

ONE

“THAT YOU, NIGHTCRAWLER, EASTBOUND?” the raspy low-edged voice echoed from the CB.

“Hey, Red Rover, how’s it goin’? Been awhile, huh, Jesse?”

“Goin’ good. Try not to get stuck on these highways at night too much anymore. Couldn’t avoid it this time. How you anyway?”

“Good, man. Alright. So who twisted your arm?” Micah asked it with a smile, knowing it wouldn’t take much for Jesse to do anything for anyone, especially when it involved his semi.

A rough laugh accompanied the answer. “Jane Pickering needed a load of alfalfa. Gotta meet the farmer in Quincy at four. Thought I’d get there a bit early and maybe grab a nap.”

Micah recalled Jane Pickering had held onto Jesse’s heart since the day Micah’s father had introduced them so many years ago. Must have been complicated because the two of them had never married each other or anyone else.

“I remember Jane. Nice woman.”

“Yeah.”

“So you headed back after you’re loaded?”

“Probably grab some lunch and take off home, uh-huh. What ’bout you?”

“I’ve got a couple days work over here and then I’ll head back.”

Their conversation was brief as the range of the CBs would come to an end, but they’d connected and hoped to meet up “one of these days” again, which seemed to be harder to do than it used to be.

Micah looked forward to the truck stop in Post Falls, but the dark hours still lay before him. He wasn’t really tired yet, but he knew how easily the drowsiness could descend during the uneventful travel over the open road in the darkness before dawn.

He briefly glimpsed the headlights in his driver’s side mirror before the probably black Denali roared past him in the left lane, easily traveling upwards of 90 mph with the red dots of tail lights quickly out of sight ahead of him.

“Smokey, where are you?” Micah murmured as he maintained his speed of 65 pulling his fully loaded 53 foot trailer.

RELIEVED TO GET OUT of the cab once he’d fueled up and parked his rig in the expansive lot of the truck stop, he stretched his back muscles and twisted his neck back and forth. His stomach had started to growl the last couple of miles and breakfast sounded good. As he walked across the busy lot to the restaurant, his revolving gaze caught a couple a few steps off to the right of the entrance to the restaurant. He recognized the lanky driver, a hay hauler and loose cannon at times on the roadways. He was a good driver—or could be—when he wasn’t bearing down on his equipment and bragging over the CB about the various young women he’d been “romancin’.” In just the few seconds Micah spent observing the two, he saw the young man’s strong large hands with a firm grip on the skinny mostly bare arms of the shorter girl hanging straight at her sides with a cigarette wedged between the first two fingers of her right hand, she making just one short glance at his hold of

her arms. They weren't arguing, but the guy seemed to be making a point, and she seemed intent on listening to it.

Micah headed to the restroom to use the facilities and wash up before ordering. The memories often came like a surprise attack, assaulting his senses giving him no time for resistance. For just one tiny moment in the less than four second glimpse of the couple out front, the girl had reminded him of Jean. No resemblance in her appearance. Why then? The inevitable old grief threatened him with the choking sensation of holding back unwanted, and now seemingly unwarranted, tears. So many years ago. Why did it still hang around like a noose tightening its grip on the last breaths of his life, daring him to survive his loss?

He stared into the mirror above the sink, willing himself back to the present by focusing on his expression—clearing the evident sadness out of his eyes. It wasn't that he wanted to forget any of it, even the grief. It's that it was so long ago and he was just now desirous of moving on. To who knows where but somewhere else besides the gloom of sorrow's place etched forever in his mind by the memory of his first and only too-short-lived love.

"Lord," he whispered as another man entered the restroom.

A simultaneous nod and Micah exited.

He scanned the restaurant portion of the truck stop, noting the booth where he usually parked himself was occupied, so he sauntered over to the quieter side of the room and planted his now weary frame on the bumpy red vinyl seat. He picked up the menu from behind the condiment holder just to make sure he wouldn't change his mind about what he planned to eat. A new breakfast special teased his hunger, and he couldn't resist it. Before he closed the menu, a cup of black coffee was set on the table with three small cream containers.

"Thanks, Ros—" he started to say as he slipped the menu back in its place.

Sexual abuse.

“Not over here. This is my section,” the girl from outside the entrance said good-naturedly. “Rosie told me you take cream with your coffee.”

Her eyes were a pale blue with little expression in them in spite of the smile. Always when his eyes connected with certain strangers, it happened. Nothing to foretell it. Just the information. Concise. Sometimes chilling, as this was. He looked at her nametag pinned above her left breast on the short-sleeved red and white striped uniform blouse.

“Bonita,” he said aloud. “Thank you.”

Her eyes dropped slightly. “Crazy name, I know. My mom thought I was a pretty baby. She stuck me with it.”

“It fits,” he said kindly with no flirtation.

The girl had lived long past blushing, but she seemed to appreciate his comment, perhaps surprised there seemed to be no agenda attached to it. “Maybe once upon a time. Not so much anymore. Now, what can I getcha?” She managed another smile.

“The special, please. Eggs over easy. Skip the sausage. A tall glass of milk and please keep the coffee comin’.”

“Got it. Rosie said your name’s Micah.”

“That’s right.”

“Is it short for Michael?”

“No. Just Micah. Named after a biblical prophet,” he offered for explanation, more to see her reaction than for any other reason.

“Huh. Like the guys who predict the end of the world and stuff?” she asked, no sarcasm.

“Well, yeah, they did do that, but they also told of how and where God’s Son would come to earth and offer salvation.”

“And that would be Jesus?” she asked with the hint of a smile.

“That would be Him.” Micah smiled back.

“I’ll go place your order, Micah.”

It wasn’t easy knowing such intimate details about strangers, but he’d learned from experience it was the way the Lord required

him to pray for people. There were a few whose names he never got to know—just how to pray for them. Until the time came when the Lord let the burden pass on to someone else he supposed.

The coffee pouring into his cup brought him back to the present tense.

“Sleepy?” Bonita asked.

“Yeah, maybe a little.” He gave her a grateful smile. “Thanks,” he said as she pulled three more creams out of her pocket.

When he glanced up at her, coffee pot in hand, he strained to keep his face expressionless as flashes of the terror and pain on her face at a much younger age zipped through his mind. “I’m sorry,” he said without meaning to.

“What? You’re sorry? About what?” she asked, confused.

He scrambled for logic. “Oh, uh, you know, not very talkative. That’s all.”

She laughed. “No problem. Sometimes there’s just nothin’ to say, you know?”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“I’ll have your order in a coupla minutes.”

“Thanks.”

The place had gotten busy during his reflections. Hungry truck drivers and a few of the townsfolk who knew where to come to get a good breakfast. The food here was good. Especially the breakfasts. Whoever their morning cooks were, they knew how to make the selections just the way you ordered them.

He sipped on his coffee and wondered why the Lord had allowed him to see this girl’s pain so vividly. That was a new twist to these revelations, and it took him by surprise, threw him off guard.

Bonita placed a large oval plate in front of him, filled with a waffle, a round mound of butter melting all over it, two eggs over easy, three hefty strips of Canadian bacon cooked to perfection, and some orange slices with a few good looking early strawberries, and set his milk down to the right of his plate. She said nothing

until she returned with a carrier holding three types of syrups and the coffee pot to fill his half full cup, reaching into her pocket for more creams.

“All set, Micah?” She checked with a smile, picking up the empty creamers.

He was almost afraid to look at her again, but not wanting to be rude, he looked up at her. Another swift image of her anguish passed with the speed of a shutter snap. “Thank you,” he replied, trying to keep the sadness from his voice and expression.

The smile dropped off her face. “Did I forget something?” The concern evidenced as she surveyed the table for a mistake.

“No! This is great.” He forced himself to smile up at her without direct eye contact.

That seemed to satisfy her concern. “I’ll be checkin’ on ya, keepin’ up with the coffee.”

“Thanks, Bonita.”

She walked off confident to attend to others’ coffees. Micah was relieved. He bowed his head discreetly and thanked the Lord for his meal. Later on he’d be spending time with God to ask about these new unsettling additions to his experience.

He finally put the brakes on the coffee and after she inquired about serving him anything else, she deposited the check on the table. There were no further pictures of her pain, and Micah couldn’t help but be grateful.

She returned to remove his empty plate. “Got a busy day?” she asked as she piled his glass, silverware, empty cup and saucer on the large plate.

“Yeah, I do. A couple of them.”

“You’re not from around here, are ya?”

“No. Other side of the mountains.”

“Like Seattle?”

“The general area, not in the city.”

He noticed she seemed to want to chat.

“You Blaine’s girl?” he asked, surprising himself.

An expression he couldn’t identify appeared and passed within a second. “That what he said?” she retorted with a hint of irritation.

“I haven’t talked to Blaine in a while. Just saw you two out front when I came in.”

“He thinks I am. Me? I’m not so sure.”

“Because of how he is?”

“You mean sleepin’ with any piece of—” she stopped abruptly and took a quick survey of the room. “It’s temporary. That’s all it is,” she concluded, picking up the dishes.

“You lookin’ for something permanent?” His questions asked without his permission.

She laughed slightly. “You offering?”

He smiled up at the young woman who’d been used and abused. “I think it’s too soon for that,” he said thoughtfully, not wanting to insult her in any way.

“Oh, so you’re not of the usual mindset to beat it into bed right off the bat?”

He caught her furtive gaze then and kept it. “No, I’m not, Bonita. You deserve better.”

“That’s just it, Micah. No I don’t.”

The sadness showed itself briefly before the hardened resolve blanketed it. “Thanks for talking.” She carried the dishes away.

He left a big tip and headed out to his truck. Once inside the shiny black Kenworth T800 sleeper with the engine idling, it solidified: Bonita was fragile and vulnerable. That’s why she’d reminded him of Jean. In a totally different way than Jean, but the same somehow nevertheless. Where Jean’s fragility had come from a late discovery of a defective heart, Bonita’s came from the rabid snatching of her innocence. The vulnerability of Jean’s short life ever looming in her numbered days, Bonita’s had come from her race to escape the damage and un-mendable sorrow of someone invading a life unwelcome.

Nicole Petrino-Salter

“God,” he whispered, painful. All he could muster right then was the hurt of it all. This was the pattern. The soaking dense drenching of someone’s torment.

It had started soon after Jean’s death.