



As I Have Loved You

**A Novella
by Ron Decuir**

SAMPLE

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CHAPTER 1

Licensed to Kill

Licensed to Kill! Randy Whitaker shouted, shaking his fist at a war correspondent that was speaking over the wall-mounted television in the prison cafeteria. Randy strode around the room ranting, "Can you believe that? I go to prison for killing in self-defense, but a soldier in the Army gets praise and glory for doing the same thing. Why? Because he has a license to kill, and I don't!"

Randy was picking at his breakfast amidst the clamor of the other inmates and the rattle of plates on the stainless steel tables, when the news came on, and set him off.

The correspondent was in Baghdad, down on one knee, interviewing a young soldier lying on a stretcher, with a heavily bandaged leg. Pointing to a nearby house, the soldier moaned into the microphone, "My buddy and I kicked in the door and charged in. Flashes from a terrorist's automatic weapon lit the room, and I felt a burning in my leg." The soldier grimaced, "I returned fire, nailing the guy. He spun around against the wall and slid dead to the floor. My buddy dragged me out here and called a medic." The soldier raised his hand and shouted, "God bless America!"

"God bless America indeed!" the correspondent agreed. "We salute you. You truly exemplify the self-sacrificing spirit that our country was founded upon." The correspondent rose, and the camera crew moved to the door of the terrorist's house, peering into a darkened room. A lone candle on a table revealed a woman weeping over the lifeless body of her husband.

Randy shouted again, "Come on dude; interview me. I'll tell you my story." The other prisoners, who were numbed by his frequent outbursts, returned blank stares.

My story, Randy thought, still hardened over his bitter past.

His mind reeled back ten years to a night when he was nineteen, hanging out in a park with his high school gang, The Cobras. They were laughing and drinking beer in Ken Wilson's white Pontiac Bonneville when four members of their rival gang, The Jackals, pulled up behind them in a black Lincoln Town Car.

The Jackals jumped out of their car and strolled around the Cobra's car several times. Inside the car, the Cobras grinned at each other, looking forward to a good fight. Frank Hudson, the burly leader of the Jackals approached the car, dragging a heavy chain. "This is our turf!" he shouted, as he swung the chain round and round over his head and then crashed it into the front passenger window, sending a shower of glass into Tom Brown's face.

Randy sprang from the back seat, the door knocking Frank down onto the sidewalk.

Ken Wilson and Billy Joe Johnson pulled knives and jumped out of the other side of the car onto the street, charging the rest of the taunting Jackals, while Tom sat in the front seat picking glass out of his eyes.

Frank jumped up and spun around, his chain catching Randy's left leg. One swift jerk and Randy was lying on the sidewalk. Frank pulled the chain loose, swung it high over his head, this time aiming to strike Randy in the face.

Randy, trembling, cursed, rolled over, pulled a snub nosed revolver from his belt, and fired twice.

Time froze. Frank lay dead in a pool of blood. The Jackals and Cobras fled the scene.

Remembering left Randy depressed. He wandered back to the table, sat on his stool, resumed eating, and muttered, "Licensed to kill. That's it. Licensed to kill."

CHAPTER 2

An Unexpected Pardon

“Come with me philosopher,” a prison guard chided as he tapped Randy on the shoulder, waking him from his flashback. Randy knew the routine well. He had been called to the warden's office many times before because of his attitude. Now that he had made this scene, he dreaded the thought of having to endure another lecture on the subject.

Randy passed his hands through his thick blonde hair, drying the nervous sweat from his palms as he followed the guard into the warden's office. The air was tense as the two men stood staring at each other in silence. The warden handed a large manila envelope to Randy. “Here are your personal effects. The Governor has pardoned you. You are free to go.”

Randy closed his eyes and shook his head, not quite believing what he had heard. Pardoned? No way. He had received a life sentence for killing Frank and expected this prison to be his home forever. Memories flooded his mind as he looked into the envelope and saw his old wallet, his keys, and a well-worn address book. He flipped through the book and saw a blur of names of people, most of whom had forgotten him.

“I really don't know how you received a pardon,” the warden brooded. “I hope you have learned a lesson, but I'm not sure.”

Without looking up, Randy shot back, “We'll see, won't we?” His gray eyes clouded with resentment as he took his things out of the envelope and tossed the empty envelope defiantly on the warden's desk.

The warden shoved a bundle of street clothes into Randy's arms and pointed towards the restroom, saying, “Change in there.”

Randy removed his prison garb, put on his new clothes, stuffed his belongings into his pockets, and walked back into the office.

The warden gave Randy two hundred dollars and a bus ticket home. Randy put the new bills and ticket in his wallet, and stood in silence.

“Good luck,” the warden offered as he held out his hand. Randy put his wallet back into his pocket, ignored the warden's hand, turned to the guard and said, “Let's go.”

The guard scolded, “Man, you need to learn to show some respect!”

The warden silenced the guard with an upraised hand. “Just get him out of here.”

Randy followed the guard through a series of locked gates and walked out into the afternoon sun. Across the parking lot, a prison bus waited to take him to a main bus line in Pine Bluff.

The warden watched from the window until Randy got on the bus. He muttered, “Yes, we will see,” as he threw the envelope into a trashcan and slammed the cabinet drawer.

Randy sat behind the driver, looking back at the prison gate through the barred bus windows, and stewed. I won't be free until I get off of this bus.

After five minutes that seemed an eternity, he barked at the driver, “Why aren't we leaving?”

The driver turned around and grinned, “We're waiting on another guy who's being released today.” Then, gesturing toward the prison, he chuckled. “I would have thought you'd have learned some patience in there.”

Randy cursed the driver and squirmed in his seat until a tall, black man climbed on the bus, said hello to the driver and sat across the aisle from Randy. The driver closed the door, pulled out of the parking lot, and headed down the road to Pine Bluff Arkansas.

Randy reached across the aisle and shook the man's hand. "Randy Whitaker's my name."

"Joe Jameson. I've seen you around."

"You got set free today too?"

"I've been free for a long time," Joe said with a big smile, "but they let me out today."

Randy grimaced, trying to ignore Joe's comment. After a momentary silence, he asked, "What were you in for?"

"Rape." Pointing at the prison, Joe sighed, "I've been in that place for twenty-five years. Some new lawyers used DNA samples and proved that I was innocent, so the warden released me."

"But ... twenty-five years of your life! You must be plenty mad. I'd get even for that," Randy fumed, kicking the seat in front of him.

"No, not really," Joe laughed. "I haven't lost anything because I didn't have a real life when I came to this place." He shook his head. "I can't hold any grudges against people who did me wrong. God loved me when I was his enemy and mistreated him and others. Jesus said, 'This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.' That means we should love in the same way."

"Look man, don't preach the Bible to me," Randy growled through clenched teeth. "I've heard it all before. You can knock off your religious garbage. There's no one here to impress. You can be real now."

Joe just smiled and quietly sang, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

Randy scowled, turned away, and watched the blur of trees as the bus rolled on to the next scene of his life.

When the bus arrived at the Pine Bluff bus station, the bus driver opened the door and chuckled as he watched Randy and Joe step down onto the sidewalk. "Ya'll come back...you hear."

Randy cursed and shook his fist.

Joe smiled and thanked the driver for the ride.

Randy and Joe sat in silence on a dusty bench until an old Greyhound bus roared to a stop in front of them.

Randy didn't move until Joe boarded the bus and got settled; then Randy got on and found a seat near the back of the bus next to an elderly lady.

"Are you a student?" the lady asked politely as the bus headed north on Interstate 530.

"Yes ma'am, I just got out of prison. I learned a lot there."

"What on earth were you in prison for? You look like such a fine young man."

Randy leaned over, looked deep into her eyes and said, "For murder."

"O dear God!" the lady gasped, grabbed her purse and moved close to the window, fixing her gaze outside.

Randy laughed, leaned back in his seat, and took a nap.

When the bus pulled into the Washington Avenue station in North Little Rock, Randy turned back and bowed to the lady, "Goodbye ma'am."

She nodded and waited until he walked down the aisle to the door before she joined the exiting crowd.

Randy walked through the smell of sooty diesel exhaust and into the musty terminal. After getting change from a ticket agent, he bought a bag of chips and a sandwich from a vending machine.

"It's a small world," Joe said, as he walked by Randy. "Maybe we will see each other again."

"Hope not," Randy grunted as he went outside, caught a city bus, and headed west.

Randy had just finished his sandwich when the bus driver made a routine stop at the State Capitol and waited for riders to come on board.

The capitol building was draped with Fourth of July decorations, and a group of local pastors stood on the landing at the top of the front steps, holding an American Flag, an Israeli Flag, and a Christian Church Flag. A banner proclaimed them as the "Christians For The Preservation Of Israel." Their supporters filled the steps and flowed down into the walkway areas, smiling as they handed out pamphlets that solicited support for their cause.

A large crowd gathered on the lawn, enjoying a picnic celebration as they waited for a man to give a speech. Anti-war protestors marched back and forth on the sidewalk carrying peace signs and chanting, "NO MORE WAR!" They tore up all the pamphlets they could get their hands on. Curious, Randy stepped off the bus and weaved his way through the crowd until he reached the foot of the steps.

He looked up and saw a portly man in his mid fifties, who he recognized as Joel Prindell, the pastor of his parent's church, holding a microphone as he read a petition that carried 200,000 signatures from around the state.

Joel began, "We, the citizens of the State of Arkansas, petition our state representatives to support the defense of Israel. We ask that the "War on Terror" be extended to Iran and that pre-emptive strikes be made against Iranian nuclear enrichment plants so they will not be able to make nuclear weapons that they can use against Israel."

The crowd cheered, and the protestors jostled their peace signs, chanting "NO MORE WAR! DON'T BOMB IRAN!"

A thin young man wearing worn camouflage coveralls, his hair past his shoulders, a beard nearly as long, slipped past Randy, ran up the steps and asked Joel for the microphone. Joel recognized the man, but taken off guard by the interruption, handed the microphone to him.

Everyone grew silent as the man took a few steps back. He gestured towards Joel, and then to the other preachers and said; "You call yourselves Christians, but you are hypocrites, no different than the enemies you want to destroy. You disgrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You don't know what the New Testament means! Jesus said we are to love our enemies, but there is no place for his words in your fearful, angry hearts. What makes you think that God will forgive you if you won't forgive those who have offended you? The Bible says 'perfect love casts out fear. The only way that we can have boldness before God in the Day of Judgment is for us to love others the way God loves us. There is no fear in love. Don't you understand that...'"

Joel scolded the bearded man “stop your ranting and give me back that microphone!” Joel snatched the microphone away, and tried to resume his speech, but the protesters booed and moved towards the steps, demanding; “Let the guy speak! We want to hear what he has to say!” But the police barred their way and made them disperse.

Randy backed up and covered his ears with his hands. *Preachers! You can't get away from them.*

The bearded man retreated down the steps, stopped in front of Randy, stared at him, and disappeared into the crowd.

That guy looks familiar, Randy thought as he walked back to the bus stop; his mind swirled with the man's words as he waited for another bus to take him home.

CHAPTER 3

Homecoming

Randy's neighborhood had changed very little in the time he was gone. The trees were taller, and the houses looked smaller. He drank in familiar scenes as he got off the bus at South Woodrow Street and walked the few blocks to his parent's house. He paused for a moment; then rang the doorbell.

His mother, Peggy, heard the ring and wondered, who could that be at this time of the afternoon? She set the dishtowel on the counter, smoothed a wisp of her light red hair with her hand, and walked to the door. The petite woman almost fainted when she opened the door, her mouth gaping open, staring at her son.

"Hi Mom. Catching flies?" Randy mimicked her as he dropped his jaw and put his hands to his head.

"Randy! What on earth are you doing here? Did you escape? Are they looking for you?" Peggy's eyes sparkled as she grabbed him and kissed him. Then, looking up and down the street, she pulled him through the front door.

Randy regained his balance and laughed. "No Mom, it's okay. They let me go."

"Greg! Greg!" Peggy shouted toward the garage as Randy followed her into the kitchen. "Randy is home. Our boy is home!"

Randy's father, Greg, a wiry man in his mid sixties with dull brown eyes and a sallow face, crawled out from under his truck, wiped the grease from his hands and ran a comb through his dingy white hair. He walked into the kitchen, stood beside his wife and stared in disbelief at the sight of his wayward son.

"The warden called me into his office this morning," Randy explained, "and told me that I had been pardoned. The warden was as surprised as you are."

Peggy pointed up the stairs. "Your room is just like you left it."

"Your motorcycle is in the shed in the back yard. I've kept it up," Greg added proudly.

"There are some leftovers from lunch," Peggy offered, "but I can send out for something else if you like."

"No, Mom, don't make a fuss over me. Believe me, I'm not picky."

Mom's baked chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, and peas were a treat after nothing but prison food for so long.

After Randy finished his meal, he helped Peggy clear the table, and they retired to the living room. "It must have been two months since we visited you," Peggy chattered. "My Lord! I can't believe my eyes. Here you are, sitting here in our house and you're free."

Peggy's words jolted Randy back to his conversation with Joe Jameson. He smiled at her but something was wrong. He really didn't feel free.

It didn't take long for Randy to grow restless. He walked out to the shed in the back yard, pulled the door open, and stood staring at his Harley, amazed at how his dad had kept it so clean. He took the keys from his pocket and straddled the bike. It started right up. He leaned back on the handlebars for a minute, relishing the throbbing feeling of having wheels under him again, but he wasn't ready to go out yet. He turned the key off and sat quietly for several minutes.

Then he went up to his room and rummaged through his old clothes, threw the ones that didn't fit any more into a bag, and brought them downstairs. "Here's some stuff for the Salvation Army" he told Peggy, as he shoved the bag into the corner of the kitchen then gave her a hug.

They talked for a long time then he walked into the den and crashed on the sofa until the noise of the television woke him.

"Sorry to disturb you," Peggy apologized, "but I don't want to miss this Fourth of July celebration from the Kennedy amphitheater in Washington D.C."

Jack Harvey, a medium height, heavyset man with thick glasses, organizer of "Christians For The Preservation Of Israel," stood before a "Star of David banner" that was so large that it obscured the curtain behind the stage.

"Our Jewish brothers," Jack began, "tonight we are gathered in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to support your cause against Iran. We are honored to have the President of the United States, J.W. Lowery, who has graciously consented to be with us tonight. Welcome Mr. President." Jack beamed as he gestured for the President to come forward.

President Lowery, a handsome Native American Cherokee from Oklahoma, rose from his chair, stepped up, and shook Jack's hand while smiling into the camera. "Thank you Dr. Harvey," the President said. "We are grateful indeed to have such loyal supporters of our 'War on Terror.' God is granting us victories over the 'Axis of Evil.' I salute our troops who are hunting down and destroying our enemies to preserve peace and liberty. We will crush any nation that stands in our way. You can count on me to do whatever it takes to get the job done." Then J.W. held up his hands and declared, "WE SHALL NOT FAIL!"

Orchestrated fireworks filled the sky above the amphitheater. The jubilant crowd of four thousand waved American and Israeli flags, and echoed "WE SHALL NOT FAIL!" They applauded loudly as Harvey shook the President's hand again and went on to introduce the many TV preachers and evangelists invited to participate in the program.

"Today, we held rallies in all of the state capitols," Jack boasted as he began to show video clips. "Here's a shot from the rally at the Little Rock Capitol."

The camera panned across the crowd, then showed the people on the steps. "There were anti-war demonstrations at some of the gatherings," Jack said in disgust, "but this is to be expected from those who do not understand our cause for peace in Israel."

Turning to Greg, Peggy whispered, "Isn't Dr. Harvey wonderful? He has such great love for God's chosen people."

The camera briefly showed the young man that Randy had seen at the rally, then the cameras quickly turned away. Randy pointed at the TV. "That guy took the microphone away from Joel Prindell at the rally, but they didn't show that on the program tonight." "What did he say?" Peggy asked, rising up in her chair and turning to Randy.

"He told Joel and the other preachers that they didn't understand the New Testament; that they didn't love their enemies."

"Well, I can see why they wouldn't want to show that on television. The young man is obviously a troublemaker." Peggy frowned as she sat back in her seat.

"Probably a Communist!" Greg nodded in agreement.

The next item on the news was the interview of the wounded soldier in Baghdad.

Randy said, "I saw that clip this morning. It reminded me of when I killed Frank Hudson. It made me wonder if there is really any difference between gang wars and national wars." Randy returned to the kitchen for a glass of water.

When Randy came back into the den, Greg glared at him. "You must be kidding. Of course there is a difference. You killed for petty reasons. Our soldiers are fighting for liberty!"

"Randy, how dare you say that our soldiers are wrong to fight in wars?" Peggy objected. "What about all of our soldiers that were wounded and disabled fighting for us in wars? Some of them lost their legs, arms, and some their eyes. Would you want to make them feel bad for what they did? They were trying to set oppressed people free. I'm sure they believed that what they were doing was right."

"They probably thought so," Randy agreed. "I'm just wondering about war and about what the man at the rally said."

Greg lit his pipe. "You should forget those foolish questions and think about important things, like getting a job."

"I'll look for one tomorrow," Randy replied, "but now I need a good night's rest. See you guys in the morning."

Randy kissed his mom and went up the stairs to his room.

He lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling, thinking back on the day, about the soldier that he had seen on TV, about Joe, about the mysterious man at the rally, about liberty, and about how things at home hadn't changed a bit since he went to prison.

CHAPTER 4

Another Chance

Early the next morning, Peggy was singing and cooking in the kitchen. Randy sneaked up behind her and grabbed her around the waist. She let out a squeal and swatted him on the behind. They both laughed, happy over the unexpected homecoming.

“That coffee smells good,” Randy said as he poured himself a cup, picked up the phone, and called his friend Tom Brown.

“Tom, I'm home,” Randy said excitedly.

“What! Cool! How did you get out?”

“Beats me; the warden was surprised too.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Get a job! In prison I had a lot of training as an electrician. I'm pretty good at it, now I need to get some experience.”

Tom was excited. “Say, I'm doing carpentry work for Keith Hudson. He's the superintendent of a new development, west of Holly Springs.”

Randy coughed, spewing his coffee all over the counter. He put the cup down and wiped up the mess with a rag. “Frank's father? You've got to be kidding. Remember? Frank, the guy I killed? Maybe he hired you, but he'd never hire me!”

Tom laughed. “Randy, this guy is really different. I know he needs an electrician. It's worth a try. If you come over right now, you can follow me to the jobsite. Here's how you get to my place...”

Randy wrote down the directions, hung up the phone, and told his mom, “Tom said he may have a job for me.”

Peggy sighed and shook her head. “You don't need to go back to your old friends. Don't get in trouble again.”

“Don't worry Mom; I'll be good.”

He went to the shed, pulled out on his bike, and rode to Tom's apartment. Tom was waiting for him in the parking lot. He gave Randy a high five. “Man, it's good to see you. Follow me!”

At the construction site, when Keith Hudson heard Randy's motorcycle, he went outside and greeted Randy.

“It's been a long time,” Keith smiled, extending his hand and fixing his dark kind eyes on the nervous young man.

Surprised at Mr. Hudson's friendliness, Randy looked down, timidly shook his hand and mumbled, “Hello, Mr. Hudson.”

Keith cast questioning eyes at Tom.

Tom spoke up, “Mr. Hudson, Randy is looking for a job. I told him you were looking for an electrician.”

“What experience do you have, Randy?”

“I went to electrical school in... prison.”

“I hear they do a great teaching job. I bet you learned a lot. Follow me and I'll show you what the job would be.”

Tom grinned, “I'll get to work. See you later.”

Keith pointed to the building behind the construction office. “This is the warehouse. You'll find all the supplies you need. Interested?”

“Yes, sir! Thanks.” Randy replied, still in a dumbfounded fog.

“Do you have any tools?”

“No, sir, but I’ll get some.”

“Meanwhile, you can use mine,” Keith offered.

They walked down the street looking at a dozen or so houses under various degrees of completion. Randy’s heart beat fast and his mind was spinning. *I can’t believe how nice this guy is treating me after what I did to his son.*

“Let’s go into my office and I’ll sign you up. I’ll give you a set of job tasks each morning. Here’s something you can start on today.”

Randy, astonished, stood staring at the work order. He went into the warehouse, picked up a belt of tools, and a box of electrical outlets and set out for house number 3419.

After work, Tom caught up with Randy in the parking lot. “I’m meeting Ken and Billy Joe at the Golden Goose Bar And Grill at seven tonight. Do you want to come?”

“Sure, where is it?”

“It’s only been open for a couple of months. It’s on the corner of Markham and South University.”

Randy cranked his bike, smiled at Tom and said “See you there.” Then he went home to change clothes.

In another part of town, Alice Hudson, Keith’s wife, heard the garage door open. She pulled back her long black hair into a ponytail and moved a laundry basket away from the door so Keith could come in.

Keith walked into the kitchen, kissed Alice and sat down at the table.

“You’re home early,” she smiled.

“It’s been a strange day. You won’t believe who came to see me today... Randy Whitaker.”

Randy! An icy shudder went up Alice’s spine.

“He got out of prison and is staying with his parents,” Keith continued with a serious look. “I told him he could come and work for me.”

“You did what???” she cried out with pleading eyes. “Have you forgotten what he did? I didn’t object when you hired Tom. He was part of Randy’s gang. He wasn’t the one who killed Frank; but hiring Randy?”

Keith put his arms around her. “I know it hurts dear. It hurts me too. I miss Frank so much, but we need to put that all behind us.”

CHAPTER 5

The Same Old Song

The Golden Goose was a cozy pub, crowded, and noisy. Tom led Randy to a table in the corner where two of his old gang members, Ken and Billy Joe were drinking beer. A girl Randy didn't know was with them, sipping a cup of coffee.

The two guys gave Randy the old Cobra snake tongue sign with their fingers. Randy grinned and signed them back.

Tom put his hand on the girl's shoulder. "June, this is Randy Whitaker, an old friend. Then looking up, said, "Randy, this is June Davis."

Randy nodded with a bright smile.

Turning to the guys, Randy asked, "What have you guys been doing?"

Billy Joe gestured, "Robbing old ladies, dealing drugs, fighting with the Jackals, like always." Then they all laughed.

Randy smiled, sat down, and ordered a beer.

Billy Joe continued, "Well, the truth is, what happened at the park scared the Hell out of us. We all went straight. I went to college, got a degree in accounting. I work for a tax office downtown."

"I joined the Army," Ken said. "Went to Iraq."

"Tom told me about that," Randy said, then thinking about the soldier he had seen on the news, he asked, "See any action?"

"A little," Ken answered with reserve.

"Just like old times wasn't it?" Randy smirked.

"What old times?"

"Like the wars we used to get into with the Jackals."

"You're serious?" Ken asked indignantly.

Randy turned away from Ken. "Billy Joe, how about the Jackals?"

Nervous, after seeing Randy's treatment of Ken, Billy Joe stammered, "They went straight too. We never see them, except for Mike Allen. He manages The Brown Bean Coffee Shop over on Interstate 430. He's married and has a kid."

"Mike!" Randy shouted, slamming his fist on the wooden table, causing June's coffee to spill and the beer glasses jump. "He's the one who squealed on me. If he had kept his mouth shut, no one would have ever known what I did. There weren't any other people near us at the park that night."

"Things happen, Randy," Tom said, trying to settle him down.

"Right, things happen." Randy snarled, "You guys can quit and forget it all. Ken can play his war game, settling the score with the Terrorists. But I won't forget. I'm going to settle my score with Mike."

"Take it easy man," Ken cautioned.

Randy jumped up, grabbed Ken by the collar, dragged him out of his chair, and yelled in his face. "You take it easy, glory boy! You just went straight and got paid for your killing. Don't you remember why we formed our gang? The Jackals molested and beat up your sister, threw her in a ditch and burned her car! The law wouldn't touch it. No substantial proof, they claimed. So we took the matter into our own hands."

Ken jerked loose from Randy's grip, pushed him away and straightened his shirt. "Man, what's wrong with you?"

Randy glowered at the nosy people around him. Then he sat down and was quiet for a while.

"Excuse me, June," Randy finally apologized. He got her a fresh cup of coffee and cleaned the table with some napkins. "I spent ten years in prison for defending myself. It's hard to forget." Then he lightened up and grinned again. "Why do you hang around with these thugs? Where do you work?"

"They are alright guys," June laughed. "I work at a bookstore by Fair Park, on Markham and North Van Buren Street."

"Well, I joined the work force today, thanks to Tom and Mr. Hudson."

"Can you believe that?" Billy Joe asked amazed. "Mr. Hudson hiring Tom, and now you, after what you did to Frank."

"I know Mr. Hudson. He's a real special guy," June smiled. "A real special guy."

They all caught up on what they had been doing for the last ten years. At Eleven, Tom looked at Randy. "We'd better go get some rest. Another day's work tomorrow."

Randy held out his hand to Ken. "Sorry Ken, I shouldn't have taken my stuff out on you."

"It's cool, Randy," Ken smiled, shaking Randy's hand. "I'm glad you are out."

"Bye Billy Joe, and you too, June," Randy said courteously. "Thanks for putting up with me. Hope I didn't ruin your evening."

"Join us anytime," June smiled.

As they walked out, Randy put his arm around Tom's shoulder, "Thanks for everything, Tom. You're a good friend. I especially appreciate you keeping in touch with me over the years. It meant a lot."

"Sure," Tom said. "That's what friends are for, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know," Randy confessed. "I've never been a friend to anyone."

The next morning, at 7:30 sharp, Randy walked into Mr. Hudson's office.

"Hi, Randy," greeted Keith. "Today you can install the lights in house number 3513. The fixtures are in a box in the warehouse."

"Sure! Thanks again for the job!"

Randy worked hard all day. When it was time to quit, he went back to the warehouse to return some unused items.

He noticed several nail guns on a shelf. *He'll never miss one of these; I'll pawn it tonight*, Randy thought as he picked one up. He looked around outside the door, put the gun in the saddlebag of his motorcycle and looked around to see if anyone had seen him.

Disappointed, Keith watched him through the back window blinds. When he saw Randy coming towards the office, he quickly walked back to his desk and sat down as if nothing had happened.

Randy walked in. "Hello Mr. Hudson. I'm finished."

"How did it go today, Randy?"

"It feels great to work."

"Good, see you tomorrow," Keith patted Randy's shoulder.

Saturday morning, after Randy finished installing the living room lights in house 3513, he went to Keith's office. "Mr. Hudson do you have a few minutes to talk?"

"Sure Randy. Say! There's a good hamburger joint around the corner. Come on," he motioned with his arm as he held the door open. "I'll treat you to lunch."

After ordering burgers and fries at the counter, they found a booth in the corner, and exchanged small talk until the waitress brought their food.

Keith bowed his head and prayed, "Jesus thank you for this food, bless it, and thank you for Randy, Amen."

"Amen" Randy agreed, silently thinking, *Mr. Hudson really meant that prayer*, then dug into his burger.

"Randy, what is it that you want to talk to me about?" Keith asked as he set his soda down.

Randy hung his head and confessed, "You're so good. You aren't like me. I'm a murderer, and now a thief. I haven't changed at all. I stole a nail gun out of the storeroom and pawned it."

"I know," Keith said, scratching his head. "I saw you through my office window."

"But you didn't say anything!"

Looking directly into Randy's eyes, Keith said, "I'm no different than you. I've stolen things before, and I'm a murderer too."

"What! Who did you kill?" Randy stammered, bewildered.

"You! I hated you for four years, wished you were dead. Jesus says that's the same thing as killing. For a long time, I tried my best to change. I wanted to let it go, but I couldn't. Will you forgive me?"

Randy blushed. Finally he said, "Forgive you? Sure, but you don't seem to hate me now. How did you change?"

"The change started at 9/11 when the World Trade Center was attacked. It made me think about you, and Frank, and your gangs. I felt about you like I felt about the terrorists. The whole country wanted to wipe out the terrorists. I did too. We were all saying God Bless America, and waving our flags. One day, I saw President J.W. Lowery on television. He proclaimed that America would not rest until evil and terror are wiped out entirely."

"I turned off the television and did something that I rarely did. I picked up a Bible from the bookshelf. It opened to where Jesus said that we must love our enemies. I was frozen in my tracks. I surely didn't have that kind of love. I couldn't go on feeling the way I felt about the terrorists, and about you. I needed a change. I asked God to give me His kind of Love, the real thing. He is being faithful to my prayer."

Randy confessed, "I can't believe you are so nice to me, especially since what I did to Frank. I'm sorry about what happened. It was so sudden. I really didn't know what I was doing. We were in gangs and things got out of hand."

"I know Randy. That's in the past, but this is today."

"I'll get the nail gun back for you."

"Fine," Keith said, "but I'm not worried about it. Pass the ketchup. These are good fries, aren't they?"

"Sure are," Randy agreed with a smile of relief as he finished his food.

When they returned to the jobsite, Randy spent the afternoon installing the rest of the lights.

After work, angry thoughts about Mike Allen of The Jackals gang rose to Randy's mind. *I've got to teach that guy a lesson.*

Instead of going home, he headed North on Interstate 430, ate supper at Nicholi's Pizzeria, then continued on to The Brown Bean Coffee Shop. It was getting dark as he

waited for Mike to close up. Mike pulled on the shop door to make sure it was locked. Satisfied, he walked across the parking lot to his car. He had just opened the car door when he noticed a figure walk out of the shadows.

“Randy!” he choked. “I heard you were out. Good to see you.”

“Is it?” Randy said coolly, his eyes blazing with hate. “You slime. You turned me in. I’ve thought about this for a long time.”

“Things have changed,” Mike whimpered. “The gangs are all broken up.”

“Yes, and that breaks me up,” Randy said, as he pulled a knife and backed Mike into the open door of his car.

“I’m sorry, Randy!” Mike pleaded.

Randy grabbed him by the hair and slashed the knife across his chin. “Here’s something to remember me by. Keep your mouth shut this time. If…”

Before he could finish his sentence, Randy saw a police car round the corner and head down the street in their direction. He shoved Mike across the car seat and climbed in beside him, closing the door. He held the knife to Mike’s throat. “As I was saying, keep your mouth shut if you know what’s good for you.”

After the police were gone, Randy smirked, “Mike, it’s been good seeing you!” He got out of the car, slammed the door and walked away.

Mike drove to the emergency room, and had the cut stitched up. When he got home he told his wife that he had tripped in the parking lot and hit his chin on a post. “Sorry Honey,” she said, but somehow she knew better.

Randy rode home. When he walked in the front door, Peggy called from the kitchen.

“Are you hungry?”

“No Mom. Thanks anyway, I’ve already eaten.”

As he walked up the stairs to his room, he agonized, *I am hungry, but I don't know what for.*

CHAPTER 6

Reflections

Randy lay in bed for a long time, tormented by his anger. He couldn't sleep so he turned the radio on to drown his thoughts. The old Eagle's song, Lying Eyes, was playing.

He turned the radio off, and cursed when he thought about the words of the song, "your new life didn't change things," and he thought about what he had just done to Mike. *My pardon from prison was a farce. It really didn't change me. How can Keith forgive me, love me and give me a job, but I can't forgive Mike?*

His anger morphed into depression as he lamented, *I wish I was like Mr. Hudson, but I'll never change.*

The next morning was Sunday. Peggy called up to Randy "Do you want to go to church with us?"

I need something. It's worth a try, he thought. "Sure, I'll be down in a minute he yelled back at Peggy."

The songs were lively. People raised their hands, shouted and danced. TV cameramen captured the crowd and the pastor for live television. After the offering was received, Pastor Prindell came forward and gave his message. "It says in God's Word, that God has given us all the weapons we need to battle against the devil. Let us remember that we do not battle against flesh and blood. Our grievances are not against people..."

Maybe this is what Mr. Hudson was talking about, Randy thought.

Pastor Prindell continued, "Thanks to all of you who showed up at the rally at the capitol Wednesday. As Jack Harvey said, it is the responsibility of our Christian nation to protect Israel. To that end, we need to show support for our government and pray that they will successfully destroy all of Israel's enemies."

The congregation applauded and cheered, but Randy was bothered by something – something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Joel concluded, "We should thank God that we are not evil men like Saddam Hussein, Yasser Arafat, and Osama Bin Laden. We fear God and are good moral people."

"Praise the Lord," several people shouted.

Randy shook his head, clearing his mind, like he was coming out of a stupor. Something was wrong. *What does he mean? I know I am evil, I thought we weren't supposed to brag about being spiritual.*

In the lobby, after the service, Joel Prindell called out, "Hello Peggy, Hi Greg." He walked over and put his hand on their shoulders, then extending his hand to Randy he said, "Glad you're home. Come by and visit me sometime."

"I might just do that," Randy answered, cautiously shaking his hand. "I do have some questions about your sermon."

The Whitakers said their goodbyes and went to the cafeteria for lunch. They went through the long line, found a table, unloaded their trays, and sat down. Peggy said a quick blessing, and they began to eat.

"Wasn't that a good sermon?" Peggy asked, munching on a piece of cornbread.

"The pastor's a hypocrite," Randy argued. "One minute he was saying that we do not do battle against people, and the next minute he was praising the effort of our troops to do battle against people."

“Well, Joel Prindell is a good pastor. We can trust what he says,” Peggy assured.

“He's been to several Bible Colleges. I've seen the diplomas on the wall in his office,” Greg added.

“I don't know what he learned there,” Randy complained. “But...”

“Oh, my Lord!” Peggy whispered, putting her hand on Randy's arm, interrupting him, “Look who is sitting at the table against the far wall behind you. Keith and Alice Hudson! I hope they don't see us. I wouldn't know what to say.”

Randy turned around.

Keith spotted Randy and waved. Then he left a tip on the table, took Alice by the hand, and walked with her to the table where Peggy, Greg and Randy were sitting.

Greg and Randy stood up. “Hello, Mr. Hudson,” Randy said. Then he turned to Alice and said in an embarrassed voice, “Hello Mrs. Hudson.”

“Hello,” Alice replied shyly, avoiding Randy's eyes.

“Would you like to join us?” Peggy asked, hoping they would decline.

“No, thank you,” Alice replied quietly. “We are finished. We have to be going.”

“Good seeing all of you,” Keith said as he took Alice's arm and walked with her to the cashier.

When they got home, Randy sat on the front porch, frustrated about the contradictions he heard at church and frustrated about the contradictions within himself.

He heard the roar of a motorcycle next door. He walked around the corner of the house where he saw his neighbor astride a Royal Blue, hard-tail, custom chopper. Randy walked over to admire the bike.

“Hi Randy, “The rider said. “I'm Charlie Hathaway. Remember me?”

“Now I do. I saw you at the rally, but I didn't recognize you with the beard.” Randy laughed as he shook Charlie's hand. “What's with the camouflage clothes? You were always so preppy.”

“I wore these in Iraq. They are pretty worn out, like me I guess.”

“Iraq? When were you there? Were you in combat?”

“I went over five years after you went to prison. I was in combat zones as an Army Chaplain. But that was another life ago.”

“How about your mom and dad, do they still live here?”

“No, they both died in a car accident a year after I got back.” Then changing the subject, Charlie said, “I'm going to take a ride. Want to come along?”

Randy hesitated, not wanting to get preached at, but said, “Sure, I'll get my bike.”

Solemnly they cruised northwest on Highway 10, through the woodlands to Lake Maumelle. Randy had not felt so good in a long time.

They pulled into a café parking lot, stretched, and looked across the beauty of the lake before they went inside, sat at a table and ordered coffee.

“Are you still in the service?” Randy blurted, before realizing how stupid a question that was considering Charlie's long hair and beard.

“No, I had enough of the confusion and heartbreak,” Charlie sighed, elbows on the table, sipping his coffee.

“Since you were a chaplain, do you run a church somewhere now?”

“No, I'm not very interested in organized religion. I'm still trying to sort some stuff out.”

Randy hesitated, wondering how Charlie would react, then he said “Me too – like, why is it a good thing for a soldier to kill an enemy, but a bad thing for me to do the same thing?”

Charlie knitted his brow. “I thought about what you did, and about questions like that when I was in Iraq. The conflict there was so real, wasn’t just a simple intellectual discussion. Most of the soldiers that I counseled had many questions after they killed in combat. That is why it is so hard for them to come back to civilian life. They are trained to be fighting units, used to fighting for survival, and protecting their buddies. A lot of them really believed in what they were doing, but many were double minded. They really didn’t want to kill anyone. Killing traumatized most of them. I just tried to comfort them and keep them from falling apart. I don’t think I did a very good job of it. It was rough over there. Soldiers have a lot to deal with, not just physically, but mentally, emotionally...and spiritually, he added.”

“Do they believe in God?” Randy asked, dreading a sermon.

“Just like everyone, they’re hoping that God is watching over them,” Charlie said, as he took a picture out of his wallet and handed it to Randy. “This was Larry McGill. He had joined the Army because his father thought he was a coward. Larry had become a different person. Aggression and hate that had overtaken him; he yearned to kill his enemies. He considered himself a Christian, but didn’t think God wanted to hear from him any more. He knew that he had hardened his conscience and was arrogant and merciless, his only goal was to keep his men alive.”

Charlie put the picture back into his wallet. “McGill was tormented. One day after chapel he came to me and said, ‘Chaplain, I can’t take this any more. Every time I look down the sights of my gun and see another human being, coldness flows through me. My conscience tells me to stop, but I drive the thought away, and numbly pull the trigger. It happens so fast. What should I do?’”

Charlie groaned, “I didn’t know what to tell him. Larry was killed the next day.”

Then Charlie regained his composure, took a sip of coffee, and continued. “Being over there made me question what it means to be a Christian. I guess you have to put Jesus’ words about loving your enemies on the shelf until you get your job done. We do that with a lot of things in our everyday lives, not just with combat. I thought that when I got back home, I’d get answers, but I found that the churches don’t want to deal with the question at all. They don’t want their comfy standard of living shaken by turning the other cheek.”

Love our enemies! Randy thought, annoyed. *Three people have said that in the past few days: Joe, Charlie, Keith and now Charlie again, I can’t get away from it!* Then, breaking out of his thoughts, he asked “You were challenging Joel Prindell at the rally, isn’t he your pastor?”

“He was, before I left for Iraq,” Charlie answered sadly. “He encouraged me to become a chaplain, but when I got back he wouldn’t listen to the questions I struggled with.”

“I was confused by what Joel preached this morning,” Randy said as he turned towards the window and stared across the lake. “He talked about spiritual warfare, but he called for physical warfare too. Sounded like a contradiction.”

Charlie glanced out the window then turned back to Randy. “It’s really not a contradiction, it just seems to be that way.”

“What! How can you say that?” Randy challenged, looking back at Charlie.

“It’s complicated,” Charlie said as he finished his coffee. “Christians are not of this world. They are of another kingdom, the Kingdom of God, and are guided by Jesus Christ. They don’t war against people, but show mercy to the sins and offences of others. Christians war against spiritual enemies using spiritual weapons, The Word of God, which is called The Sword of the Spirit. But, ironically, governments are ordained by God carry out justice, to war against people with physical weapons: guns, grenades, bombs, rockets, aircraft, missiles, and drones. But it won’t always be that way. When Jesus comes back, nations won’t war against each other any more. Anyway, I couldn’t fight people any longer. That’s why I left the armed services. Joel didn’t understand. He was intimidated when I talked to him about my dilemma when I got back.”

“So you are saying that governments get their license to make laws and to kill from God?” Randy frowned, looking back at Charlie. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Yes. It’s a real mystery,” Charlie confessed. “It’s hard to understand why God gives authority to governments who conquer other nations, overpower them by their military might, and then put leaders in power who make laws that God expects it’s citizens to obey.”

Charlie paused and asked, “Am I boring you? I tend to ramble when I get started, I could talk all day about this stuff. Do you want me to stop?”

“Not really”, Randy answered, after thinking for a moment. “I find what you say kind of interesting.”

“Let me give you an example,” Charlie continued. “Take, for instance, our immigration laws. On the surface they seem reasonable because they keep our land from being overrun by illegal aliens. But when you look more deeply at things, you see things differently. These immigration laws were established by the American Government, which was founded by people who came over from England, illegal aliens themselves. Our founders didn’t respect the ways and laws of the Indians. Instead, they killed much of the Indian population, conned them out of their land, or downright stole it, then they claimed that God had blessed them with the territory. Now our government sets laws to protect the land we stole by violence. And real irony is that people who don’t obey these laws that governments make up are in opposition to God. That’s a real mystery.”

“Suppose so.” Randy scratched his head.

“The bottom line,” Charlie continued, “is that God places leaders, even corrupt ones, in government for his purposes, and we must obey the laws they make. Hard to understand, but God’s ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts higher than our thoughts. Any way, that’s how I see these things. Like I said, I just have to accept it as a mystery.”

“Maybe,” Randy agreed. Then he changed the subject, and asked. “What work do you do now?”

“I work at Jake’s Cycle Shop. That’s where I built my bike.” Charlie replied.

“Nice,” Randy smiled.

“I’ll get your coffee,” Randy said as he looked at the check and laid some money on the table.

“Thanks Bro. It’s good to see you again. Didn’t mean to preach, I know most people don’t want to hear this kind of talk,” Charlie apologized.

“No, I have a lot to learn. It’s good to have someone I can talk with.” Randy said as they walked out to their bikes.

It was dark when they got back home.

The next day, during his lunch break, Randy went in the warehouse, got a drink of water, then called June from the warehouse phone.

“Hi June. This is Randy. Remember, I met you last Thursday night? You said Mr. Hudson was a special person. I see what you mean. Say, I’d like to see you again. Do you want to meet me at the Golden Goose tonight after work?”

“Sure, about seven?”

“Great, see you then,” Randy said expectantly.

CHAPTER 7

Through Muslim Eyes

Later in the afternoon, at the bookstore where June worked, Assad Ahmad, a computer tech, finished replacing the network card in June's computer. "There, that should do it."

"Thanks Assad, you always are a great help," June smiled.

"No Problem," he said sadly.

"What's wrong?"

"I just got news that my youngest brother back home in Palestine is dead."

"I'm sorry, what happened?"

This will explain," Assad said as he handed a letter to June. "It's from my mother." She opened the letter and read:

"Our Beloved Assad,

We have news for you. News that is sad, but also happy. This afternoon your brother, Abdullah, gave his life for Allah and our cause for freedom. Hamas told us about it, and gave us a copy of this article from an Israeli newspaper. It is an interview with a young Israeli girl that was an eyewitness."

June opened the news clipping which read:

"As I sat in a bus I saw a young man who was later identified as Abdullah Ahmad from the West Bank. He showed a counterfeit pass, somehow avoided a search at an Israeli checkpoint, and made his way through the crowd, until he got on our bus.

Everyone was hot and sweating. As the driver closed the door, and the bus began to move, Abdullah stood up and yelled at the top of his voice, 'Allahu Akbar.' Terror gripped us. I screamed, ran to the back of the bus, and opened the emergency door. A man attempted to tackle him, but it was too late. He jerked a detonator strap from inside his robe, and it was all over.

I was blown through the back door, and fell on my back on the ground. As I lay there in pain, I saw workers sifting through the burning bus; carrying off charred bodies, and screaming, bleeding, dismembered survivors.

I heard one emergency worker curse as he said, "Here's what's left of the devil that did it."

June returned the clipping to the envelope, and continued reading the letter.

"Our son was not a devil. He was such a good boy! But now he is gone. We knew it would happen; he had gone through years of training for his mission. We had talked about it, and how glorious it would be, but that doesn't comfort me. When I received the news, I fell on the floor and cried. I feel better now, so I can write you this letter. Your father Hazem said that Abdullah served his country and Allah faithfully. Hazem told me Abdullah was a martyr and the Quran says that martyrs go to paradise. He said, 'we are all proud of what Abdullah did; Greater love has no man than he lay down his life for his friends.' Hazem had read that somewhere."

Wish you were here with us at this time.

Amira."

June handed the letter back to Assad with tears in her eyes. "I can't imagine how you feel about this."

“I am really having a hard time with this. I am sad about the loss of Abdullah, but more than that, I am angry about his being brainwashed to be a martyr. Since I moved to America, I have begun to question many things about my religion.

June listened quietly then asked politely, “Like, how can being a suicide bomber and killing other people be considered a martyr, since martyrdom is when other people kill you for your faith, not when you die trying to kill others?”

“But your soldiers do the same!” Assad shot back, defiantly defending the belief that he had begun to question. “They are brought up from birth pledging allegiance to your flag, and are trained in military camps to kill, then they come over to our lands and kill our people in the name of your God. It’s no different.”

“I suppose you are right,” June agreed as she wiped her eyes. “Sorry I upset you. That was so insensitive of me.”

“That’s alright, Assad answered. It is a hard thing to discuss. Thanks for reading my letter, and letting me talk about it.”

She saw a customer, she glanced back at Assad and said, “I have to go. By the way, I’m meeting someone at the Golden Goose tonight at seven. He just got out of prison. I think you’d like to talk to him. Would you like to come?”

Assad hesitated; then agreed, “Thanks. That might prove interesting. Forgive me for getting angry with you.”

“Sure, we’ll look for you tonight.”

That night, June waited at the door until Randy arrived. As they sat at a table she told him, “I invited Assad Ahmad to join us. He works on the computers at the bookstore. He was sad today because his younger brother, a suicide bomber, was killed in Israel.”

Randy choked.

“There he is now,” June motioned, standing up and waving at Assad who had just walked in the door.

“Assad, this is Randy Whitaker. Randy, this is Assad Ahmad,” June introduced the two men. They shook hands then sat down.

“Do you want some coffee?” Randy asked.

“That would be nice,” Assad replied politely.

Randy waved to a waitress and asked her to bring a coffee. Then turned to Assad and said, “June told me about your brother.”

“It is difficult to talk about. I’m not sure you will understand. My brother Abdullah was, as you would say, a suicide bomber. He died two days ago while blowing up a bus in Israel.”

Then Assad said, “Randy, June told me you were just released from prison. What were you in there for?”

“I was serving time for killing a man in a street fight. We were a high school gang, defending our turf, our land in a way. We were fighting against The Jackals, another group who claimed the same land, and wanted to come into our territory and take over.”

Assad leaned back as the waitress brought the coffee. “Thank you” he said with a sad smile. Then he turned to Randy. “What you say sounds like what we have been dealing with in the Mideast since the League of Nations took over our land. Now Israel claims our land as theirs. It’s an interesting parallel to your cause, but obviously on a different scale. Different, but in a way, the same thing.” Assad smiled, you are really an unusual person, and have strange thoughts.”

Randy laughed and said, "That's the best thing anyone has said to me in a long time."

Assad continued. "I have listened to your President speak about his War on Terror, and I saw an interview of a soldier on the news one night last week. The soldier was being praised for killing a terrorist, as you call our people who fight against America and Israel. I thought America was a Christian nation. I know a little about your religion. Did not Jesus say in your Bible that you were supposed to love your enemies?"

"Yes," June said, "That is what Christians are supposed to do."

"Well, if you don't want to do what Jesus said, how then can you call yourselves Christians, and say that you are his followers? Don't you think it matters that you don't want to do what the founder of your religion says to do?"

June lowered her eyes, and said, "Many who call themselves Christians don't understand what a Christian is. God sent Jesus to die for us and forgave us when we were his enemies. If we have his Spirit, we will forgive others when they are still our enemies. If we don't have that Spirit, then we are not Christians."

Assad laughed. "You need to tell those who call themselves Christians, but want to war and kill, that they should become Militant Muslims. Then at least they could kill without being hypocrites."

The conversation hit Randy hard. The hair on the back of his neck bristled as he thought about what he did to Frank, how Keith had forgiven him, but how he still hated Mike. Then Randy thought *Assad was the fourth person who mentioned love of enemies. What is going on???* He wanted to cry, but choked back the feelings.

Somehow he had taken a small step onto the road that he was meant to be on.

They talked about work for a while, paid their bill, and walked out to the front porch.

Assad gave Randy a business card. "I enjoyed our conversation. I feel a little better now. If you want to get together again, give me a call." Then he walked to his car.

"Thanks, June," Randy said as he turned to her. "I'm glad I met you."

June smiled. "Me too."

Randy paused in the parking lot and thought about Alice. A deep sadness moved in his heart. He couldn't shake it. Something told him it was time to go see her.

Randy rode over to the Hudson's house, rang the doorbell, and shuffled back and forth on his feet as he waited. Alice walked from the bedroom, not prepared for what she would see. She opened the door and trembled, unable to speak.

"Mrs. Hudson, may I come in?" Randy pleaded.

Alice looked down at the floor, stepped back out of the doorway and pulled the door fully open.

Randy walked into the den and sat on the sofa. Alice closed the door and sat in a chair across from him, gazing with forlorn eyes at Randy.

Randy looked down at the floor and muttered, "Mrs. Hudson, I'm so sorry for what I did to Frank and to your family. I cannot imagine the hurt and grief that you have suffered. You probably wanted me to rot in prison. Maybe I should have. But for some reason, I am sitting here in your house. I don't know what else to say, but please forgive me."

Alice broke, held her face in her hands, and began to cry uncontrollably. She looked up. "I don't know if I have forgiveness in me. I want to. My God, I want to! This

bitterness is eating me up! Please give me time, Randy.” She ran back into her bedroom, fell on the bed, and sobbed.

Keith, who had been listening from the kitchen, walked into the den and gave Randy a hug; “Thank you Randy; things will be all right now.”

CHAPTER 8

Doubletalk

The next night, Randy leaned back in a chair in his room, thinking about what Alice had said. *Time*, Randy stewed, *has never changed anything*.

He picked up his Bible and read several familiar verses. They were just words on a page. Like Alice, he too remained in despair, with no hope of ever changing.

He put the Bible down and thought *maybe a ride will clear my mind*. He cruised east on West Seventh Street for a while, cut south to Interstate 630, and headed west. He turned north on South Woodrow Street and as he came to Prince of Peace Church he thought, good time to pay that pastor a visit. He entered the parking lot, got off his bike, and walked into the church

Randy stood in the open door of Joel Prindell's office, knocked, and asked, "Got a minute?"

"Sure Randy, come on in." Joel called out, looking up from his desk. "What's on your mind?"

Randy turned a chair around, straddled it, looked around the office, and then faced Joel. "Well, things that don't fit together."

"Like what?" Joel asked, brandishing a professional smile.

"Like a wounded soldier being interviewed in Iraq. It was on the news last Wednesday."

"Yes, I saw that. What about it?"

"Why did he get praise for killing, and I got prison?"

"You can't be serious," Joel laughed, putting some papers away in his desk drawer. "Are you trying to justify what you did?"

"Not really, just wondering." Randy answered. "We were two gangs at odds with each other, just like nations warring. We knew the risks of fighting each other, knew we could be killed. We had our own private war, just between ourselves. No collateral damage or injury to innocent bystanders. It was a clean and simple conflict, nobody else's business."

Joel had never heard anything like this before and didn't know what to say.

Seeing that Joel didn't have an answer, Randy stood up, turned his chair back around, sat down again, leaned his elbows on Joel's desk, and said "Something else doesn't fit. Last Wednesday, at the rally, you said that we should bomb Iran."

"Yes I did," Joel smiled, pushing away from the desk and leaning back in his chair. "Iran is a threat to Israel, and to America."

"Then on Sunday morning you preached that we don't war against people, that we do not war against flesh and blood."

Joel, caught off guard, shot back, "Not warring against flesh and blood only applies to Christians, acting as people, as private individuals, not to Christians fighting in the military!"

"You mean a Christian stops being a person when they are in the military?"

Joel swallowed hard.

Randy went on. "I'm not the only one with these questions. Last night I met a Muslim man from Jordan who asked me why Christians kill. His brother, a suicide bomber, blew himself up in a bus. That man thought he was serving his God and laid

down his life for his friends and country. What about that guy? Who's to say that terrorists are not justified to attack us because they want us out of their land?"

Joel grew impatient and smug. "There are young American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, putting their lives on the line to set the oppressed people free, and give them democracy."

Suddenly, Randy became serious, "Strange for me to say this because I'm not very religious, but talking to Charlie Hathaway has made me start to wonder about what it means to be a real Christian. Like, should a Christian kill even in the name of so called freedom?"

Joel rose from his chair, walked over to a bookcase, and nervously straightened a book. Then he turned back towards Randy. "Charlie!" Joel smirked, "is a loser, a dropout. He made a fool of himself at the rally, and when he returned from Iraq, he threw away a bright future in the ministry."

Randy slowly stood up, "Well, if he threw away what you have, I think he is pretty bright. Pastor, I have to go. If you figure all this out, let me know."

When Randy reached the door, he stopped and turned around. "There is one more thing you said Sunday."

Joel fumed, but didn't respond.

"You said that we should thank God that we are not evil men like Saddam Hussein, Yasser Arafat, and Osama Bin Laden."

"Yes, indeed," Prindell agreed. "We are not evil like those men are."

"Well, I don't know about you, but I know that I am still pretty rotten. God's got a long way to go to clean me up. I can't really say that I am better than those men are." Then Randy asked with a stern look, "Didn't Jesus say something about this in one of his parables about a Pharisee and a Publican? And didn't the Apostle Paul say we were not to judge people? You may want to read that. See you around."

Randy walked out leaving Joel stunned. Speechless.

When Randy got back home, he went over and knocked on Charlie's door.

"Hey Bro. What's up," Charlie greeted him with a smile.

Randy, shaking his head, said, "Chaplain, I need some answers."

"Come in Randy, I'll make some coffee."

"I just got back from talking to Joel Prindell."

"How did that go?"

"Joel didn't have answers."

"Did you expect him to?"

"Not really," Randy answered, sipping his coffee at the kitchen table.

Changing the subject, Randy confessed, "Saturday night I knifed the guy who turned me in for killing Frank ten years ago. I hate myself, but can't change. I try to do what's right for a while then I give up trying. It has always been this way."

Charlie looked up at Randy "Trying won't cut it. You can't just change the way you think and act. Because what you think comes from a deeper place, comes from what's in your heart. You need a heart transplant, a spiritual one. Your heart is what has to change, you have to be born again."

"Cheap words...born again," Randy smirked. "I've heard that too many times in prison. It was just a way to con the system and get out."

“Being born again isn't something you can do. God has to do it. But you have to really want it. It will cost you all the things that are eating you up, including your resentment and bitterness. You haven't bottomed out yet. Right now, it sounds like you are just cherishing your wounds.”

“Maybe. I suppose that I'm just not ready to pay that kind of price. Thanks for the coffee Charlie, and for listening ... and for being honest with me.”

“You bet. Anytime.”

CHAPTER 9

Lest Ye Be Judged

The next afternoon Randy and Keith were at The Home Warehouse maneuvering a stove and a dishwasher on flatbed carts through a checkout line. Randy spotted Joel Prindell. Their eyes met, and though he didn't really want to talk to Randy any more, but Joel felt pressured to say hello. He paid for his desk lamp, and then walked over to Randy.

"My old one burned out last night," he told Randy, holding up his lamp.

"Hello, Pastor, this is my boss, Keith Hudson," Randy said proudly.

"Mr. Hudson, this is Joel Prindell, pastor of Prince of Peace Christian Church. My parents go there."

"Prince of Peace. What a good name for a church," Keith replied. "And what a good message that gives."

Joel blushed as conviction fell on him as he thought. *Peace isn't what I've been preaching.*

"Can I buy you a cup of coffee?" Keith offered, shaking Joel's hand. "There's a coffee shop just outside this building. They're everywhere these days."

"Sure," Joel agreed hesitantly. "Let me put this lamp in my car and I'll meet you guys there."

Keith and Randy loaded their purchases in the van and joined Joel in the coffee shop.

"How's pastoring?" Keith asked.

"It's been a strange week," Joel said, sipping his coffee. "A protester interrupted my speech at the rally at the Capitol, and Randy roasted me with questions last night."

Keith looked at Randy and smiled, then turning to Joel, he asked, "What did the protester say?"

"He told me that I didn't understand the New Testament and that I have been misleading my Church."

"Have you?"

"I don't think so." Joel answered, then quickly changing the subject, said. "Tell me something about yourself."

"I'm Frank Hudson's father; I run a construction company."

Joel cast a shocked look at Randy then looked back at Keith.

"Yes, Randy killed my son," Keith said. "I hated him for it, I was miserable. My pastor said it was just the devil accusing me, told me that I should rebuke him and forget it."

"That's for sure," Joel proudly agreed. "That's what I've been telling my congregation. God doesn't want us to feel bad about the things we do. He isn't upset with us any more."

Keith continued, "It didn't work. I had no peace."

Joel squirmed in his chair.

Keith noticed Joel's uneasiness so he paused, then continued, "I found that I was hiding from the chastisement of God, because my heart was evil. God wanted me to forgive Randy so I could be free. I finally gave up my private war when I realized that Randy wasn't the enemy. As you know, I was battling unseen enemies that I really

needed to defeat with spiritual weapons. I was giving place to them with my unforgiveness.”

Joel blushed, remembering his discussion with Randy the night before.

Keith looked at his watch, “We'd better go, Randy. We have a lot to do today.”

“Thanks for the coffee,” Joel gestured with his cup as he watched Randy and Keith leave.

I've heard enough about this subject. Joel silently huffed. He stood up, threw the cup of coffee in the trash and stormed out the door.

Joel went back to the church, troubled. It was Wednesday night, so Prince of Peace had an evening service. Joel went through the motions conducting the service, but his mind was elsewhere.

After the service was over, he went home and sat in bed talking with his wife Karen. He fell back against the pillow and complained, “I'm tired, think I'll go to sleep early.” Karen pulled the covers over him, went out of the room, and closed the door so he wouldn't be disturbed.

Joel drifted into a vivid dream. He was walking down a wide road in thick darkness. An eerie wind blew through him as strikes of lightning illuminated scenes of his life on the smoky mist that surrounded him. In the dream he laughed, it all seemed like a funny movie to him. Far in the distance he saw a man sitting on a throne. He strained his eyes to see who it was. It wasn't God, but he couldn't quite make out the features of who it was.

As he drew closer, a cold fear gripped him. *It can't be* he shuttered, but nonetheless, it was true. The man on the throne was Joel himself. Joel tried to retreat, but was blocked by a large angel.

The man on the throne followed Joel's every move and every thought with cold dark eyes of judgment and condemnation. A loud voice from heaven echoed the words that were engraved across the top of the throne:

“Judge not, lest you be judged, for by what measure you judge, you will be judged.”

Joel fell to his knees. The voice thundered again:

“God is the lawgiver and the only judge! You are not to judge and condemn! Reach out to your enemies in love and forgiveness. Bring them deliverance from their sins and from the devil. That's what they really need. People need reconciliation, not condemnation.”

Joel shook in horror, realizing that he was being judged in the same way he judged other people. “There must be some mistake,” Joel pleaded and protested, “I said the sinner's prayer. I'm a child of God.”

The voice thundered once again:

“You are a bastard, not a son. You have refused correction from everyone God sent to you. You had your last warning this afternoon.”

Joel writhed in bed, screaming. Karen ran into the bedroom and shook him. He awoke soaked in sweat, his eyes bulging. He groped for her hand and pleaded, “Pray for me. I'm lost!”

After Joel calmed down, he went back to his office, sat at his desk and opened the desk drawer. There was a W.W.J.D. bracelet. He took it out of the drawer and put it on. *Yes, What Would Jesus Do?*

He picked up the phone and called Jack Harvey. “Jack, I know it's late, but I have to talk with you.”

“Sure Joel, what's going on?”

Joel's words flowed with excitement. “Jack, our petition is all wrong. As Christians, we can't support bombing Iran. In the Bible, Jesus showed us that the New Covenant was not just between God and us. It gives us a new spirit that also changes how we treat our enemies - a spirit that forgives and does not condemn the sins of others. We are in the age of grace. If we want to war, we do not have the spirit of Christ, and we are still in the dark.”

“You're nuts!” Jack challenged, “Who's been brainwashing you? Some cult? We are duty bound to defend the oppressed and kill the enemies who are abusing them.”

“That's the duty of the government,” Joel replied, “Not of Christians.”

“Remember King David said that God taught his fingers to war,” Jack argued.

“Yes,” Joel agreed. “But that was the Old Testament. People battled against flesh and blood, against human enemies. Jesus changed that; he showed us that our war is really against evil spirits.”

“Be sensible, Joel. What about justice? If we do not judge, who will administer justice? We would have anarchy and chaos. The Apostle Paul said that God ordains rulers as avengers of God against those who do evil.”

“Yes, but Paul also says that Christians are not to avenge themselves. So how can a Christian be in the position of an avenger?”

“Your brain is scrambled Joel. Get a good night's sleep; things will be better in the morning. Good night and God bless you.”

Joel hung up the phone. He put his head down on the desk. He thought about the last week and the people who had tried to show him the truth, including Charlie, Randy, and finally Keith. Then he turned on his computer and prepared his sermon for the coming Sunday.

CHAPTER 10

Christ of the War on Terror

Saturday night, Randy called Assad and asked, "Would you like to continue our discussion? My parent's preacher disagrees with what we were talking about. It might be interesting to see what he preaches tomorrow morning. His church is Prince of Peace Christian Church on the corner of South Woodrow and Lamar. The service is at ten o'clock. Interested?"

"Sure," Assad replied, "I'll meet you there."

Sunday morning, after the praise band played some familiar songs, Joel came forward, leaned on the pulpit, and lowered his head. The congregation wondered at his unusual silence. The band, also puzzled, stopped playing.

Finally, Joel raised his eyes and spoke in a slow and deliberate voice. "Week before last, on the State Capitol steps, I silenced the voice of Charlie Hathaway, who most of you know. He was trying to show me the truth, said that I didn't know what the New Testament meant. I thought he was a fool, but now I see that I was the fool. This past Wednesday night, I had a dream that rocked my foundations. I want to share it with you."

"I was walking down a wide road..."

When he finished relating the dream, Joel began to cry. "I have been blind, but now I finally have eyes that see. I have been misleading you, because I have been misled myself. We have been studying about how America was founded on a Christian Worldview. But that is not true. Our founding fathers did not know what true Christianity is, and most of the church today does not know either."

"How unpatriotic of you!" A member of the congregation spoke out.

Another angry voice followed, and another. "This is not the kind of thing we pay you to preach."

Neal Kinsey, a church elder, stepped up and warned Joel. "Pastor, you are out of line. America has a Godly government founded on Christian principles."

"No," Joel said softly, turning back to the congregation. "We hate and kill just like the warring Muslims that we condemn for hating and killing us."

"Arab Lover!" a voice shouted, then another, dissension breaking out among the congregation. People began to leave.

Randy looked at Assad and shook his head in disbelief.

Joel yelled, "Stop! A true Christian Worldview would see the world as Christ sees it, through his eyes and with his spirit. But if the worldview we have been following was true, Jesus would look like this."

He turned on the overhead projector, showing the classic picture of Jesus with upraised hands surrounded by his worshiping disciples. But Joel had modified the picture to show Jesus holding an automatic rifle in one hand, and a grenade in the other. It was labeled CHRIST OF THE WAR ON TERROR.

The congregation was shocked and disgusted.

Joel pointed to the picture. "This is the Jesus that The Christians For The Preservation Of Israel, and many other Christians in our country are serving, warring in the name of Jesus. This is not the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, who said to turn the other cheek and love our enemies."

Sam Winston, another elder, objected, "God is using the war to make it easier for Christians to spread the Gospel, to safeguard our right of free speech, and to maintain the right to gather together!"

"No," Joel pleaded. "The church uses that excuse to justify war. Jesus said that those who follow him would suffer persecution, but that's not the Jesus most of the church wants." He changed to the next slide and continued. "If Jesus had the mind and the heart of the militant Christians of today, the Bible would read something like this:"

Jesus called his disciples aside and gestured for them to sit under the shade of a palm tree.

"I intended to send you out two by two, as lambs among wolves, to preach the Gospel, but I'm having second thoughts about that. We must do some other things first."

"What's that?" Peter asked.

"We must get rid of the wolves," Jesus replied.

"What do you have in mind?" Matthew asked.

"After my resurrection, we are going to have a big campaign. The Sanhedrin, the Pharisees, and the Roman government are corrupt. They don't like what we are doing. The Roman government worships Caesar and a pantheon of gods and goddesses. They are making immoral laws, and are mistreating their people. We have to put a stop to this."

"How?" James and John asked. "Call down fire from heaven?"

"In a way," Jesus said. "Assemble the zealots. Have them bomb Rome, assassinate Caesar, and set up a government we can control. Then we can do our work without fear of persecution."

His sarcastic story over, Joel cried out, "Does this sound familiar? It is certainly not the Jesus of the New Testament. To say Jesus would speak this way would certainly be blasphemous, but for the most part, today's church is acting just as if Jesus had spoken those words." Joel pointed into the camera and said boldly, "Listen, Dr. Jack Harvey, this is the false Jesus you are serving. Your scheme to bomb nuclear facilities in Iran is not an act of love. You must repent."

Assad had tears in his eyes. *This man understands. I want to be like him*, Assad leaned his head down against the back of the empty seat in front of him.

Joel went on. "This great sin of the church must be exposed, so we can repent of this evil. We focus on the sins of others. We are prideful when we campaign against those who commit sins we do not commit-like abortion and homosexuality. We think we are so holy and righteous, but we are nothing but a bunch of hypocrites. We are full of hate and revenge. No one in their right mind would want what we have."

Betty Burns, the TV news director, yelled, "Cut! Cut! My God! The entire program has gone out over the air. We should have caught it, but Joel Prindell never has given us any problem before." She ran to her news desk, switched off the camera link from the church, faced the newsroom camera and said, "We apologize that we are having technical difficulties. We will return to Joel Prindell's service as soon as the problem has been solved." Then she switched to standard network programming. The television station was in panic and the studio phone began ringing off the wall as irate watchers voiced their disapproval that the station would let something like that go out over the air.

"We'll be sued!" Betty screamed, slapping her forehead and pacing around the newsroom.

Later that night, Randy and his family were sitting in the kitchen eating supper when a flash of light broke through the window, and the sound of an explosion rocked the quiet neighborhood. They ran out into the front yard and stared at a glowing fire in the distance. Prince of Peace Church, Randy thought as he ran down the street to see what had happened.

Randy reached the church, made his way through burning rubble, and walked through the blown-out wall of Joel's office. Joel was trapped under a large wooden beam. Randy yelled for help. Several men, who had just arrived, lifted the beam off of Joel, and Randy pulled him free.

"Pastor Prindell," Randy cried. "I won't rest until I take out the terrorists who did this to you."

"Let it go, Randy," Joel mumbled, as blood poured from his mouth. He grabbed Randy's arm and pulled him close. "Pray for them and forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Joel's head fell limp, as he died in Randy's arms.

End of sample

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