

Prelude

Somewhere a baby was crying. The sound was distant and faint. Yet it caught her ear. She would know the sound anywhere. It was him! It was him! She knew it! He was out there crying for her! Waiting for her, longing for the comfort of her arms, the sound of her voice, the feel of the soft touch of her finger brushing his cheek.

“Josiah! Hold on! It’s mommy! I’m coming! I’m coming, baby!”

She moved through thick layers of white foam, she pushed and struggled and strained.

“I must get to him! Oh Lord, help me get to him! He needs me! He’s crying for me!”

The harder she strained, the harder the white obstacle pulled at her, grabbed at her, and held her back. It was like walking through sticky, thick, liquid marshmallow.

Still she could hear the sound of him, crying and crying.

“Oh God, why can’t I reach him? Oh God, help me!” her heart cried out inaudibly.

Straining with all her strength, she pulled one foot free, then another.

“I’m free! I’m going to reach him! I can do it! I can make it!”

Yet more white foam began to flow from below her, trapping her once more. Thicker this time, she could not lift her legs. Unable to keep her balance, she fell forward. Now she was fighting to pull her arms free also. Lying face down in a pile of the white thickness, the sound of her baby’s crying was fading. He was moving away!

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“God, NO! Wait Josiah, I’m coming! Oh God! Oh God! Oh Lord Jesus! Help me!” she screamed as the white foam expanded up and over her, enveloping her, entombing her, suffocating her.

She could hear someone screaming, “NOOOO!”

Suddenly she could feel someone shaking her gently.

“Dee, honey! Wake up, sweetie! It’s Mom! Wake up, honey, wake up!”

With a gasping breath, Daria jerked awake and screamed. Her heart was beating out of her chest and her body was covered in sweat. Using her good arm, she pushed herself upright, sliding her motionless legs and her body into an upright position. Her blankets were twisted and tossed across her body. She woke from her nightmare only to quickly remember the nightmare was there in consciousness, too. Her baby was gone.

Her mom was next to her on her bed, reaching to embrace her. She let out a bellowing sob until she was sure her insides were going to explode.

“Oh God! Oh Lord! Why, Mom? Why? Why? Why? I can’t take anymore! I heard him crying. I couldn’t get to him, Mom! I couldn’t reach him!” she cried.

“It was a dream, honey. Just a dream. Shhhh. Breathe, honey. Take a deep breath. Josiah is in heaven with Jesus. He’s holding him in His arms. He’s not crying, he’s laughing and giggling. He’s happy, not sad! He’s in perfect peace. He’s in paradise,” her mom cooed softly, rocking her daughter in an embrace.

As her sobbing slowed, she purposely and deliberately calmed her breathing.

“Remember what Pastor Bill said in your last session? This is normal. You’re okay, honey. You’re okay. One day at a time. It’s going to take some time. It will get better, Dee. It will.”

Daria sighed and squeezed deeper and harder into her mother’s arms. “It feels like it will never be okay again, Mom. When will it start getting better? When?”

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“Shhh, I know. It will. It will. Let’s pray.”

Daria’s mom gently lowered her daughter back on her bed, straightened her covers, and took her left hand in both of her hands. *Lord, give me strength*, she prayed to herself. Taking a deep breath and allowing it to blow out completely, she closed her eyes and began to pray out loud for her devastated daughter.



Chapter 1

“Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; and give heed to the voice of my supplications! In the day of my trouble I shall call upon You, for You will answer me” (Psalm 86:6-7).

The brightness of heaven does not allow for shadow, for there is only light. In this light stood the archangel. His arms were raised in worship to the Lamb as his voice blended and swirled, combining with the sound of heaven’s music.

As the praise filled the atmosphere, the Most High King stood before them and they fell as one with their face to the ground in reverence and awe of Him. After a time, He called the archangel forward.

“The seed is just beginning to break through the ground. There’s more to be done. The fight for freedom must now begin. Whom shall we send?” His voice resounded through the air.

“Majesty, I would send the childlike one, for she is representative of the heart of freedom,” the archangel said reverently.

“Yes! Innocence of a child’s heart—fully trusting, unquestioning, full of unbridled faith. Yes! Ready the one called Release!”

As the choir began once more to sing softly, she appeared at the front of the multitude of heavenly beings. She lifted her arms in worship and sang aloud. Though she seemed small, her voice was clear and strong and confident. “All hail to the One, whose compassion never fails. Great in grace, mercy, and love is He. He opens the storehouse of riches and bestows His great kindness on all He has made! Praise Him! Praise to the

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King! Praise to the Lamb! Sing hosts of heaven! He is forever worthy. Forever worthy, forever worthy!”

As she sang, she was clothed about with armor, and she was given a mighty sharp sword. Though it would seem to a human’s eye that the sword would be much too heavy for such a tiny being, she wielded it as though it were light as a feather. “See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we would be called children of God! 1 John 3:1a” were the words etched into the metal of the sword. She read the words aloud and turned toward the King. “How marvelous, Great King! For this is the key; this is the revelation that will launch them into freedom!”

Without a word, He turned to the archangel and gave the signal. He sounded the shofar, and in a shower of prismatic light, the angel descended, followed by a regiment of angels, flowing down, down, down into the night, toward the town below.



As the daylight faded, lights in the town below began to blink on one by one. A street light, a porch light, a house lamp—each separate light combining to create a final show as darkness swallowed up the day. The scene likened to one plugging in a Christmas tree, one strand at a time, until every bulb is glowing. And finally, once each tiny bulb is aglow, one can stand back to take in the beauty of the blending of individual bursts of light. Awash in serenity and a sense of heavy peacefulness, the stage was set. Another day was ending in the town of Hope’s End. The curtains rose to display the vibrant hues of the sun setting against a darkening sky. This was the nightly grand production bursting on the scene. Beauty, harmony, serenity. It was the satisfying end to a day. Graceful peace for the soul and yet...and yet...

In her heart, the discontented sadness grew. Linda sat on her backyard balcony alone. Perched atop the sturdy cedar patio table, she hugged her knees to her chest and laid her head down on top of them. Her long blonde hair toppled down over her tanned legs as wisps brushed her arms, floating on the breeze. Everything she had ever worked for, every

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dream she had for her life, seemed meaningless. The closing of the day displayed before her in majestic beauty added to this sense of finality—the ending of all things lovely in her life. Her marriage was over.

Linda and Thom Ross met in college. She once told a friend she could swim in his deep brown eyes. He was of full-blooded Italian descent. His deeply tanned skin accented the brilliant white smile he wore when he had placed the wedding band on his bride's hand. He was passionate about everything he did, and everyone he loved which included, until recently, his proclaimed soul mate, Linda. Soon after graduation, the couple married, almost as if it were the natural progression of their future.

Even though both came from strong families, neither Thom nor Linda cared much about having children, much to the chagrin of both would-be grandmothers. They were so very content with each other and their careers, they decided early on that there was no need or room for more. Linda made a career out of phlebotomy at a local health lab, and was slowly studying to become a paramedic. She volunteered on the town's ambulance in the evenings and weekends. Thom, meanwhile, was a paralegal in a prestigious downtown law firm. While Thom was a desk jockey, Linda found fulfillment in saving lives in a roundabout way. While Thom sat hunched over a computer, Linda sat glued to her emergency scanner waiting to be sent out on a call.

They were such an odd couple that friends and family wondered on what level the two ever connected. Their secret was, in fact, that they did not connect at all. Yet their relationship was strangely symbiotic. They each had multilevel interests and views, but were completely open and accepting of the other. They lived in complete acceptance and freedom of the other's feelings, pursuits, and dreams. With their arms wrapped around each other, there was wholeness, safety, and deep comfort. Each passing anniversary seemed triumphant proof to the doubters that they were made for one another.

Their home was high atop Astral Mountain on the old Weber family farmland. Linda grew up the proverbial farm girl, living just a three-minute winding drive to the bottom of the mountain and the town of

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Hope's End. Her brother, Ray, lived across the expansive yard in the worn, but sturdy, family homestead. Across the makeshift road stood the remains of what used to be Ray's woodshop. Her once-woody mountain-man brother had undergone a spiritual and personal transformation after watching his livelihood literally go up in smoke months ago. Like a slowly rising phoenix, the skeleton of the old shop was slowly disappearing as Ray rebuilt. He was a master at creating all things wood—from trinkets, to furniture, and anything in between. Since the fire, his life as a lone craftsman locked away in the woodshop was completely uprooted and changed forever. Now, he was rarely home, spending much of his days helping manage Smith's Natural Cabinets near the center of town. Simultaneous to his career change, Ray had experienced a spiritual awakening, compelling him into a deep relationship with Christ. When he wasn't working, he could usually be found involved in some ministry project at New Harvest Gospel Chapel. Though deeply gratified to see her brother happy and fulfilled, Linda missed being able to stroll a few yards to his woodshop to chat with him. Back in the day when Ray's livelihood was inside the woodshop, she would drop in at will with food, or for an evening cup of coffee. Even when he was hard at work finishing an order, she could hop up on a stool and pour out her heart to him. She mourned the loss of the special time with her brother and friend. Especially now. Especially on nights like tonight.

When she married Thom, they renovated the old family barn from the inside out. It was the perfect distance from the homestead where Ray now lived. Far enough for the couple to have privacy and space of their own, yet close enough to pop in without putting on a coat to cross the yard. While keeping the rustic feel, the couple had turned the interior into a dream home. The rich wood tones were expertly accented with furnishings that gave it a cabin sort of feel. The kitchen, in contrast, was expansive and completely equipped with state-of-the-art appliances. The living room was warm and cozy, complete with an old stone fireplace. The barn loft had been converted into their country bedroom and study. It had a sophisticated rich feel, without being stuffy, but at the same time there was a hominess that was far from sloppy.

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Sultry summer evenings like this one had always been their together time. Thom would leave his study and Linda would put aside her medical journals and together they shared themselves unhindered. Linda would lie on his chest as they gazed up at the stars or watch the lights in the town below. With bucketed ice melting around their bottle of wine, they took turns sharing their deepest passions. Hours passed as they laughed and loved, alone in the universe in total seclusion. The only one that joined them in this time together was Thom's golden retriever, Chloe, who slept peacefully at their feet. It was all so...so good. So very good. At least, it seemed so.

Out of nowhere, looking at Linda over the top of his morning cup of coffee, Thom announced he needed more. The blow was instant, devastating, and debilitating. He packed a few things and closed the door behind him without even letting her know where he was headed.

Sensing her pain, Chloe had followed her incessantly around the house for days on end. Linda spent many nights crying into the dog's furry neck as loneliness gouged at her. Then, adding insult to injury, one night Linda returned home from work to find Thom had come to take his dog away from her.

Linda was, for the first time in her life, truly alone. After pushing the food she called supper around on a plate, there were extended empty long hours before the depression exhausted her mind into a fitful sleep. Often now, in the middle of a restless dream, she would wake up and reach for her husband to find a pile of cold barren covers. So many tears, so much pain.

What have I accomplished? I wanted to find my soul mate, get married, and spend the rest of my days discovering and rediscovering our world together, hand in hand. I wanted to have separate interests, but share a common final goal—contentment, unending comfortable love, a relationship that grew in the face of all that life could throw at us. Now he's gone, and I don't know if he'll ever come back. And if he does, will things ever be the same again? And what if he doesn't come back? Will I be okay? When did I miss the signs that we had gone off course? As we

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grew comfortable in our own skin, I thought we would continue to accept and be comfortable with each other with each stage of life. I thought we had that down pat. Why does it now seem to not be enough for him...and for me? I want more. The hole inside of my very soul is nothing I ever had planned for. I was self-reliant, self-sufficient, self-assured. Thom was just an additional aspect and facet to all my being. What is missing?

Linda's mind swirled and kneaded discontented thoughts. They seemed to stab at her like steely knives. "God, where are You?" she softly whispered to the night air.

A prayer? Was that a prayer? I haven't said a prayer since I was a kid.

Lifting her eyes to the twinkling sky, she sighed and wiped away yet another tear. She could hear her mother's voice gently urging her on. Though Mom was gone now, she could see her eyes moist with care. "Honey, if you walk away from faith, you walk away from everything that is truly important. There's nothing more important than believing in the Lord," Linda could still hear her say.

Her big brother had completely recommitted his life to Christ in the past year, and she watched him go from a discontented misfit into a fulfilled man of integrity. If she had put the old Ray and the new Ray side by side in a picture, you would swear it was a different person. They had always been close, and Linda worried at first that Ray was going to turn into some sort of religious robotic freak. But that was not what he was about at all. He burned with a passion that she could see in his eyes. He didn't force his new found life beliefs on her, but the look on his face now when he talked about God was contagious.

Could Ray be right? Could Christ be what I am missing? I don't want religion. No. No way. Never. I don't want performance driven ceremony. I want to know God—the realness of God. I want to know You are God. I want to be able to have a relationship with You. I want to be able to reach out and find You waiting there. I want...I want...

"I want what Ray has," Linda whispered as a tear erupted from her eye and gently rolled down her cheek.

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The cool summer breeze blew across her face and made the streak of saltwater cold on her skin. She reached up and brushed it away. As she dried her wet hand on the sleeve of her blouse, her eyes caught the sight of a single glowing light on the opposite mountain from her home.

The single light that pulsed through the darkness drew her attention away from the pain in her heart. She sat and stared at it for what seemed like forever. She felt drawn to it, attached to it, pulled toward it from deep inside. As if the light had lassoed her heart with an invisible thread, she jumped from her seat and walked to the edge of the woods to get even just a bit closer to the light she saw miles and miles away.

What is that? Is there a street light up there in the middle of nothing? Who put it there? Why do I even care?

As she stood staring at the single glow, all of the sadness and pain took second place to her curiosity. Linda pulled her blonde hair back from her face and rubbed her forehead.

I'm losing it. That's what's happening. I am losing my mind. I need sleep. I need to actually sleep, to close my eyes and have enough peace that I can actually sleep.

Linda closed the sliding patio door behind her and climbed fully clothed into her empty bed. For the first time since she was a little girl, she said a prayer as she closed her eyes.

Well...okay, God. Here goes.

"I...I don't know how...I don't remember how to pray to You, but I'm gonna try. God, I don't know where to go from here. I know I need You, but where do I start? Will You even hear me? I don't have anywhere to turn. I just want peace. I just want this pain to stop. My heart is being torn out of my body. If You can help me...If You will help me..." It was as much as she could get out. There was no more. Linda's whisper was cut short inside of her throat as she choked back tears. She pulled her covers into a ball, hugged them to herself, and fell asleep on top of her wet pillow.

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In her dream, Linda was standing on the edge of the dirt road in front of her house. She looked across the valley and could see the light on the opposite mountain, but in her dream it pulsed. *Come, Linda. Come find me.* She could hear a soft whisper from the light itself. Suddenly, she was given the ability to fly. As she lifted from the ground, she floated high above the town. As she hovered slowly on, she could momentarily see into individual lives of people in the town: A mother with a very sick child, a teenage boy standing on the ledge of a bridge, a woman kneeling at a graveside, sobbing deeply. It was as if Linda could feel their desperate pain, their need for relief from their pain. It was so intense she felt her stomach tighten with emotion even as she slept. The humid air of Linda's bedroom was cut by the sound of her sleeping voice crying out, "Oh God! They need help! Help! Please help!"