kirk nodded, and then walked toward the others, adjusting his suit as he went. When he came near, one of the men looked up and squinted through the smoke that swirled from his cigarette.

"Mornin', Rev'rend." He and his helper slid their measuring sticks across the asphalt and repositioned for another pop of their line.

"Think you'll be done today?" Kirk asked.

"If not, Leonard will have my hide." They popped and moved again.

Kirk pushed open his suit jacket and placed his hands on his hips. "I don't suppose you guys could move that truck. You're on new sod."

The man stood, removed his cigarette, and barked something in Spanish across the lot. The Hispanic fella jumped in the van and moved it.

"Thanks," Kirk said.

"No problem." The man popped another line and moved his stick.

“If you need me, just see my secretary. She’ll let me know.”

“You bet, Rev’rend.”

Kirk watched a few seconds as the men continued their methodic march across the parking lot. He walked to where the van had been parked to assess the damage. A brown streak ran through the sod. He shook his head and made a mental note to say something to Leonard. Better to let him deal with it.

He walked gingerly across the grass to the picnic shelter that had been built beneath an oasis of oaks and poplars at the rear of the parking lot. If the weather remained warm enough, the church would have its first dinner-on-the-lawn on Sunday.

Angie.

She loved picnics. Kirk hoped she could make it, prayed she would. Yet Angie never left the bed now except with assistance. She could still use the bathroom, but someone had to get her there and back.

He wished she’d change her mind about treatment, but there was little chance of that. After their June meeting with Bill Sorensen, Angie became a new woman. She was like someone who’d looked through a travel brochure at a wonderful place and now had the ticket.

She called her friends to spread the joy, but not everyone embraced it. Instead, there was the predictable shock: *Angie, do you know what you’re doing?*

Many of her friends argued gently with her. But despite their misgivings about her judgment, they all offered their support. And who among them could argue against the prospects of heaven? Only Wilma, the widow next door, seemed baffled that Angie would make no effort to extend her life. She saw the decision as almost selfish.

“What about Kirk?” Wilma had asked.

“He’s a pastor,” Angie answered. “He understands.”

And in the beginning, Kirk was sure he did. This was another challenge from the Lord, another test of their faith, especially his. And he

believed that God would show himself mighty on their behalf. Angie would get better.

For the last several weeks, his preaching had taken on a tent-meeting fervency. He'd hated giving up the pulpit to the two candidates that came, but that's the way things fell out. Still, he'd kept a rally going. They were the children of Israel before the Red Sea. During one sermon, he'd stood like Moses with his arms outstretched and cried, "Fear not, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord!" Several had remarked that, except for his tenor voice and lack of a beard, it had been a stirring rendition, almost as good as Charlton Heston.

But Angie continued to go downhill. Kirk didn't think he was worrying. Oh, he'd heard the demonic voices of anxiety whisper over his shoulder. But he'd beaten them back, and thankfully, no one knew—no one except Angie. He couldn't hide anything from her.

Kirk walked through the shelter imagining all the food, the laughter, kids running around. Too bad they had to entertain the last candidate at their first picnic. But that's what was on the schedule, and they'd have a reception for him anyway. Combining it with the picnic was a lot easier on the ladies.

He stopped at the end of the shelter and looked behind to a small open field. It was the portion of property set aside as the graveyard. He stared for a moment at the fragile blades of new fescue that stood up like bright green needles. Then he turned away and started for the church.

A breeze stirred a few of the leaves that had begun to fall. The summer had been dry, and some of the trees were shedding early. The start of a motor drew Kirk's attention. He looked over his shoulder and saw the Hispanic man unloading the painting machine from its trailer. Perhaps today would be the end of the construction schedule he'd been keeping. He could go back to something of a normal agenda—and in his own office now!

The last candidate for associate pastor arrived tomorrow. Kirk moaned at the thought. With Angie's condition, he should have called off

the whole process. Yet he never dreamed Angie would sink this far, this fast.

But after Sunday, interruptions to the pulpit would be over. There'd be no more candidates. He could continue his revival-like call for faith that heals. Like the children of Israel, they might have their backs to the Red Sea, but—

Kirk's walk slowed to a stop. A thought struck him like a huge hand: the final candidate—his name was Moses.

A coincidence? Could the Lord be doing something?

No. But the more he thought about it, the more the thought took shape. It sprouted arms and legs, grew a beard. *Moses.*

Was God sending his servant—or at least someone with the same name—and at Angie's lowest point—to set them free? Free from doubt? From fear? From *cancer*?

This was hard to believe. But that's what ruined the children of Israel, wasn't it? When Moses led them to the Promised Land, they stepped back in unbelief.

Kirk looked down at his feet and realized he was standing still. He inhaled, took a step forward, followed by another and another. With his shoulders back, head erect, he found his stride.

Promised Land, here we come!

Rob Cantrell marched into the kitchen and glanced at the wall clock. “Kirk and Leonard better show up soon or we’re gonna be late.”

Sally had picked up the supper dishes and was wiping the table. “Why’s Leonard going? He didn’t for the other two candidates.”

“This is *Moses*.” Rob leaned against the counter. “You should have heard Kirk at the elder meeting last night. He was trying to be guarded, but I think he’s expecting a miracle for Angie.”

Sally rinsed out her dishrag, slowly, back and forth beneath the running water. “Angie’s not expecting a miracle,” she finally said. “Oh, she’d accept it if that’s what the Lord chose to do, but in her heart, she just wants to go home.” Sally wrung the water from her rag and draped it over the sink divider. “I would, too.”

Rob stepped beside Sally and put his arm around her. “You’d be sorely missed, you know.”

Sally chuckled. “You’d manage.”

“Yeah, but it’d sure be lonely around here.”

“You’ve got Mack Johnson, the best friend anybody could hope for—something Kirk doesn’t have, according to Angie. She’s worried for him.”

Rob nodded. After he lost his arm, he would have killed himself if Mack hadn’t bulldozed through the self-pity and knocked some sense into him.

Angie had every reason to worry if Kirk had no close friend other than her. For all Kirk’s friendliness—and he could be very friendly, especially with newcomers—there was always a fence, a professional hedgerow over which Kirk shook hands. He had the firm grip and beaming smile, but there’d be no trespassing on Kirk’s internal property without an invitation.

“What about Will, Kirk’s old college buddy?” Rob asked. “I thought they were getting together every week to play golf or something.”

“Apparently that’s not been true for some time. But no one can fault Will for not trying. Angie says he’s called several times. In fact, she suspects Will is in need himself. But like most men, he won’t just come out and say what’s bothering him.”

A car horn sounded.

“Finally.” Rob glanced at the clock again. “We’re gonna be late.”

“Oh, be positive for once.”

“Okay, I’m positive we’re gonna be late.” As he walked to the door that led to the garage, he said over his shoulder, “I doubt our guest has had any supper. He’ll probably be hungry.”

“I’m way ahead of you,” Sally said as she followed Rob. “You just fetch him here.”

He kissed her at the door.



Rob hurried to Kirk’s car. He could see Leonard’s wavy white hair shining like a beacon in the night. Although well into his seventies, Leonard showed no sign of slowing down. Rob climbed into the back seat behind the former state senator.

“Ev’nin’, Rob. Glad you could make it.”

“Howdy, Leonard. How’s that shopping center coming?”

“According to Kenny, there’re only a few items left on the punch list. First tenant is already in. The rest are chomping at the bit. Christmas is coming, you know.”

“Yeah. Seems the season gets moved up every year.” Rob looked to Kirk’s image in the rearview mirror. “How’s Angie doin’?”

“Hangin’ in there.”

Rob leaned forward and laid his hand on Kirk’s shoulder. “How ’bout you?”

“Doin’ just fine,” Kirk said. “And hope is on the way.”

Rob nodded. “Well, better step on it, or we’re gonna be late.”

“Rob.” The wavy white head turned ever so slightly. “Did our Moses give us any idea on recognizing him? Are we looking for a robe and staff?”

Rob waited while Leonard and Kirk had their chuckle. “He said he’d be wearing a kilt.”

Leonard chortled.

Kirk glanced in the rearview mirror. “Are you serious?”

“That’s what he said. And I guess he’ll have those funny socks, too.”

“Moses-in-a-skirt,” Leonard mumbled. “Is he bringing his bagpipes?” He looked toward Kirk but failed to engage him this time.

“Some of those Scots are pretty tough, Leonard.” Kirk then climbed into his pulpit to inspire his small congregation. “For some reason, I see a well-built young man. Not too tall. About our size, Rob.” Kirk always drew on someone from the congregation to make it personal and improve the impact. “Ruddy complexion, curly red hair, maybe a beard.”

Kirk praised the biblical Moses. He admired his toughness as a man who stood up to Pharaoh, performing all those miracles. But Rob noted that when Kirk referred again to the current Moses, he called him his *potential* associate, leaving himself a little wiggle room. Rob said nothing. He only hoped that Kirk, for his own sake, was right in a few things.

They approached the airport from the north on Highway 14. A huge plateau rose up in front of them, elevating the runway beyond view. And from the southwest, a jet bearing the logo of the airline due to deliver their man turned onto short final. Rob glanced at the clock on the dash and sighed. What a time for an airline to be prompt.



Moe listened politely to Delores, who had chattered non-stop on the short hop from Atlanta. Grandchild number six was here, and she was coming in from Dallas to do her motherly duty. She swished with every move-

ment in her shiny, purple running suit. Based on her size, Moe guessed the suit had seen little running.

When they taxied out in Atlanta, Delores rummaged through a mammoth bag she demurely referred to as her purse. She produced two thick picture albums of 4 X 6 pictures. She showed him *all* the pictures of *all* the grandchildren, with running commentary on their backgrounds, current status, and certain bright futures. Moe smiled and nodded through the whole presentation, trying to “ooh” and “aah” at appropriate intervals.

Then he answered a myriad of questions about himself, his homeland, and what brought him to America. Delores was heartbroken, hand at her breast, that he’d grown up in an orphanage and foster care. But wasn’t he something for overcoming all his difficulties—and to enter the ministry no less! Why, he would be a tribute to all his people. Well, she didn’t mean that he was a different race or anything. Just that she’d never met anyone like him. Anyone, you know, that little. She’d only seen them on TV or in the movies, like *The Wizard of Oz* when she was a kid. Figured they were all headed down the yellow-brick road. She laughed loudly and patted his knee with her chubby fingers, but her neck turned a blotchy red, and she avoided his eyes.

The show came to an abrupt halt as soon as the plane did. She jumped up with everyone else, wrestled her purse onto a shoulder, and promised to tell her daughter to visit that church if he ended up staying there. They would just love his accent—Scottish, not British, she promised to remember. And she would never forget that folks like him were not “midgets”—“dwarf” or “little person” was preferred. Well, God bless him, she said and wedged her way into the flash flood of exiting passengers.

Moe thumbed mindlessly through the flight magazine and waited for everyone else to leave. Thoughts of the great opportunity before him were giving way to an anxiety that threatened to overtake. He could feel the stares of the other passengers as they walked by. Seeing a dwarf was rare enough, but one in kilt would really be strange. What had possessed him?

After all the other passengers deplaned, he fetched his computer satchel from beneath the seat and slung it over one shoulder. As he left the plane, the crew waved to him. One of the flight attendants winked. “Enjoy your stay,” she said, and lifted his spirits with a bright smile.



Rob fought to slow his pace. Kirk showed impatience, too. But they stayed with Leonard, who moved at the speed of legislation. When the escalator reached the top floor, they found themselves swimming against a small sea of arriving passengers. Rob’s eyes darted about the crowd looking for a plaid skirt with hairy legs. Kirk darted into the atrium by the restaurant, then returned and led everyone back to the gift shop where he questioned the attendant.

“Excuse me. Have you seen a man in a kilt?”

“Kilt?” she repeated with a blank look.

“One of those plaid, skirt-like things Scottish men wear when they’re playing bagpipes.”

“Oh, of course,” she said, throwing up both hands. “No, I haven’t. But he could’ve snuck by on his way to get his bags.”

“Thank you.” Kirk turned to Rob and Leonard. “I’ll run down to baggage claim. Rob, can you check the Men’s room?”

Rob cringed to himself. “Okay.”

“I’ll check the flight monitors,” Leonard said. “Make sure this is the right flight.”

While Kirk hurried toward baggage claim, Leonard ambled to the monitors. Rob took a few steps toward the Men’s room but decided he’d just watch the door. No one came out with curly red hair, a beard, or a kilt. After a few moments, Rob elected to join Leonard. He’d keep an eye on the entrance to the Men’s room.

In front of the monitors, Leonard had assumed one of his statesman-like profiles.

“We got the right flight?” Rob asked.

“Yes,” Leonard replied, “but he may have missed his connection. There are two more flights, but they’re not due for a while.”

Kirk returned empty handed. The horde of passengers had dwindled to a trickle, so they huddled to decide what to do.

Suddenly, Leonard’s eyes became transfixed. “Good grief.”

Rob and Kirk turned to look in the direction of Leonard’s gaze. Talking to the gift-shop attendant was a very small man in a kilt. At the outside of his calves, ribbons peeked from beneath the turned-down tops of the socks.

“Well, Kirk,” Leonard said, “you got one thing right. He’s not too tall.”

Rob watched the excitement drain from Kirk’s face. The gift-shop attendant was pointing to them now, and their man turned to face them: Moses-in-a-skirt; a clean-shaven Moses without a curly red hair on his head; and most notably, not too tall. He started toward them, and they, as if Rob had given a command, marched forward in unison.

“Hullo, I’m Moses Mackenzie, but all my friends call me Moe. Pleased to meet you.”

Rob extended his hand and was surprised that their guest’s hand felt almost the same size as his. The grip was firm, too. “Rob Cantrell. We’ve talked on the phone.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for your help in getting me here.”

The little man’s eyes glanced to Rob’s shoulder, but Rob noted that he quickly turned his attention to Leonard. Rob introduced Leonard, and then Kirk. Each man offered a brief welcome. When Kirk finished, Mr. Mackenzie addressed him.

“Pastor Vaughn, I’ve been looking forward to this opportunity to candidate as your associate. I pray we will see the Lord’s victory and exalt his name together.”

Rob thought it was a well-prepared opener, but all Kirk could do was smile weakly, shake Moe’s hand again and say, “Well, amen to that.”

They fell into a netherworld silence and stared at one another. The elements of grace begged for some small word of encouragement, but Kirk still appeared dumbstruck. And before Rob could ease the awkwardness with a kind word, Leonard opened his mouth.

“Well, let’s get your bags and get this circus on the road.”

Rob wanted the floor to open up and swallow them, especially Leonard, who was far too clever not to realize what he'd said. Rob was ashamed that he'd not spoken before the rude remark. But like the other two, he'd been caught off guard. No one expected this.

Rob admired their guest's self-control. Though the young man now seemed irritated, he held his tongue. With a hand, Rob motioned toward baggage claim and moved quickly in that direction. It was hard for the little guy to keep up, but Rob wanted to put a few paces between them and the other two men.

"Did you have a nice flight, Mr. Mackenzie?"

"A bit long, but very nice. And please, all my friends call me Moe."

At the bottom of the escalator, Rob turned and called up to Kirk and Leonard, suggesting they go fetch the car. Kirk nodded and waved. Rob led Moe toward the baggage conveyors.

"As I told you over the phone, you'll be staying with Sally and me."

"I look forward to meeting her. How is Pastor Vaughn's wife? I was sorry to hear about the cancer."

"I don't remember what I told you last, but Angie's not doing well. She's under hospice care. Sally thinks the end is near."

"The Lord could still raise her up."

Rob started to say something about Kirk's expectation. Instead, he said, "Yes, he could."

After collecting Moe's bag, Rob led them toward the exit doors. "After your visit here, are you going to see your friend in Florida?"

"Yes, sir. I was able to contact him."

"Good. I'll bet you're looking forward to seeing him."

"Quite. It's been seventeen years. We've a lot of catching up."

They passed through the automatic glass doors. Rob looked for Kirk's car, found it, and motioned to Moe. "Over there."



To Rob's relief and delight, Kirk said something appropriate as soon as they drove away.

"We've been looking forward to having you," he said, eyes darting to the rearview mirror. "I hope your trip went well."

"Very well, thank you," Moe replied. "I'm sorry to hear about your wife."

Rob caught the irritated look in Kirk's eyes when they glared at him in the rearview mirror. "I told Mr. Mackenzie a little about Angie's situation in our last conversation."

"I've been praying for her," Moe said. "The Lord can still raise her up."

That remark got another gaze from Kirk's eyes, but this time they were on Moe. "Yes," Kirk muttered. "Yes."

Kirk's gaze was so long that Rob glanced out the windshield to make sure they weren't in danger of leaving the road. Apparently, Leonard had the same thought.

"Better pay attention, Kirk," Leonard mumbled. Then he changed the subject of conversation entirely. "What's all this I hear about haggis, young man? Is it really made from sheep's belly?"

"In a manner of speaking," said Moe.

"Is it any good?" Leonard muttered.

"Oh, yes," Moe replied. He smiled toward Rob. "Or so I've been told."

Rob chuckled but was apparently the only one to get the joke.

The netherworld silence returned. Rob asked about the Scottish weather and whatever small talk he could think of. Their guest responded politely, but Rob could tell Moe was nervous. When Rob ran out of

subjects, he drummed his fingers on a knee, praying that Kirk would drive faster. He glanced at Moe, who'd turned his attention outside his side window.

When they reached the Cantrell house, Kirk pulled into the driveway behind Rob's truck and popped open his trunk. Everyone but Leonard stepped from the car. Rob pulled out the luggage while Kirk shook Moe's hand.

"Hope you get rested up. I had planned to spend some time with you tomorrow, but—" Kirk glanced quickly to Rob, and then looked back at their guest. "I need to be with my wife."

"I understand perfectly. Please tell her I'm praying for her."

Kirk nodded. "Rob and Sally will take great care of you. See you on Sunday."

As Kirk climbed into his car, Rob extended the handle on Moe's suitcase and wondered at the sudden change in plans. Kirk had spent a portion of Saturday with the other two candidates, showing off the new building, now about to house its first service, and quizzing their theology before they stepped into his pulpit. As Kirk's car drove away, Rob looked down at their Moses.

"Let's go in through the garage," he said. "All the important people do. It leads straight to the kitchen." At the door, Rob stopped. "Now, before we go in, let me warn you that Sally has recently adopted a health kick. Nothing fanatical, of course, but I hope you like vegetables. And you'll probably get enough salad to make you hop around like a rabbit." To Rob's great satisfaction, they shared their first unencumbered laugh.

Sally walked toward them as soon as they came through the door. True to her born and bred Southern virtues, she greeted Moe without flinching.

"We're so pleased to have you, Mr. Mackenzie." She offered her hand.

"Please, all my friends call me Moe."

“All right, Moe it is. And you must call me Sally.” She smiled down at him and folded her hands in front of herself. “How about something to eat? Surely you’re hungry.”

“Would you happen to have any vegetables?” Moe asked.

“Absolutely!” She turned to the refrigerator, opened the door, and began pulling out covered dishes.

Rob winked at Moe. “I’ll show you your room while Sally gets things ready.”

“Moe, would you like some hot tea?” Sally asked.

“Tea would be grand. In fact—” Moe laid his luggage on its side and unzipped the top. He pulled out a tin painted in a red and green tartan. “Scottish tea, for you.”

“Well, we’ll just put this on right now,” she said. “And what else can I get you?”

Moe glanced at Rob. “I suppose I could handle a small salad.”

“That is so smart,” Sally said.

Rob gave Moe a thumbs-up. “Follow me. Your room’s right down this hall.”

He showed Moe his room and the adjoining bathroom. While Moe started unpacking, Rob opened the closet and pulled out a stepstool.

“To help at the sink. The mirror’s kind of high.”

“Thank you.” Moe glanced again at Rob’s shoulder.

“Mack Johnson and I have breakfast every Saturday morning. You’re welcome to join us, but you’ll need to get up around seven.”

“That’ll be fine. I’d like to go with you.”

When they returned to the kitchen, a small plate of colorful greens and garnishes waited. Another plate held a sampling of green beans, corn, and black-eyed peas. To one side sat a cup of hot tea with the cream and sugar bowls. To the other, a selection of dressings and a box of whole-grain crackers.

“Incredible,” Moe said.

While Moe ate, Sally quizzed him about Scotland. She hovered over him and offered everything except a foot massage. Rob just sat back and watched his wife do what she did best: tend to the needs of others.

When Moe finished, he excused himself saying his body was still on Greenwich Mean Time, which was after midnight. He'd slept little in the last few nights and none on the flight over. He'd like to turn in.

"Good night," Sally said. "Sleep as long as you like."

"He's joining me and Mack in the morning," Rob said.

"Oh, you'll like Mack."

Sally picked up Moe's plates and set them on the counter. While her back was turned, Moe gave a little bunny hop. Rob grinned and watched Moe disappear toward his room.

Sally came back to the table, collected items for the cupboard, and glanced down the hallway. She looked at Rob and raised her eyebrows as if to say, *Well, well, what have we here?*

Rob listened for Moe's door to close before speaking softly. "You should have seen the look on Kirk's face—all of us, really."

"I think he's delightful. I love his accent. And he's so cute in that kilt."

"I don't think I'd mention it."

"Of course not," Sally said. She closed a cupboard door and stepped to the table. "So he wasn't the Moses that Kirk expected."

"Not by a long shot. None of us did. Who would?"

"People didn't expect a one-armed man when they met the Rob Cantrell who came back from Vietnam. Surely you remember the stares."

Rob swallowed. "Still get them."

"And you always will. You're different." She laid a hand on his cheek. "But in a very nice way."

He took her hand in his. "Thanks." Where would he have been without her?

Sally picked up the cream and sugar from the table and glanced down the hallway. “Well, he may not be the Moses everyone expects, but he may be the one we need.”



Dragging the stool into the bathroom, Moe stepped up to the mirror. His forehead was lined with fretful creases. His eyes stared back, blank and impassive, two drooping bags under them like little bruises.

Who was he kidding? Crossing the pond had changed nothing. The hobgoblins of diffidence had revived, and the eternal question rang like a gong in his psyche. How did the mutation of a single gene square with being “fearfully and wonderfully made”?

A hot shower relieved some of the tension, assuaged the psyche, and drowned a few of the hobgoblins. He slid between the sheets, desperate for sleep and equally desperate for some assurance that he’d done the right thing.

“Oh, Lord,” he mumbled at the edge of sleep, “please help me.”