

More Than Dust in the Wind

Donald James Parker

Sword of the Spirit Publishing

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Chapter 1

A whistle blew, but the noise was swallowed up in the bedlam emanating from the bleachers. The man Bambi was guarding had driven to the basket along the baseline. Bambi, in his opinion, had timed his leap perfectly and blocked the shot cleanly. As he stood there eyeballing the referee, a vision of the high school state championship game clouded his mind.

His hands went up and grasped the crown of his head. *No ref, don't call a foul on me. I didn't touch the guy! Please, don't let me be the cause of my team losing another championship game!* He looked up into the bleachers, where it seemed almost every person was standing.

The referees went into a huddle. When they finished their discussion, the lead official announced that the player with the ball had stepped out of bounds before Bambi fouled him. The ball belonged to the Dakota State Trojans with three ticks on the clock and the score tied in the championship game of the regional NAIA tournament. The winner of the game would advance to the national tournament in Kansas City; the loser would go home and put their basketball uniforms in mothballs for another season. A Trojan loss would bring Bambi's collegiate basketball career to an end.

DSU, the team from Madison, South Dakota, had no time-outs left. As team captain, Bambi received a signal from the bench and relayed it to the rest of the team. The play called for him to line up near the free throw line. His job was to run toward the ball and set a screen for his teammate near the baseline. After setting that screen, he would pivot and run back toward their basket, and the out-of-bounds passer would hit him on the fly. He would have to shoot it almost immediately after catching the ball to beat the buzzer. That wouldn't give him time to even reach mid-court.

The thrower slapped the ball, and Bambi broke to set the screen. After executing the improvised pick-and-roll maneuver, he had body position on the man screened out as he sprinted down court. According to plan, the man who had been guarding Bambi switched to the man receiving the screen. Bambi was open for a fly pattern. The pass barely cleared the fingers of the defender,

who was right on his heels. By the time he touched the ball, he was almost to the half-court line. Three dribbles later he reached the mid-court stripe. He'd made an occasional shot from half-court when playing around. Never had he attempted one from this far away in a game, but he had no choice. Without breaking stride he pushed the ball up from his hip and fired it toward the hoop with all the mustard he could put on it. He watched the trajectory and saw that the shot was online. *Does it have the distance?* Almost mentally willing the ball to fly even further, Lance witnessed the ball hit the bang board; he'd actually shot it too far. It caromed off the glass and forcefully split the net on its downward ricochet. He collapsed in a heap on the gym floor but jumped up immediately when he thought of his claustrophobia and the possibility of being on the bottom of a monkey pile.

A quick glance at the bench showed the whole team headed his way to celebrate. Another glance at the cheerleaders and fans behind them told him he was going to get sandwiched. He didn't wait for the celebrators to reach him; instead he turned and ran toward the cheerleaders. He swooped in and lifted Lisa Nielsen off the ground, spinning her around as he did so. Before she'd made a 360-degree circle, Lance shouted, "Will you marry me?" And then he was engulfed by the rest of the team and fans.

He'd never been a part of such bedlam. In the scramble he and Lisa both went to the floor. It was a fight to get back to their feet. Finally the eye of the storm moved to another part of the gymnasium where the team started cutting down the net. Bambi stayed at center court with Lisa.

Lisa smiled coyly at him. "What did you say when you were twirling me around? I swore you asked me to marry you."

"I thought you didn't swear."

"I'm using the term figuratively. Are you denying that you proposed to me by changing the subject?"

"Heavens, no! Why would I do that? There's nothing more important to me on Earth."

"What about the national tourney next week?"

"Only the third most important thing in my life."

"So am I number one or number two?"

"Two, of course. But you are number one on Earth. Only God is above you."

"In that case, I'll accept. If I were number one, that would be an issue, but I'm perfectly happy to be number two."

"I don't have a ring for you. Actually I do have a ring, but it's back at home. I was waiting to pop the question a little later, but I

got inspired tonight.”

Lisa looked down. They were standing right in the circle at half-court. “Sure you do, Bambi. Look at the floor. You can give me the biggest ring I ever saw.”

“It’ll work for tonight. I think you’ll like the real deal better.”

He then took his new fiancée into his arms and the two, who had dated all through college, stood at half-court kissing for the entire world to see. They were oblivious to the crowd around them. Bambi decided that as captain he needed to join his teammates, but he wasn’t letting go of Lisa. She had to go where he went until it was time to hit the shower. He held her right hand in his left as he guided her across the floor so he could shake hands with the opponents. When it was time for him to get a chunk of the net, she got up on the ladder with him, and they brought it down together, holding it above their heads for one more round of cheering.

“I don’t want this night to ever end,” Bambi said.

“Sorry, I can’t help you there. All our days, whether wonderful or terrible, all give way to the next. This will just be a wonderful but fading memory in a few years.”

“If it was just the basketball game, I might have trouble keeping it vivid in my mind, but combined with your acceptance of my marriage proposal, this one is never going to fade.”

* * *

Since the cheerleaders had received permission to travel with the basketball team to the regional tournament, Lance and Lisa were able to talk about their decision on the four-hour bus ride home.

“So when do you want to have the ceremony?” Bambi asked.

“I’ve always wanted a June wedding.”

“Then in June I’ll be busting out all over with pride to make you my bride.”

“Ooh, poetry in motion! I like it.”

“Well don’t expect it out of me on a regular basis. I’m just an ordinary guy, you know.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Bambi. Believe me, you’re an extraordinary guy. If you weren’t, I wouldn’t love you so much. One adjective I think applies to you is ‘steadfast’. I think God likes that in his people. They don’t have to be flashy in what they do, but they always show up to take care of business. That quality makes a girl feel secure. I’ve seen you sacrifice to realize your dreams. It’s obvious that if you really love me, you’ll be pouring out the same type of effort into our marriage.”

"And into my career, which also impacts you. That brings up a point...or perhaps a question. What if I don't find a teaching job? Can we still get married?"

"What makes you think you won't--"

"I didn't say I won't, but it's possible. Lots of guys in the graduating class last year ended up coming back to school or taking a low-paying job outside of education."

Lisa brushed back some hair from her forehead. "Let me be perfectly blunt here. You're a jock. No, let me rephrase that, you're a well-known jock. It seems to me you'll have to beat off the superintendents with a stick for a coaching job."

"Beat 'em off with the board of education?"

"Exactly. Your tennis racket will work, too. Just be ready to decide which job of many that you want to take."

"Where do you want to live?" Bambi asked.

"I'd love to stay in or as close to Madison as possible."

"Me too. And what are you going to do for a job if I land in Podunk Junction and there are no openings for an elementary teacher nearby?"

Lisa folded her arms. "Forgive me if this sounds unrighteous, but you might try using your leverage to land us both a position at the same time -- a package deal, you might say."

"So I tell them that I'll take their job if they throw in an elementary job for you?"

"By George, I think it's sinking in."

"I'm not sure that's ethical. And wouldn't you feel like...I don't know...like you were riding on my coattails if you didn't win the position for yourself?"

Lisa sighed. "You're right. Ultimately it would probably eat at me. I'm just so worried about setting up a sound financial foundation, and I want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem."

In his best Bogart voice Bambi said, "Listen, sweetheart. We'll be just fine on one income. You don't have to work, see. I just thought you'd like to make use of the college degree and work with kids. You could be a substitute teacher so you could work part time."

"That thought crossed my mind. You know how kids treat substitute teachers though."

"Hmm. That thought didn't cross my mind. I can't believe the students would be mean to a beautiful lady, and one as sweet as you, but that chance is there. Your regular students can be mean too, but at least you have more control in that situation."

"One thought just hit me. What if I land a teaching job, and you don't? Is that going to eat at your male ego?" Lisa asked.

"Man! I never thought of that. And what happens if you get an offer and take it, and I get one later in a town a hundred miles away from you? Do you give yours up, or do I turn mine down? Or do we live a hundred miles apart except for weekends?"

"Stop, Bambi! All this agonizing over the future is getting depressing. Maybe, we're taking the wrong approach here. Do we have faith that God has a plan for our lives? You know that unless God builds the house, man labors in vain."

"Ooh. That's a tough question. I have no doubt that God loves us and wants the best for us. Some people, perhaps, are set apart for God's work and thus he has a specific plan for their lives. There are some big questions in my mind about him having a definite plan for everybody. I just think that he wants people to reach a certain spiritual level of trust and maturity. Perhaps he doesn't really care what you go through to learn those lessons."

"So you think we need to look out for ourselves? God isn't going to take care of us?"

"God helps those who help themselves," Bambi said.

"What book of the Bible is that from?"

Bambi scratched his head. "Proverbs, maybe?"

"Wrong. That's not in the Bible at all. I've really struggled with this concept. It seems that God wants us to work hard but yet trust him. What's the percentage of the perfect mixture? Fifty-fifty?"

"I don't know, Lisa. The heavenly math class was full so I didn't get in."

"And maybe success comes through persistence. God doesn't really do anything to help, but the principles that he instills allow us to keep on trying – like that rubber tree plant in the song."

"Or that daisy pushing up through the cement in the driveway."

"Exactly. Or that boy that kept working out and practicing his jump shots and free throws until he took his team to the state championship game. That was your effort. Maybe God intervened when you planned on driving out on that thin ice."

"It was the memory of John Baker and his words that did that."

"But maybe God put those words into your head. Maybe even John Baker lived and died just to inspire the youth from succeeding generations, like you."

Bambi ran his fingers through his hair. "Maybe."

"And maybe you've been called to be an inspiration too."

"Yeah. If so, God must be scraping the bottom of the barrel."

"Are you serious or is this that false modesty you pull out of your hat all the time?"

"That's not false modesty. I like the term 'pride under control'"

"Hand check!" a voice bellowed from their right. They turned to see who was harassing them. It was Corky, one of the two classmates from Bambi's high school who were playing for the Trojans.

"We were just talking, so don't get any funny ideas," Bambi said.

"Never would I do that. I've seen you guys operate for long enough to wonder if you do anything besides talk."

"I don't know about that. Seems to me we put on a pretty good display of public affection at center court."

Corky chuckled. "I guess I have to admit that one. People were taking bets on what day you were going to come up for air."

"Ha-ha. Do you have anything constructive to say?" Bambi asked.

"Actually I came up here to congratulate you guys before I go back to my seat and fall asleep. It'll be way past my bedtime before we get home." Right on cue, Corky yawned.

"Ditto. I can't sleep right now though because the excitement is still too strong," Bambi said.

"I wish you guys the best. Oh, by the way, I overheard your conversation. A word of advice: work as if everything depends on you and pray as if everything depends on God. Good night."

"Sweet dreams, Corky," Lisa said.

As Corky returned to his seat near the back of the bus, Lisa remarked, "Now we have our answer. Work and pray."

Bambi nodded. "Good answer. Now I have another question...."

"What is it?"

"I'm afraid to ask it."

Lisa frowned. "How can you be afraid to say anything to me?"

"You'll find out if I ever work up the courage to ask my question."

"OK, you've got my attention now with your word games. Can we call this one 'hangwoman', because you've left me hanging?"

Bambi exhaled with a deep sigh. "I guess it has to be put on the table, so we might as well get it out of the way. One discussion probably won't be enough though."

"Could we get started with the first one – tonight?"

"OK, OK. Are you going to become a Catholic, or am I going to become a Protestant, or are we going to continue having our

own faiths?"

"I thought you were going to become a Protestant. That's the way it always seemed to me anyway. I just can't even envision continuing to go to separate churches. Bambi, we need to be on the same page here. Nothing in our marriage will be more important than our faith. If we're apart on that, there is no sense in getting married."

"See, I told you it was dangerous to bring this up."

"What do you mean by dangerous?"

"It could threaten to break us up."

"Do you really mean that?" Lisa looked at her watch. "It was less than two hours ago that you proposed to me, and now you mention the 'b' word. You'd rather keep your religion than me?"

"Sorry. Maybe we should have this discussion sometime when we're not both tired. I said it would probably take more than one try. Let's quit for tonight and get some sleep."

"You expect me to go to sleep after getting me all riled up?"

"Riled up? You're awfully mild for being riled and not close to wild."

Lisa pulled her hand out of Bambi's and sat up straight. "Well, Mr. Poet, you're going to blow it, and then I'll let you know it when I tell you to stow it."

"Wait! Why are you really getting upset, and why are you spouting verse like a Dr. Seuss character? I just meant that for saying you were riled you certainly didn't act like it. Now, I might have to take it back. Even in the dark I can see the fire in your eyes."

"You started the rhyme, buster. I just finished it. And you're exaggerating. I bet you can't even see my eyes."

"You don't bet."

"Well, if I did, I'd put money on this one."

"Maybe I misspoke about your eyes. What I really meant is I hear the fire in your voice. Let me turn the table around. Would you rather keep your religion than me?"

Lisa turned and looked out the window at the trees and houses bathed in the streetlights of the small town they were passing through. It was her turn to sigh. "I hate to say this to you, but it just became crystal clear to me. I'd never become a Catholic."

"Never! Why not?"

"Because they believe things that go against my understanding of the Bible."

"Such as?"

"We've talked about those things before, Lance."

"Lance, huh? Been a while since you called me that. Getting formal on me I see."

"It slipped out."

"Yeah, a Freudian slip."

"Don't bring Sigmund Freud into our discussion unless you really want to see me get riled. Back to the topic, there are a bunch of things about the Catholic Church that swim upstream against the current of the Bible. The Word says that there is no man who is a mediator between men and God except for Jesus Christ. Catholics put the priest there as a go-between."

"What about Protestant pastors?"

"Not the same thing. They don't forgive people's sins. Only God can do that."

"So that's one thing."

"The thing with communion is a little freaky to me, believing that the wafer is really the body of Christ."

"Does it hurt anything to believe that?"

"Well, I guess not, but it creeps me out a little. And then there's the passage in the Bible where it warns against those who will forbid marrying and eating of meat. Priests and nuns are forbidden to marry, and all of you are supposed to avoid meat on Fridays."

"Are you saying the Bible warns against Catholicism?" Bambi asked.

"It certainly could be interpreted that way. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Perceived truth seems to follow that same pattern. The trouble is that perception never changes the underlying truth. So it doesn't matter what I think about that passage. It either does or doesn't speak out against those practices. What I say is irrelevant."

"So when you say you would never become a Catholic, that's irrelevant?"

"No, I'm talking about truth. If I say the Catholic Church can't be God's only true church, my words won't change the truth if it really is. However, my statement that I can't join the Catholic Church is a truth unto itself; like some guy believing in the Easter Bunny. The fact that the Easter Bunny doesn't exist doesn't change the fact it's true he believes there is an Easter Bunny. Two different truths involved. Number one: there is no Easter Bunny. Number two: he believes there is an Easter Bunny. Are you following my rabbit trail here?"

Bambi nodded. "I'm with you. I didn't fall off a carrot truck last

night.

"Then there's the little fact that most Catholics don't read the Bible but rely on the church to tell them what to believe."

"Come on, Lisa. Do all Protestants read the Bible?"

"Well, probably not. Being a Protestant doesn't make you any more spiritual than being a democrat or a republican makes you patriotic. I've heard of guys hanging out at church picnics and telling dirty jokes. If we go back to your original mission to win the state championship, weren't the guys who represented Madison every year before that on the basketball court called basketball players, just like you were?"

"That's what they were called, but their lack of devotion to the team argued against the privilege of carrying that title."

"Exactly my point. There's no real value in a name. The difference for you was that you applied yourself to improving and winning. The effort was important, not the labeling," Lisa said.

"Reminds me of the statement, 'it's not so important what we say but rather what we do'. Talk is cheap, hombre."

"Yes! That problem is even worse in churches. A basketball player at least has to show up for practice and games. People can claim to be Catholic or a Protestant and never show up at church."

Bambi held up one finger. "Or just at Christmas and Easter."

"That too. To tell you the truth, the biggest problem probably I have with your church is the belief that if you're not a good Catholic, you're going to hell."

"I've struggled with that concept some myself."

"That's encouraging. That shows at least you're thinking. Bambi, if you apply common sense, you see through the use of labels and get down to people's hearts. The Bible says that God looks upon the heart."

"I have an analogy here. In the book *Aerobics*, the author provides statistics on how a person can improve cardiovascular condition. You can swim, run, bike, walk fast, etcetera, in order to get in shape. Some people choose to be swimmers. I chose running. Others are bikers. They all choose their specific discipline. Which one gets you in better shape? The answer to the question has to involve how frequently the exercise is done and how hard the person pushes himself."

"Not a bad comparison. In religion we have prayer, forgiveness, obedience, trust, church attendance, helping the poor, etc. How well those things are applied and how often will determine a person's spiritual shape."

"I like it. Spiritual aerobics." Bambi bobbed his head up and

down.

"Now back to my complaints. I think I've listed all of mine concerning Catholicism. It's your turn to tell me what you find offensive about a Protestant church."

"You really want to know what I think?"

"Yeah. That's the reason I asked."

"OK, for one thing, what about the fact the pastor has to go to college to get a degree to be a minister. It's just like being a teacher or a doctor or a dentist."

"What's your point?"

"Shouldn't a job like a pastor be a calling from God and not a book learning, get your diploma situation?"

"I never thought of it in those terms before. That makes sense. But you don't want an uneducated person as a leader. Wait, Jesus chose those kinds of people to be his apostles." Lisa slapped herself on the side of the head. "Now you've got me debating with myself. I hate it when that happens. What else is on your list?"

"What about pastors being able to take a job at a bigger, fancier church that pays them more money. They become spiritual gunslingers for hire to the highest bidder. They end up living in a big, expensive house far from the manger in Bethlehem."

"I've seen the place where your priest lives. Not exactly a slum."

"It's comfortable. I'm not saying that it's not OK for people to have some creature comforts. What I mean is that people can be tempted into following society instead of God; the whole thing of keeping up with the Jones family and stuff. A man who has devoted his life to God can't spend his time and money trying to impress other people. Those two things just don't go together."

"I can't argue against that. So, you make good points, but in actuality, there are some Protestant churches where the pastor isn't a seminary graduate and in some cases where they work full time in another job to earn a living and pastor the church on their own time."

"Hmm. I like that concept. Common working men leading the way, kind of like in the days that Jesus walked the Earth with his disciples."

"Glad you found something you can like, Bambi."

"Too bad you couldn't find something good about Catholicism."

"The stained-glass windows are pretty awesome."

"True."

"They do have a great football team."

"What?"

"Notre Dame," Lisa said.

"I can't believe you said that! Are you making fun of my church?"

"Would I do that?"

"I don't know. I didn't think you would, but you seem to be doing it."

"You're being a little touchy."

Bambi moved away toward the aisle of the bus, as far as he could from Lisa. "I'm not touchy at all."

"Now you're being real punny."

"Thank you. Aren't you going to come back with your own – call me a catlicker or something?"

"Bambi, just because I don't like what your church believes, that doesn't mean I'm going to make demeaning remarks about the people who do accept that doctrine. You really need to trust me and my motives. I have your best interests at heart, you know."

"Then maybe you should consider what it would do to my family to have me walk away from the Catholic Church."

"I have considered it. My feeling is that it is more important that you please God than please your parents. You're supposed to honor your parents, but the command to love God with all your heart is the first great commandment."

"So why can't I love God with all my heart as a Catholic?"

"I'm not saying you can't do that. I'm sorry. I guess I just assumed...."

"Assumed what?"

"That you'd be willing to switch for me."

"Would you want me to switch if my church *is* God's true church?"

"Of course not, but I'm sure it isn't. So, I could never be a part of it. And I don't want to go to church alone. Even more importantly, when kids come along, what are we going to teach them? I'm afraid we might have a problem here that we can't resolve. We need to get this situation ironed out before we make any more plans."

"Fine!" Bambi jumped up and walked to the back of the bus. He went into the bathroom and just stood looking at the walls and listening to the hum of the bus motor and the tires on the pavement. Upon exiting, he took a seat near Corky and tried to go to sleep.

When the bus arrived in Madison, Bambi awoke with a sense of loss. It took him a minute to get his bearings. *I've got to get my duffel bag and take Lisa home.* When he reached the front of the bus where he and Lisa had been sitting, he found the seat vacant and his bag, which had been on the floor, on top of the seat. He grabbed the handle and exited the bus. There was no sign of Lisa.

After making sure she was nowhere to be found, he headed toward the spot where his car was parked. One of the cheerleaders drove by him on the way out of the parking lot with Lisa sitting in the passenger seat. Bambi stared in dismay as he watched the car speed away carrying the only girl who had ever stolen his heart.

Chapter 2

In the morning Bambi awoke and saw the sun shining brightly through the curtain of his window facing east. He glanced over at his clock. It was after ten a.m.; never in his life had he slept that late. On the other hand, never had he gone to bed so late. It was 2:30 a.m. when he dragged himself up to his bedroom and fell into his down and linen sanctuary.

The last Mass of the day started at eleven a.m. There was still time to make it. Bambi jumped out of bed and dressed quickly, feeling self-conscious standing in front of Lisa's picture while in his underwear. He turned the picture face down so he wouldn't feel like his body was being analyzed.

I wonder if Lisa is still sleeping. No time for a shower, and besides, I just got out of one a few hours ago. He scooped some water on his head and combed out the rooster-tail look.

Bambi quietly descended the staircase just in case his parents were still sleeping. They couldn't have arrived at home much ahead of the bus. The smell of food in the kitchen hit him before he made it halfway down the stairs. *Obviously Mom is up.* When he reached the bottom, he heard quiet conversation between his parents. *They must be trying not to wake me.*

He walked through the kitchen door and immediately went to his mother to give her a hug. "Morning. Why didn't you wake me up for church?"

"Hi, Lance. We thought it would be OK if you missed one Mass. We knew you were pretty wiped out."

"How does it feel to know you're headed to the national tourney?" Mr. Masterson asked.

"It doesn't seem real." *Like my fight with Lisa last night.* "Right now I just want to worry about getting ready for Mass. I'm going with you, so if you have some breakfast prepared, lay it on me."

"Coming right up, Tiger."

* * *

Bambi was ready to leave before his parents. He loitered in the trophy room where the many awards he had won over the years resided along with newspaper clippings. He fondly read over the Bulldog Compact. It was now over eight years since he

had composed that document which had changed his life, the lives of some of his teammates, and the status of the basketball program in Madison.

In four days I'm leaving for the NAIA national tournament. I should be ecstatic. What difference does it make if Lisa isn't with me? Unfortunately, all the difference in the world.

"OK, Lance. We're ready."

"Coming, Mom."

Bambi rarely attended the late Mass. He was a morning person and liked to attend the eight a.m. service, which was never crowded. The eleven o'clock Mass was jammed. The Mastersons had to wait in line to dip their fingers into the Holy Water and make the sign of the cross. *Obviously people like being able to sleep in.* Their normal seats in the middle were already occupied so Lance's family took open seats next to the confessional. They knelt on the foam-padded kneelers, said a prayer, and then sat back in the seat. Bambi ended his heavenly petition with a plea for a blessing on Lisa. As he sat waiting for the service to begin, he studied the confessional next to him.

How many times in the last fifteen years had he knelt in one of those two little rooms and waited for the ominous sound of the window sliding open? He always felt so nervous going in there and so good coming out. It was never clear to him whether he felt relief because his sins were forgiven or because the ordeal was over. He always made up the list of sins he confessed anyway. With the exception of missing Mass, he never officially kept track of his offenses. He wondered if other people kept a journal or something so they knew exactly what to confess. He looked around him. There were some people here who he suspected would need multiple journals.

His eyes wandered up to the stained-glass window above him. The sun shone down, showcasing it as if it was backlit. He remembered Lisa's comment about the windows, and the pain came back to him. The altar boys came out to light the candles and caught his attention. His gaze moved upward to the cross above the altar, and the thought of his pain seemed insignificant and childish. Despite the full building, the solemnity he was used to at the early service still prevailed. The only human noises were coughs.

The large organ in the balcony began to play, and a choir started singing. Bambi had forgotten this was a high Mass, which would be accompanied by music. That sound gave a whole new feeling to the service. The priest and the altar boys came out of

the back room, and the congregation stood up.

Bambi had never been an altar boy because they were chosen from the kids who attended the Catholic grade school next door to the church. He pondered what it would be like to serve the priest as he watched the Mass unfold. It was basically the same every week. The only thing that changed was the sermon and the passages used in the reading of the epistle and gospel. *What would it feel like right now to have Lisa by my side? Perhaps a more relevant question is what would it feel like to be sitting next to Lisa in another church right now, away from my parents and this building where I've gone to church my whole life?*

After taking the communion wafer, Bambi stayed at the altar a little longer than normal to pray for guidance. A second priest who was helping distribute communion came up to Bambi. In a reflexive maneuver without thought, he opened his mouth and took a second wafer. This time he didn't even wait to swallow before he left the altar. It was a no-no to take communion twice in the same day. *What was I thinking of? What do I do now?*

Bambi reached his seat and still hadn't swallowed. The wafer was about to cause him to gag. Finally he decided just to swallow it. *After all, how severe can the punishment be for remembering the Lord's sacrifice twice in one day?* He glanced over at his mom. She was giving him one of those funny looks, indicating she knew something was wrong. All she got from him was a shake of his head.

I know that look. She's going to give me the third degree right after church gets out.

* * *

After the Mass, Mr. Masterson announced he was taking them to lunch. Normally Bambi was happy to have lunch at a restaurant, but today he was hoping to call Lisa right after church.

Oh, well. It's her lunchtime anyway. I don't want to bother the family while they're eating.

Mrs. Masterson turned around and faced her son. "So, Lance, what was the matter with you during church?"

I knew it. She's like a bulldog. "Nothing, Mom. My throat was pretty dry this morning, and I had a little trouble swallowing."

"Uh, huh. Probably spent hours talking to Lisa last night on the way home."

"Not exactly. I fell asleep."

"My, aren't you romantic? Propose and then you doze."

"I suppose. About the proposal, ahh...we got kind of derailed last night."

"What? You didn't break up?"

"I don't know exactly what we did. We got into a discussion on religion and both got a little defensive. She basically said I'm going to have to leave the Catholic Church in order for us to get married."

"Oh. I was worried about this situation."

"It's OK, Mom. Don't start crying whatever you do. You'll get me bawling if you do that. I really try not to cry in public restaurants, so help me out here."

"I'm not going to cry. I've been preparing for this day for a couple of years now. The handwriting was on the wall," Mrs. Masterson said.

"Somehow I missed it. Must have been looking at the wrong wall," Bambi said.

"I think you've been looking at the clouds for the last four years."

"That could be true. Now I fall back to Earth and discover reality."

"Life is hard, Lance. You've had a very blessed existence so far. Part of that blessing has been Lisa. Let me ask you this. Have you ever considered going through the rest of your days without her?"

"I don't want to think about that. Why would I consider such a possibility?"

"So you can figure out if you want to avoid it enough to do whatever it takes to keep her."

"Oh, got ya."

"There's one thing I want you to keep in mind when you make the decision whether to stay in the Catholic Church or not; do not consider your father and me. Our feelings aren't important here. You need to decide for yourself, for Lisa, and for God. We're going to be just fine no matter which road you take. Right, honey?"

Mr. Masterson had a mouthful of food. He nodded emphatically until he swallowed and then said, "You're a Catholic now because we chose to be. Whether you're a Catholic when your life ends, that's your choice."

Bambi lowered his voice. "Don't you believe that I'd go to hell if I leave the church?"

His parents looked at each another. Mr. Masterson pointed at his wife. "Your turn for a hard question."

"Lance, I might have trouble telling Father O'Reilly this, but we don't believe the other people who love and obey God are going

to hell just because of their church membership or their belief or disbelief in certain doctrines.”

“You don’t know how glad I am to hear that. I’ve been struggling with that teaching for a long time, especially with Lisa not being Catholic. And then there’s Corky and Donnie.”

“How about Aunt Bess and Uncle Art?” Mrs. Masterson asked.

“Yeah. Them too,” Bambi replied.

“My parents were very upset when Bess left the church. She and I had quite a few talks, but I know she’s very happy right where she is.”

“How come you guys never left if you don’t believe all the doctrine?”

Mrs. Masterson looked over at her husband. He took the hint that it was his turn to contribute again. “We like the formality and the reverence. Bess, on the other hand, couldn’t stand it. She thrives in the informal and more emotional environment. That’s what her church offers her – music with drums and guitars, a very informal dress code, informal prayer. We’re kind of old-fashioned and like things to stay just the way they are.”

“So it sounds like it won’t be a big deal if I jump ship?” Bambi asked.

“We’re not saying you should take the decision lightly. What we are saying is that you won’t cause us trauma if you choose to become a Protestant. As long as you love God and his son, Jesus, I’m not worried about your eternal future. Because if you love them, you’ll find the right road.”

Bambi smiled and reached across the table to grasp his mother’s hand. “Thanks, Mom. I needed that.”

* * *

When the Mastersons arrived home, Bambi went to the phone immediately and dialed the number that was etched in his memory banks forever. Mr. Nielsen answered. “Hi, this is Lance. Is Lisa there?”

“I’m sorry, Lance. She went out with some of her girlfriends after church. I’ll tell her that you called.”

“OK. Thanks.”

“Good game last night!”

“Yeah, thanks. Bye.”

Bambi hung up the phone and stood staring at it. He was normally more talkative with Lisa’s father. Today, he just wanted to talk to Lisa. *I hope I didn’t hurt his feelings by hanging up so quickly. He probably wanted to talk basketball for a while.*

The phone rang while he was standing there thinking, startling

him for a moment. After he recovered his composure, he grabbed it eagerly. *Maybe it's Lisa.* "Hello."

"Bambi, Corky here. Did you see who we got for the first game of the tournament?"

"No. Where did you see it?"

"Sioux Falls paper. We got Eastern Alabama – number one team in the nation."

"Which means we got the lowest seed of the whole tournament. Looks like we're going to have to earn some respect."

"If we don't, our stay in the tournament is going to be very short."

"Gosh. I didn't think of that. We might ride all the way to Kansas City for a couple of hours and be out of it. That wouldn't be much fun. I think we better win at least a couple of games to make it worth the trip."

"Yeah. That would put us in the quarterfinals. That would definitely put Dak State on the map. So, did you and Lisa kiss and make up?"

"Not yet. I haven't even talked to her since I walked to the back of the bus last night."

"You don't want to wait too long to make up – if that's your intention."

"Since when did you become a relationship counselor? You don't even have a girlfriend."

Corky chuckled. "So? Neither does the Pope, and he's been giving advice for years."

Bambi made a face. "Please tell me last night didn't kick off the National Week to tell Catholic jokes."

"OK. Last night didn't kick off the National Week to tell Catholic jokes. Did you hear the one about the priest who walked into a bar–"

"Say good night, Dickey."

"Good night, Dickey. Wait, it's still afternoon!"

"No better time for a nap! Bye." Bambi hung up, climbed the stairs to his bedroom and crawled back under his covers. As he drifted off, he thought of how nice it was to escape the pain of the world for a few hours.

* * *

When he awoke a couple of hours later, he found his mom in the kitchen baking pies. "Umm. Those smell great. I bet the aroma of the pies woke me up."

"That wouldn't surprise me a bit."

"Did Lisa call?"

"Sorry. Not a word."

"Hmm. She's probably still out having fun. I better get some homework done. That basketball tournament got me behind in my classes and the trip coming up isn't going to help me catch up."

"Good idea."

* * *

Bambi spent the rest of the afternoon doing his makeup assignments. When his mother called him to dinner, he gladly put the drudgery aside and joined his parents in the kitchen. After a good dinner, he was granted the privilege of thoroughly enjoying two large slivers of blueberry pie. The topic of Lisa never came up, much to his relief.

After eating, he excused himself and went to the phone for another try. This time Lisa's mother answered. "Hi, is Lisa there?"

"She's here, Lance, but she went to bed immediately after eating. She's been on the go all day and after the trip this weekend, she's run out of gas."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. Thanks."

He shook his head. *This is frustrating. Is she really sleeping or is that a convenient excuse? Maybe I should turn my attention toward the first game of the basketball tournament.* He went back to his homework.

* * *

Bambi and Lisa didn't have any classes together. However, neither had a class during the lunch hour and they often bumped into each other at the Trojan Center coffee room, where kids often hung out between classes. There was no sign of Lisa that day. Bambi didn't feel like talking to the guys, so he retreated to the TV room, took a seat on an empty couch and started reading an assignment. His concentration was interrupted by the reoccurring thought that Lisa was trying to avoid him.

* * *

That evening Bambi called the Nielsen residence again. The phone rang ten times before Bambi gave up and replaced the receiver. *Now I'm officially worried. Should I call one of her friends and find out what is going on? Should I just go over to her house?*

He sat down on the couch and buried his head in his hands. As he sat there with thoughts flying through his head, one thought stuck out. They were leaving for Kansas City in about forty hours. He had assignments to complete before they started that seven-hour bus trip. There was no time for a pity party. Just as he had done many times over the last eight years when he didn't feel like it, he got up and pushed himself to do what had to be done.

Hours later, feeling some satisfaction for work accomplished, Bambi stared at his ceiling. Thoughts of eight years ago and staring at the same ceiling came back to him. Lisa had pulled him out of his funk. She had taken his eyes off the Spackle above him and off of himself. Now he was in danger of losing her and slipping back into a self-absorbed rut. He started pondering alternative goals. He couldn't think of another girl who could replace Lisa. Letting her go without a fight was out of the question.

* * *

On Tuesday, after basketball practice, Bambi took the bull by the horns. He drove over to Lisa's unannounced. He felt funny standing there waiting at the door after ringing the bell. It was almost as if the confidence with girls that he had built up over the last four years had evaporated after only a couple of days away from Lisa. Self-doubt made it difficult for him to look Lisa's father in the eye when he opened the door.

"Hi, Lance."

"Hi, Mr. Nielsen. Is Lisa here?"

"I'm sorry. She went down to Sioux Falls with some of the other cheerleaders to get some new clothes for the trip to Kansas City. I don't expect her back until bedtime."

"Oh. I see. Sorry to bother you." Bambi started walking away.

"No bother at all, Lance. I'll tell her you came by."

"Yeah. That'd be nice." *As if she cares.*

Bambi knew he should be home doing schoolwork. He postponed his return to the books for a short time by taking a couple of loops on the main drag. Living memories flooded back to him. He and Lisa had 'dragged main' many times together. Today Bambi found it hard to see why anybody thought it was worth wasting the gas money. With a sigh of sadness, he peeled off on a side street and drove home.

For the second night in a row, Bambi busied himself with schoolwork. Several times he interrupted his train of thought and looked up at Lisa's picture. Despite that distraction, he completed all of his current assignments so he could play basketball without worrying about late homework. To make sure he stayed caught up, he packed some of his books, so he could work on the long bus ride and in the motel.

* * *

The next morning went by in a blur. Bambi had to attend two morning classes and then arrive at the field house for the long trip by noon. There really wasn't much opportunity to contact Lisa. The cheerleaders were taking a separate van to the tournament

and wouldn't leave until Thursday morning. Maybe, he'd get a chance to see her at the motel after the game.

Bambi's last class got out at 10:50. By the time he got away from all the students who wanted to wish him well for the tournament, it was well after eleven. He hurried to his car, drove home, and devoured a quick lunch. Afterward he grabbed his suitcase and duffel bag and hurried to the rendezvous point. He boarded the bus, and a few minutes later it pulled out of the parking lot. It stopped briefly in front of the campus where a pep rally was being held for the team. The players slid down the windows and listened to the fans sing the school song and yell, "Go Big Blue!" As the bus drove away, Bambi waved to Lisa. There was no sign that she even saw him.

Lost in thought, Bambi watched the miles flash by through the bus window. Who would have ever guessed that today he would be headed to Kansas City for the national tournament to play against the number-one team in the country – and he wouldn't be excited? Without Lisa by his side, what difference did any of it make? The world made no sense without her.

With plenty of room on the bus, each player had two seats to himself so he could stretch out and sleep. Some of the guys were already dozing before Bambi turned away from the window and opened one of his textbooks. *I don't feel like doing this, but sometimes a pilgrim's gotta do what a pilgrim's gotta do.* He finished his future assignments in two subjects before the humming of the tires on the pavement lulled him into an uneasy slumber.

When he awoke at a gas stop, he got off the bus with many of his teammates in order to stretch his legs. They would have a night in the motel to get the kinks out of their muscles, but there was no sense in letting them get any tighter than they already were. Bambi stood at the gas station looking at a map on the wall. The bus had carried them halfway through the state of Iowa, close to Lincoln, Nebraska. One of his high school classmates was a student there at the University of Nebraska. The previous fall Bambi had traveled this same route down to Lincoln to see his beloved Cornhuskers play football. It had been his dream to play basketball for the Big Red, but his talent wasn't sufficient to win a scholarship to an NCAA Division I school. In the end he decided to just stay home and be near Lisa and his family. He had not regretted that decision in the past. There were some clouds of doubt crossing the horizon of his mind this afternoon as he surveyed the map. He pictured himself dressed in scarlet and

cream and the fans shouting, "Go Big Red!"

Upon embarking on the highway once again, Bambi opened up *Dandelion Wine* by Ray Bradbury, a novel he had been assigned to read for literature class. Bambi had read some science fiction by the author, so he anticipated the book would be enjoyable. The beginning of it left him somewhat baffled. Then he reached a chapter about tennis shoes. *This is unbelievable: a whole chapter in a novel about a pair of tennis shoes.* The boy hero wanted a pair of Royal Crown Cream-Sponge Para Litefoot Tennis Shoes. Douglas doesn't have enough money to buy them, but he tells the storeowner he will run through the streets of the city like a gazelle or antelope, delivering packages and earning the money to pay them off. The storekeeper is so impressed that he agrees on the deal. He tells the eager boy that when he grows up he can be anything he wants to be. *That's kind of what I was like when I wrote the Bulldog Compact. That works with tennis shoes and maybe with basketball, but does that enthusiasm work on girls?*

Bambi closed the book and daydreamed for a moment. He relived the moments of putting on a new pair of Red Ball Jets or Converse or Adidas. It wasn't that long ago that he had broken in the shoes in the duffel bag next to him. Now those shoes would be squeaking on a shiny wooden floor in Kansas City. Bambi had run a long way in them. And like the book had said, boys were always running to become men. His boyhood journey was almost over. He was ready to put aside the things of childhood and help others make the same journey. With his student teaching already behind him, he had only to pass the subjects he was currently taking to obtain his diploma and teaching credentials. It was time to pour into other kids what his coaches and teachers had shared with him over the years.

When his daydream ended, he reached up and turned on the little light above his seat and continued with the next chapter. He was nearly finished with the book when a sign that read 'Kansas City eight miles' gleamed in the headlights of the bus. He realized he was famished. Right on cue, the bus driver pulled into a restaurant, and the hungry occupants emptied into the well-lit and warm interior of the café. The players put some tables together and sat down as a group. The coaches took a booth nearby. Two waitresses came over to hand out menus and deliver glasses of ice water. The waitress on Bambi's end was young and very cute. She was getting lots of admiring looks and a few comments from the basketball team.

"What you all doing? Is this like a team or something?"

"You guessed it, Toots," Corky said. "We're the basketball Trojans from Dakota State in Madison, South Dakota. We're here for the NAIA tournament."

"You talk funny," one of the other players said.

"I talk funny? I'm afraid you boys are the ones that talk funny. This is how the natives speak down here. You northerners will just have to get used to it. And my name isn't Toots; it's Lulu."

"I could listen to the sweet music of your voice all day, Lulu," Corky said.

"And night," someone else added, and most of the team laughed.

"You must be that Lulu I've been hearing about all my life," Corky added.

Several more comments were made concerning the waitress, who seemed to be eating up the flattery. Bambi wasn't even paying attention; he just wanted to eat and get to the motel so he could get some sleep. When he finished with his menu, he pulled out *Dandelion Wine* again and picked up where he left off.

"What you reading, sugar?"

Bambi looked up to see the cute waitress staring right into his eyes.

"Huh?"

"I wondered what you're reading that puts your nose in a book while the rest of your teammates here are eyeballing little ole me."

The team roared with laughter.

"He's a bookworm, ma'am. Girls don't interest him," Corky said, causing his teammates to laugh again.

Bambi felt the red creeping into his cheeks. "I have a girlfriend, and this really is a good book." *At least I think I have a girlfriend.*

"Well, of course you have a girlfriend. You're too cute to not have one. Remember, sugar, just because you own a car doesn't mean you can't admire a beautiful vehicle when you see one."

Bambi allowed his eyes to survey the waitress she was talking about. *She really is a fine-looking woman.* "I'll have a chicken-fried steak dinner please."

"Coming right up, handsome." She winked and smiled at him. He couldn't help but watch her sway back to the kitchen to place their orders. *When's the last time I even thought about another girl besides Lisa?* He couldn't remember such a time.

The rest of the team continued their banter about the pretty hostess. Bambi thrust his nose back into his book, trying to drive

out the picture of the honey-blonde beauty from his head, but without much success.

When Lulu returned, she placed Corky's food in front of him and said, "Where you all staying while you're down here?"

"The Ramada Inn. Are you going to come over and see us? Maybe you can come watch us play tomorrow?" Corky asked.

"Tomorrow is my day off. The Ramada is pretty close to my apartment. Where's your game?"

"Kemper Arena."

"Should have figured. That's not far away. That sounds like it'd be fun. If you all would like me to come, I'll do it."

Bambi looked up and found her staring right at him. As all the other boys were vigorously answering in the affirmative, she continued to eyeball him. She took more food from her tray and set it in front of the people who had ordered it.

"Doesn't seem like all of you want me to come. Sugar down there on the end hasn't answered."

"Come on, sugar, sweetie, honey-pie," Corky said with a fake southern accent. "Tell the lady you'd love to see her at the game."

The rest of his teammates joined in the fun.

By that time the waitress was putting Bambi's plate in front of him. He looked down the table and saw everyone looking expectantly at him. He glanced up at Lulu. "Thank you." Then in a robotic voice he said, "I'd love to see you at the game." His team cheered.

"What time does the big game start? I'll need to have plenty of time to make myself pretty," she drawled.

"Three o'clock," Corky said. "I don't think you'll have any problem knocking our socks off."

"Oh, my. Wouldn't you get blisters from playing without socks?"

"Yeah, but I wouldn't feel a thing."

The waitress laughed, making a pleasant tinkling sound like a bell. "Is there anything else I can get you boys?"

"That's a loaded question," Corky said. "For now, just make sure my water glass doesn't go empty. Maybe I can get some dessert – later."

The bell tinkled again. "You got it, Red. I'll be back, boys. Don't stop thinking about me." She walked away, taking one last look at Bambi.

"How could we forget her?" Corky asked.

"Yeah, really," a teammate across the table from Corky replied. "Why's she paying so much attention to Masterson? Can't

she see he's already whipped?"

Corky shook his head. "Women like a challenge. If he was foaming at the mouth over her like the rest of us, she wouldn't pay him any attention."

"Makes him come across as the strong, silent type, huh?"

"Looks really are deceiving, aren't they?" Corky said with a laugh.

Bambi wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Maybe you guys should start thinking about basketball. We do have a slightly important game tomorrow."

"You've got a game tomorrow," Corky said. "I'll be sitting on the bench watching it. My action down here in KC might be all off the court."

Bambi just shook his head and dug into his mashed potatoes. Some days he was ashamed to be male, which, on the other hand, made him glad he wasn't a female and the object of such hormone-based attention. He concentrated on visualizing himself driving down the lane and hitting outside jump shots as he shoveled in the food. Since his teammates were doing as much talking and laughing as they were eating, he finished ahead of everyone else.

Bambi decided to use the restroom but wasn't quite sure where it was located. He started off on an exploratory trek to find it. His first guess was back by the entrance. Halfway back to the door, he ran into Lulu.

"Are you looking for me, sugar?"

"Actually, I was looking for the restroom."

"That's not very flattering."

"Nothing personal. Mother Nature does call sometimes, and I have to answer."

"Mother Nature does have more than one ringtone, you know." She reached into a pocket and pulled out a card. "Here's my phone number. If you get lonely during your stay down here, I'd be more than happy to make sure you have a pleasant visit to Kansas City. I get off work at ten tonight."

Bambi took the card and stood staring at it as if examining it was going to provide the secrets to life.

"The bathroom is back by the entrance and to the right."

"Thanks, Lulu."

"My pleasure. Don't lose that card now. I'll be disappointed if I don't get a chance to show you some real hospitality." She smiled and walked away.

Bambi shook his head as if trying to clean cobwebs. *Is this*

really happening to me? When he reached the bathroom he started to drop the card Lulu had given him into the trash. *What can it hurt to hang onto this, just in case? She certainly seems to like me. Besides, maybe I'll give this to Corky later on and make his day. I better hang on to it just so he doesn't slobber all over it and cause the ink to run.*

When he returned to the table, Lulu was removing the dirty plates. "Did you want some dessert, handsome?" The blood rose to Bambi's cheeks again.

"He can't have any dessert, Lulu," Corky said. "He's a good Catholic, and it's Lent. He gave up sweets, including blonde ones. Me, on the other hand, have no restriction at all, and have I mentioned that I have a sweet tooth?"

Lulu ignored Corky's joke and continued to look at Bambi. He looked up into her eyes and shook his head. It looked like he saw a flash of pain in her face before she moved down the table. A pang went through his heart. He didn't want to hurt her feelings. To get his mind off the situation, he returned to his book. When the rest of the guys finished eating, the coaches came over and told them it was time to leave. Lulu managed to arrive back at their table to say goodbye. Bambi noticed that even the coaches had trouble keeping their eyes off of her.

As Bambi walked by, Lulu winked and said, "Hope you score a lot tomorrow."

Chapter 3

When the team arrived at the motel, Bambi discovered he and Corky had been assigned the same room. They got their key and walked to the room together. "What I don't understand, Bambi, is why Lulu was paying attention to you with all those other guys at the table with their tongues hanging out, including *moi*."

"Especially you."

"Maybe. She *was* something!"

"Yeah, if you're looking for a one-night stand."

"We'll be here two nights at least and more if we win tomorrow."

"Oh, that changes the whole complexion of things. A two-night stand is much better."

"Than a three-dog night."

"What?"

"That's a joke, Bambi. You remember those things. You used to tell them yourself before...."

"Before what?"

"Before...you know. Before we won the regional tourney."

"Ahh. You mean before my argument with Lisa."

"OK. You pinned me to the wall. That's exactly what I'm talking about. Anyway, three-dog night refers to a cold night in an Alaskan camp where the weather is so cold that a dog sledder needs to have three dogs lying on top to keep him warm."

"Really. That's interesting, but what's it go to do with Lulu?"

"Forget it. There's just some topics that you just don't get, and obviously, I've wandered into one. Sorry, I'll mosey right back out again."

"Hold on. Are you saying I don't know anything about girls?"

"You've been dating a gorgeous woman for four years. She agreed to marry you."

"For a couple of hours."

"I wasn't going to mention that. Anyway, you were obviously doing something right during those four years. But not everybody has that kind of dumb luck. Look at this pathetic face I inherited from my dad to go along with the red hair and freckles from my mother. I got the worst of both of them."

"Looks aren't everything, Corky."

"I know that. Tell that to the women. How many times have you heard of a fortune cookie or a fortuneteller predicting that someone short, pale, and spooky is going to come into your life?"

"Ahh...." Bambi looked around the room. "Nice place we got here."

"You're changing the subject. We're discussing how, compared to me, Alfred E. Neuman is a stud."

"I think I'll change clothes and get to sleep. Big day tomorrow, you know."

"Yeah. What, me worry? Big day for the guys who don't ride the splinter express."

"The what?"

"The pine. The bench. You know, that thing *you* sometimes get to sit on during a time-out."

"Geez Louise, Cork. What's with the jealousy kick tonight? Are you going to hammer on me because I get better grades than you do too? What's your problem?"

"I'm not going to tell you. You'll make fun of me. Or tell someone else, and they'll make fun of me."

Bambi put his hand on Corky's shoulder. "When have I ever done something like that to you?"

"Well...I guess maybe you haven't in the past. But that might mean you're due. I can't risk it."

"Corky, the only thing that's new in our relationship is Lulu. You didn't fall in love at first sight, did you?"

"What's it to you? Are you writing a book?"

"Yeah."

"Well, then make it a love story and kiss my butt!"

"A love story about you and Lulu?"

"I could do worse," Corky said.

"You don't even know her. She could be a psychotic killer trying to lure you into her snare to try out her new Bowie knife."

"Oh, come on. There's no evidence of that."

"Maybe not, but how much evidence do you have about her character? She's pretty and perky. She doesn't seem like she's a sandwich short of a picnic. Still all surface stuff. How do you know she wouldn't stab you in the back much worse than a Bowie knife by running off with another man?"

"Am I supposed to worry about my woman running off before I even land her? That's like worrying about a fish getting off the stringer before you catch it."

"Not a good comparison, Cork. Fish don't seem to be quite as

slippery as some women. It's only smart to make sure you don't make yourself vulnerable to an unfaithful female."

"When can you be sure? Are you absolutely positive Lisa would never dump you for another guy?"

"No. You can't ever be absolutely sure about anything in life. It's like our basketball game tomorrow. We're playing the number-one team in the nation. They have a starting front line of 6'9", 6'8", and 6'6". Ours is 6'4", 6'3", and 6'5". Those tall guys of theirs are black and we both know how they jump, adding to their advantage. Are we going to lose for sure? Not for sure, but the guys in Las Vegas would put all the money on those guys from Alabama if they knew we were playing."

"You don't think they know?"

"Cork. This is the NAIA. This is small potatoes. With March Madness going on, we're just a footnote at the bottom of the sports pages across the country."

"Maybe. So you think this game's a lost cause?"

"I didn't say that. What I'm saying is that we need to play out of our tree to win, but it's been done before. All we can do is play our hardest and let the chips fall as they may."

"Can you approach a relationship the same way?" Corky asked.

"Maybe. I don't know for sure. What I do have no doubts about is that I need to get some sleep. We have an early-morning practice session in Kemper, remember?"

"Yeah. I'm too wired up to sleep. I wish I could go back to the restaurant and eat again."

"Oh, brother. You really do have it bad." *Maybe, I should give Corky that phone number Lulu gave me. He needs to get to bed tonight. Perhaps, tomorrow I'll surprise him with the magic digits.*

"You go to bed. I'm going to hang out with some of the other guys."

"Fine. Just don't wake me up when you come back. And don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Sheesh. I didn't know my mother was coming along on this trip. Good night." He pulled the door open and strolled through it.

Bambi looked down at the phone. He could call Lisa, but he knew she had to get up early the next morning to ride the van to Kansas City. It probably cost a fortune to call long distance from the motel, and besides, she obviously didn't want to talk to him. After brushing his teeth, he pulled the covers back and crawled into bed. Leaving the light above Corky's bed on so his friend could find his way when he returned, Bambi turned away from the

light and shut his eyes.

"God. I hope you're on duty tonight or maybe you have some angels hanging around that are looking for something to do. Anyway, I need help. Tomorrow could be the last game of my career, and it is definitely the most challenging. Just help us to keep the score close so we get some respect. I don't ask for anything else. Well, except for Lisa. Please soften Lisa's heart so she'll let me explain to her what's on my mind. Just give me a chance to explain to her." He fell asleep before he got to the 'amen'.

* * *

The next morning the phone woke Bambi out of a deep sleep. He had trouble remembering where he was and what was causing the noise. When he finally figured it out it was the phone, even Corky, who bragged he could sleep through a tornado, was sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"Hello.?" Bambi said.

"This is Coach Blakely. Time to rise and shine fellas. Bus leaves for breakfast at 6:30 sharp."

"OK, Coach. Thanks." Bambi replaced the phone on the receiver.

"Was that Lulu calling for me?"

"In your dreams, pal."

"As a matter of fact she was in my dreams until that screamin' demon pulled me out of her arms."

"Life's tough, huh? We got half an hour. I'll hit the shower first. If you want to catch another ten minutes of z's, I'll wake you when I get out."

"Talked me into it, buddy. Good night."

* * *

Thirty minutes later, the boys strolled out into the fresh Missouri morning and breathed deeply. The smell of spring was in the air. Bambi loved that time of year when the southerly breezes and the increasingly potent sun drove the snow away from the landscape. The sound of returning geese thrilled his heart, and the sight of V-shaped formations one after another stirred his imagination. There was nothing like the return of spring to make him feel alive. He couldn't help but wonder if God had designed the seasons to parallel the life of a man. He was just about to leave the spring of his life.

The bus driver conducted them to the same restaurant where they had eaten dinner. As they pulled into the parking lot, a couple of the guys started singing *Down at Lulu's*.

Corky grinned. Lulu had told them that she had the day off, so they all knew she wouldn't be their hostess this morning. Bambi felt some relief at that thought but found himself strangely missing her as an older woman took their orders for breakfast. He realized that the girl's attention had been a refreshing change from the rejection that Lisa had been serving up.

For just having risen from their beds, the team was surprisingly upbeat. Their blood was starting to pump a little faster at the thought they would be practicing in the famous Kemper Arena in just ninety minutes. Bambi always had a little difficulty adjusting to gyms where the basket wasn't close to a wall. It was nice not having to worry about slamming into a wall on a drive, but he certainly struggled with his depth perception without the backdrop. An hour of shooting would help him get a feel for the place.

* * *

With a few minutes to spare, the team arrived at the arena as the excitement level spiked perceptively. Bambi tried to tell himself to contain his feelings and stop the flow of energy that he would need in a few more hours. The team gawked at the enormity of the building as they made their way to the huge locker room they had been assigned.

"This place makes me feel small," Corky said.

"You are small," Donnie said, looking down on the top of Corky's head.

"Wait till you stand next to one of those twin towers on that team from Alabama. You're going to be feeling small, too."

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

"Ahh. Somebody got something out of Clichés 101 last semester."

"Oh, yeah, and they're plenty more where that came from."

"Spare us, please, Donnie."

The noisy banter among the team members continued as they donned their practice attire. Whenever they were facing nervousness, it seemed that the team responded by becoming witty. Bambi didn't participate today; he was focusing in on his assignment for the afternoon. His job was to defend the leading scorer on the opponent's team. The big boys were the ones who impressed everyone, but their six-foot guard was the catalyst that revved up the scoring engine. As Bambi tied his shoes, he visualized himself backpedaling and shuffling his feet and fighting through screens to stay glued to his man, who would wear number eleven. Corky had dubbed him 'Captain 11' after the TV

personality from KELO in Sioux Falls.

Bambi dribbled out onto the gym floor and let fire from twenty-five feet. Nothing but air. He hoped nobody saw that shot as he retrieved the ball. *Maybe I can be a bricklayer when I grow up.* The absence of a wall also meant more time spent retrieving shots which came up short. When he returned to the court, he decided to start from closer in and work his way backwards. After fifteen minutes of free shooting, the coach had them do some lay-ups to get the feel for the bangboards. Then they concentrated on free throws. They finished up with some half-speed drills that allowed them to get a feel for the full length of the court and get accustomed to the feel of the floor without expending excessive energy.

Their allotted hour went by quickly. Another team showed up when the Trojans had about ten minutes left and watched until the clock hit 9:30. They started coming out on the court before the Trojans even started leaving.

"Pushy mothers, whoever they are," Corky muttered.

Bambi surveyed the other team. It wasn't their opponent for that afternoon, but this team was also much bigger than the Trojans. His team would be an underdog against anybody they played in this tournament. Bambi and his teammates exited the court and gathered in the locker room where the coaches gave them a final scouting report on their opponent.

"Gentlemen, it's almost time to see if the slipper fits Cinderella," the coach said in finishing up his chat session.

At eleven o'clock, the team boarded the bus and returned to the restaurant for lunch. The guys who expected to play a lot didn't eat as much as those who figured they'd be warming the bench. The last thing Bambi wanted was to have side ache problems like he'd experienced in the past when running too soon after eating. *I'll make up for it tonight after the game.* Corky took full advantage of another free meal to intake plenty of fuel to keep the bench toasty warm.

After the lunch, the bus hauled the team back to the arena, arriving a few minutes before the first game started. The Trojans evaluated some of their potential future competition and let the butterflies build up at the same time as they waited for their own tip-off. Midway through the second half, the Trojans marched to the locker room. A smattering of applause from the few fans who had journeyed from South Dakota to Missouri serenaded them.

It felt just like the old days in high school for Bambi when he watched the sophomore game before departing to dress, soaking

up the adoration of the Bulldog faithful. The noise was nearly swallowed up in the huge arena, but shivers went through Bambi's body as he realized people were clapping for him four hundred miles away from the only home he had ever known. The big difference was that he couldn't see Lisa among the small contingent of Trojan rooters. Apparently, the cheerleaders hadn't arrived yet.

When all the team members were finished dressing in their blue and gold uniforms and sweat suits, the team gathered around their coach.

"Bambi, obviously, we know this might be the last game of your sparkling career. I'd like you to say a few words today to fire us up."

Bambi was a little shocked. He ran his fingers through his hair and tried to draw his thoughts together.

"If I can borrow a line from Donnie, the cliché master, these guys put on their pants the same way we do, one leg at a time. Of course their legs are a bit longer than ours." There were a few chuckles and grins around the room. "We can't worry about rankings, height and all those other factors that cause us to be a Cinderella, not only in this game but in the tournament. This team represents my small hometown of Madison, South Dakota. Not many people in the world have heard of it. We can add a few people to that list by winning today. It's vital that we do our very best and not worry about results. You can't do better than your best. I want those guys from Alabama to know we play some pretty good basketball up north, and that the Trojans don't give up."

A few cheers erupted as Bambi finished. Corky started to chant. "Everywhere we go, people want to know who we are. So we tell them. We are the Trojans, mighty, mighty Trojans...." A few others joined him on a second pass. On the third time through, the whole team was chanting.

The coach broke up the noise by holding up his hands. "Let's save some energy for the opposition." He gave a short pep talk and said, "Johnny Rivers sings a song *Look To Your Soul*. I'm asking you guys to do that right now for the next few minutes. If you're a praying man, don't be afraid to throw up a petition toward Heaven."

"Ahh...Coach. You might want to zip up your pants before you go out in front of those 19,000 people," Corky said.

An embarrassed look came over their mentor's face. He tried to fix the problem but had no luck. "I broke my zipper. Looks like

I'm going to have to keep my suit coat on. Student managers, one of you guys bring me a safety pin, quick!"

An elderly gentlemen poked his head in the door. "Game's over coach. You can take the court in one minute."

"Thanks!"

One of the kids handed him a safety pin, and he clamped his trousers together the best he could. "Well, guys, maybe you need to go out there today and win one for the zipper."

Laughter exploded around the room. They all gathered in a circle and put their hands out. "Remember guys, we've got nothing to lose. Nobody expects us to win. Let's do it anyway!"

They shouted, "Go Trojans!" and filed out of the locker room with Bambi leading the way. The coaches trailed behind them.

Eastern Alabama was already on the court. Their white uniforms contrasted with the dark skin of several members of the team. The Trojans watched the opponents warm up as they began their own lay-up drills. Corky and Bambi were paired up. Bambi drove to the hoop and Corky rebounded it behind him before they recycled back into the line.

"How come Dakota State doesn't recruit some black players?" Corky asked.

"I don't know, Corky. Maybe someone in a high position is prejudiced. Maybe none of them want to play here. We only have two black guys on the entire campus and they've only been here a couple of years. The football team is recruiting them now, so maybe someday basketball will follow. I know I'd like to see it happen."

It was their turn to shoot. Corky drove in and laid the ball into the basket and Bambi rebounded. "Since the football team is recruiting blacks, then that person in a high position can't be the athletics director or president of the college. It would have to be in the basketball program itself."

"Do you mean coach?"

"I hate to say it, but that's the way it looks to me."

"He's a good man, Cork. I don't believe he's the problem. Now, why don't you put a cork in it and concentrate on the game."

"Fine."

The two boys didn't talk again before the horn sounded, calling the teams to the bench. Bambi had gotten a pretty good look at Lloyd Savoy, the guy he would be guarding today. The coach had called for special defense called a box and one. Bambi was the one guy, and he would play man to man on Savoy. The other four would play a zone defense and try to keep the ball out

of the paint. The defense was risky, but they had no choice. Savoy would shoot the lights out if he faced a normal zone defense. Bambi's excellent conditioning would come in handy today.

After final instructions from the coach, the team took the court. Bambi went up and shook the hand of all of the opponents that were close to him; he could tell they were a bit surprised to get such friendly treatment. Bambi noticed the center give a signal to one of the players around the circle. *I think I know where this tip is going.* He took one quick peek over at the cheerleaders and got a glimpse of Lisa. *Hopefully after the game we'll talk.*

When the tip went up, Bambi flashed to the spot where he thought the tip was going. He guessed right and got there just in time to intercept the ball and streak toward their basket. He was one on one with their safetyman. Bambi penetrated to within ten feet of the basket and then put up a soft jumper, uncontested by the defender, who was stationed near the hoop to prevent a lay-up. The shot drew nothing but net, and after four seconds of play, the Trojans led by two. They slapped a full-court press on immediately. After one successful pass, the Cardinals threw the ball out of bounds.

Bambi took the inbounds pass and discovered the Cardinals were playing man to man, so he set up the offense to attack that defense. A teammate came up and set a screen for Bambi, allowing him to escape his defender. Before the other defender could switch off on Bambi, the Trojan captain nailed another jumper from twenty-five feet. The full-court press went on again with the result that the Trojans intercepted a pass and got a two on one break. Donnie took a pass and laid it in to give the underdogs from Madison a six-point lead with less than a minute gone.

The crowd appeared to be pulling for David in this classic match-up of giant versus midget. They roared their approval as the Cardinals called time-out to try to regroup and stem the Trojan's momentum.

The Trojan coach had a big grin. "There are still over thirty-nine minutes of basketball to be played. Keep the pressure on, guys. The best way to stop them from scoring is to keep them from getting the ball up the court. If they do, make sure you box out. No second-chance points today!" They all nodded their understanding and the huddle broke up. The Trojans set up their full-court press.

This time after three passes the Cardinals got the ball across

the time-line and the Trojans dropped back into their box and one. Bambi shadowed number eleven. They dumped the ball down into one of the big guys and he took a short jump shot. It went off the rim, and Donnie pulled down the rebound. The Trojans pushed the pace, hoping their speed would make up for lack of size and net them some fast-break baskets. It worked in this situation as Bambi took the outlet pass from Donnie and fired a strike to a teammate breaking down the sideline. The two-on-one break ended with another lay-up for the Trojans.

The rest of the first half went almost as well for the darlings of the crowd. Their lead was twenty when the halftime buzzer sounded, and the teams retreated to the locker room for the intermission. Bambi had held their leading scorer to five points. The locker room was a scene of bedlam with a lot of hooting and hollering going on. The coach stepped into the locker room and waved for quiet.

"Guys, I can't be happier with the way you played. However, don't start celebrating before the fat lady sings."

"Coach, you gotta quit talking about my mom," Corky said.

Everybody cracked up. Since Corky was also from Madison, everyone on the team knew his mother – a rather petite lady.

"Funny, Corky. Anyway, my point is we can't let our guard down. These guys aren't number one in the nation for nothing. They are going to mount a comeback. I guarantee it. We have to keep playing great defense. As far as offense, I want to slow it down now. We've got the big lead. Let's milk the clock for as much as we can. We'll try the four corners to start off the half. Pick your shots well, gentlemen."

A messenger popped his head into the locker room. "Five minutes left in the half, coach."

"OK, guys. Let's get after this one and nail the coffin shut." They filed out joyously. Never in their wildest imagination had they pictured themselves leading by twenty at the break.

Bambi got an idea he knew where the second-half tip was going again. He tried to arrive before the ball did and ran into one of the Cardinals. A whistle stopped play and Bambi was charged with his second personal foul. He looked over at the bench. The coach was pointing to his head with one finger to tell Bambi to think. He nodded.

The Trojans played keep away as the seconds ticked off the clock. Since college ball didn't make use of a shot clock like the pros, the Trojans were able to chew up a few minutes with each possession. With fifteen minutes to go in the game, the Cardinals

had whittled the lead down to sixteen. At the ten-minute mark the scoreboard read 58 to 48 after Bambi committed his third foul and Savoy made both free throws.

Josh Dixon, Bambi's backup, sat at the scorer's table. Bambi knew he was going to be pulled because of that third foul. After crossing the centerline with the ball, Bambi dribbled carefully until the man guarding him tripped and fell. He saw an opening and took the ball hard to the basket. Just before he got there, he dumped the ball to Donnie, who put the ball in the hole. Bambi ran into a defender just before the shot and the whistle blew.

"Charging foul on number ten blue," the referee shouted over to the scoreboard. "No basket."

The horn sounded bringing Josh onto the court. Unfortunately for the Trojans, Bambi now had four fouls. He walked off the court in disgust. They had a ten-point lead with ten minutes to go, and he was stuck on the bench until further notice.

Savoy immediately made a basket, cutting the lead to eight. Bambi stomped his foot on the floor. Josh didn't have to guard Savoy for very long. On the next possession, Dixon went up into the air to catch a pass and landed on a defender's shoe, causing him to twist his ankle. Play stopped. The Trojan trainer popped open an ice bag, ran onto the court, applied the ice to the injury and helped Josh back to the bench with the help of the assistant coach.

The coach looked over the bench. "Corky get in there for Josh. You gotta take number eleven."

Corky pulled his sweat suit off and ran over to the scorer's table to report in.

"Come on, Cork!" Bambi yelled. "You can do it!" *I hope.*

The Trojans continued with their stall offense. The minutes ticked by, much too slowly for Bambi and the rest of the Trojans. At the four-minute mark their lead was down to five. If Bambi were a fingernail biter, he would have been down to the nubs at this point.

The coach put his hand on Bambi's shoulder. "OK, Bambi. I gotta put you back in now. Don't commit that fifth foul. Corky's doing a pretty good job on Savoy, so I'm going to keep him there. Get in there for Hockett."

Bambi nodded and jogged to the scorer's table. The next time a whistle sounded to stop play, the scorer blew the horn and the referees waved him into the game. Corky saw Bambi coming and started to run off the court.

"Hey, Calhoun. Where you going?"

"You're coming in for me, right?"

"Wrong. Get back out there, and you stay on Savoy like white on rice."

Bambi went over and spoke to Hockett, who jogged to the bench and sat down. This was like old times. This was the first time in their senior season they had both been on the court at the same time. Usually, Corky didn't play or only played when the game was decided, a point at which Bambi was already taken out of the game. And with Donnie on the court, three of the old Dogs of Victory were on the court together in a national spotlight.

The Cardinals knew they couldn't let the Trojans freeze the ball on them anymore. They started to commit fouls, hoping the Trojans wouldn't cash in at the charity stripe. Corky made the first of a one and one but missed the second. The Cardinals promptly scored to lower the lead to four.

They fouled Bambi on the next possession, and he calmly sank both shots. The Cardinals answered with another bucket to keep the lead at four. Donnie was the next foul victim. He missed his first shot and the Cardinals had a chance to cut the lead to two. Bambi anticipated a skip pass and dropped off in time to intercept it.

They traded scores for the next two minutes. With nineteen seconds to go Savoy went up for a shot and Corky hit his arm. Unfortunately, he didn't hit it soon enough or hard enough. The shot went in, and Savoy stepped to the free throw line with his team only trailing by two.

Bambi saw the coach's signal for a time-out. He found a referee and succeeded in getting play stopped.

The team gathered together in front of the bench. Corky walked to the bench and was the last one in the huddle. "I'm wasted, Coach. Take me out. I think I ate too much."

"OK. Hockett, back in for Calhoun. Bambi, you're back on Savoy. Everybody be ready for a full-court press. Set up the line formation. If they don't press, then fall back into the regular offense. Whoever they foul better make the free throws."

Savoy coolly dropped the ball through the cords on the free throw, and the lead was now one. The press that the coach had warned them about was applied. Luckily, they were ready and got the ball into play. Hockett brought the ball over the time-line and was fouled with ten seconds left. He missed the first free throw so he didn't get a second. The Cardinals had ten seconds to win the game.

Bambi harassed Savoy and slowed him down as he brought

the ball down the court. The crowd was counting down the seconds. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Savoy penetrated to within ten feet and let go one of his picture-perfect jump shots. Bambi had anticipated the shot and had thrown himself upward with every ounce of strength he had left. His fingertips grazed the ball and deflected it. One of the tall Cardinal postmen grabbed the loose ball, took two dribbles and dunked it home as the buzzer was sounding.

Bambi dropped to the floor and lay on his back staring at the ceiling. *How could we blow a twenty-point halftime lead?* The crowd was roaring.

Corky stood over him and started pulling on his arm. "Get up, hero. We did it!"

"Get off me. What do you mean we did it? We lost!"

"No. The shot didn't count. The buzzer went off before it left his hand. If he'd shot the ball instead of dunking, it might have counted."

By that time Bambi was up on his feet. Some of the fans were pouring out on the court. Bambi felt a pair of arms encircle him from behind and got a whiff of perfume.

"You were wonderful, Bambi!"

He cranked his neck around to see who was clinging to him. That didn't sound like Lisa, and he'd never smelled that perfume on her before. *It's Lulu.* She finally let go of him, and Bambi got to look at her. She had looked good in a waitress uniform. Tonight, decked down in a bright red sweater which was perhaps a size too small and revealing all of her charms, matched with a pair of tight white jeans, she was stunning. Bambi saw Corky standing off to the side, drinking in the sight of the blonde bombshell. A bit further away he saw Lisa watching the triangle out at center court. She was obviously not happy at what she saw.

"Thanks, Lulu. You know Corky played a big role in the win today. I think you should tell him how wonderful he was too."

Her smile disappeared. "I can take a hint." She walked over to Corky's side. Bambi couldn't help but watch her walk away. He tried to shake the thoughts of a referee calling a penalty for backfield in motion out of his head. He looked back where Lisa had been standing. She was also now walking away. Bambi tried to run to catch up with her but got swallowed up in a rush of fans. The thought struck him that he hadn't shaken hands with the Cardinals. He turned to do that and discovered they were sitting on their bench in shock.

After shaking all the other players' hands, he came to Savoy.

“Great game, Mr. Savoy.”

The boy’s eyes widened. “You played a heck of a game yourself. You killed us out there, man.”

“I see you’ll be back next year. Maybe you’ll win it all then. I hope so.”

“Good luck in the tournament the rest of the way, and God bless.”

Bambi’s eyes widened at this comment. He was a little embarrassed and held out his hand one more time. “Yeah, you too.”

Bambi walked back onto the court. He didn’t want to leave and wished he had a camera to get a shot of the scoreboard. Thoughts of the state tournament in high school flooded back to him. The taste of victory was indeed sweet. He almost felt sorry for the team they had just defeated. The Cardinals, who had nurtured high hopes of winning the tournament, were going home after one game. And the Trojans had lived to fight another day.

Chapter 4

On the bus trip back to the restaurant for supper, the vehicle was filled with jubilation. Bambi, however, didn't participate in the merry-making. His thoughts dwelt on Lisa. It was almost impossible for him not to miss her, even amid the thrill of victory. He knew that in the agony of defeat, he would yearn for her loving arms to comfort him. *I will make a Herculean effort to get her alone this evening at the motel and patch things up.*

Other thoughts entered his mind. A year from right now, hopefully, he would be coaching his own team somewhere. It was time that he started to analyze the game more and pay attention to some of the details of management that he hadn't involved himself in. How would he motivate his players to take on a giant? What techniques would he use to get his players to train on their own like the Dogs of Victory had done? There were so many details that he hadn't really considered before. It was time he started studying for a future test. The basketball coach in a small South Dakota school could be the hero or a zero of a community, depending on his success.

When the Trojans marched into the restaurant, Bambi got a rude surprise. Standing by the cash register and chatting with the employee on duty stood a honey-haired angel in a red sweater. Bambi tried not to look but the sight was too tempting. His vision made it up to her eyes which he found drilling right into his own.

"See anything on the menu you like, sugar?"

He blushed and turned away. A flash of blue color in the room ahead caught his attention. The cheerleaders were also eating here. He was heading over to say hi to Lisa when someone latched on to his arm. The odor of provocative perfume hit his brain about the same time Lisa looked up from her table.

"Lulu, what are you doing here? You're not working today."

"I know that, sugar, but I had to make sure you got the best service."

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Calling you what?"

"Sugar."

"Ohh. Because you're so sweet."

"How do you know that? You don't know me."

"Woman's intuition. I guess. You just seem to have an aura about you that flashes nice guy in big neon letters. And have I mentioned that I think you're cute?"

Bambi felt the blood rush to his face again. "Well, thanks for the compliment. I'm not trying to convince you I'm not nice, but it seems to me there must be lots of nice guys here in Kansas City."

"Maybe. I don't know where they're hiding though. I run into the other kind every day. You can tell they're only interested in one thing, if you know what I mean."

Bambi looked at her clothing that looked like it was painted on. "Yeah. I think I get your drift. And I know what guys are like. I have to listen to their talk in the locker room all the time. I think one-track minds is the phrase that applies."

"Perfect description. I hope you boys don't mind if I eat with you?"

"I'm sure the boys won't mind. Corky would be especially delighted."

"I picked up on that fact. And what about Bambi?"

Bambi stopped walking and pulled his arm away from his uninvited escort. "Listen, Lulu. There's a girl sitting at a booth over there in the corner that is the love of my life. We've been together for four years. You're a very attractive girl, but you see my heart is already taken."

Lulu pouted. "I see. Then why isn't the gallant knight in shining armor over there with his lady?"

"I was on the way over there when I was hijacked by a blonde bombshell."

"Really. Anyone I know?"

Bambi rolled his eyes.

"So you think I'm a blonde bombshell, huh?"

"I'm not sure about the blonde part because only your hairdresser knows for sure, but you are definitely a bombshell."

"Thank you for noticing, Sir Galahad. Now I'll leave you alone so you can rescue your damsel in distress." She walked over to the table where Corky already sat. A Chinese fire drill ensued as a group of boys moved over one chair to allow Lulu to have a place at their table next to Corky.

Bambi walked to the booth where Lisa sat with the other five cheerleaders. She sat on the inside, so he couldn't get very close to her. When he approached their table, the chatting ceased instantly. There was an uncomfortable silence as he stood there waiting to figure out what to say.

"Good game, Bambi," one of the girls closest to him said. Some of the others agreed. Lisa sat there studying the menu as if she was having a semester test on the material.

Bambi felt his discomfort level rising like a thermometer dipped in warm water. Obviously Lisa wasn't going to be the first one to speak. "Hi, Lisa."

She glanced his way and then back to the menu. "Isn't Blondie waiting for you?"

"What?"

"Don't play dumb with me. First she's draped over you at the arena so closely that she probably had to be surgically removed and next thing I know you're arm in arm with her in the restaurant."

"She did all that. I was an innocent victim." Lisa was still avoiding his eyes. He looked around at the rest of the cheerleaders. Some seemed amused and others uncomfortable with the situation.

"You didn't seem to protest very much."

"What was I supposed to do, Lisa? Throw a ranger chokehold on her and fling her to the floor?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to talk about it. I'd prefer not to spoil my appetite."

Stunned, Bambi stumbled away. His appetite had just been ruined. He walked right past the table where his celebrating teammates were studying the menu and Lulu without even looking at them, continued right out the front door, and started walking aimlessly down the street.

Bambi wanted to be angry. Actually, he wanted to be furious and lash out at something. His built-in anger management nurtured over the years kept him from doing so. Thus, the furor was expressed within himself as his conscience battled against his emotions. Who else could he take his anger out on? He could punch out a door or a wall, but what would that solve? He'd probably injure himself in the process. The vision of the young black man from Alabama wishing God's blessing upon him materialized on his internal screen.

"God, I hate bothering you again so soon, but I'm really messed up here. Please take away this anger that's filling me with the desire to do so many things that you wouldn't like. I know you have the power to stop the wind, so I know you can handle this little personal storm I'm going through. What do I need to do to find happiness?"

Thoughts began to flow through Bambi almost as if someone

was speaking to him. *Happiness is a condition of the inner man. You decide whether to be happy or not. All the success and money and love in the world can't bring happiness. Lisa can't make you happy. You can't make her happy. You must both choose to be happy, whether you are together or not. Ultimately, the only way to be happy is to do what God wants you to do.*

At that point Bambi looked around him to make sure no one was speaking to him. He knew he didn't hear anything audible, but these thoughts didn't generate themselves. "OK, God, if this is you talking to me, what do you want me to do?"

The thoughts stopped flowing. *Maybe it was just my imagination.* Bambi suddenly felt alone and hungry and noticed it was getting dark. If he went straight back to the restaurant, maybe he'd have time to order something to take out. He pivoted and retraced his steps.

Luckily the team members were taking their time with this meal. For a change they didn't have to hurry somewhere. There were two more games this evening, but it wasn't necessary for them to arrive for the opening tip-off. Thus Bambi did have time to order fish and chips to go. He ate hurriedly on the bus on the trip back to the arena.

The team got a warm reception from several groups. Knocking off number one had given them instant recognition. Bambi found out that the cheerleaders had opted to go to the motel and rest instead of attending the night session. Bambi was bummed. His talk with Lisa would be delayed at least another day.

* * *

On the agenda for the next day were four more games, but the Trojans didn't play any of them. The team went to watch the tournament while the cheerleaders went to the mall to do some shopping. They didn't eat at the same restaurant, so Bambi went the whole day again without seeing Lisa.

Lulu waited on their table during the evening meal and acted as if he wasn't there. One part of Bambi was relieved; the other part felt a loss. It had been pleasant having her flirt with him and knowing she found him attractive. If only he knew where he stood with Lisa. In the event she was going to dump him, maybe he should be a little more open to advances from someone else. But was Lulu a candidate?

He and Lisa both believed fervently in waiting for marriage for a physical relationship. Somehow, Bambi doubted Lulu was bound to that same code of conduct. He'd be jeopardizing his principles to get mixed up with a sexy woman like Lulu. His

hormonal urges had been overcome by his respect for Lisa and her desire to save herself. With Lulu all bets would be off. *I'll just forget about her, like she seems to be doing about me.* With her hovering around the table all during dinner, he discovered his resolution was easier said than maintained.

Watching the first game of the night session frustrated Bambi even further. He wasn't enjoying himself at all. *Why do girls have to go shopping all the time? There's a mall in Sioux Falls. Why do the cheerleaders have to spend the whole day at the mall in Kansas City? Are they out trolling for boys?* The vision of some smooth-talking Romeo hitting on Lisa tortured him. There were still a few minutes left in the half when he got up and walked out into the lobby.

After wandering around the building without a purpose in mind, he decided to get some popcorn. A group of cheerleaders from another school got in line behind him. He turned around and got a surprise. These girls represented Northwestern College from Iowa, just a couple of hours south of Madison. The two teams played every year. It was ironic that both of them ended up in the national tournament.

The girls noticed Bambi and whispered among themselves for a minute. Finally one of them said, "Excuse me. Aren't you Lance Masterson?"

Bambi turned around in surprise. "That's what my parents call me."

Some of the girls giggled. "Nice game yesterday," the spokeswoman said. "What should we call you?"

"Thanks. And you can call me 'Bambi'. So you guys play the next game, right?"

"Yep. Are you going to cheer for us?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Are you going to come sit by us?"

"Umm. I don't know...." Bambi looked over the girl talking to him. *She is cute.*

"Oh, come on. Hardly any of our fans are here. You wouldn't want poor little us to be all alone. Or is your girlfriend here?"

"No girlfriend here." *Maybe no girlfriend anywhere.* "Sure, why not? Do you want me to recruit some of my teammates too?"

A bright smile lit up her face. "That would be wonderful. The more the merrier."

Bambi got his popcorn and started to walk away.

"Don't forget about us, handsome."

Bambi heard another girl try to whisper, "We won't forget

about you.”

“Don’t worry,” Bambi said. “You guys might just make this an enjoyable night after all.”

“Guys?”

“Sorry. No danger of mistaking you for guys.” Some more giggling bubbled up, causing Bambi to decide that the giggling of girls wasn’t always a bad thing.

Bambi returned to his teammates in the gym a couple of minutes before the second half tip. “Any of you guys interested in sitting by the Northwestern cheerleaders next game? They want us to help support them.”

“Dang fine diversion,” Corky said. “I never thought I could get so bored watching basketball. My theory is that I’ll never get tired of watching cheerleaders. It’s time to put my theory to the test. Count me in.”

“There are some real foxes in that group. I’m with you,” Hockett said.

It soon became evident that the vote was unanimous. Even the guys with girlfriends were eager for a change in their routine. They were emotionally primed to play but had another twenty-four hours to wait. When the horn sounded ending the first game, the Trojans marched down to the section of bleachers where the Northwestern cheerleaders were making themselves at home.

The cutest one greeted them. “Well, well, well. It’s the boys from Dak State. What a pleasant surprise. By the way, my name is Marla. This is Jill, Tami, Betty, Denise, and Carla.”

Bambi introduced his teammates.

“Why don’t you boys sit down right up there where the pom-poms are? We saved you that spot. Sorry, but we’ve got to get to work and do a few dance routines. Don’t go away!”

The boys climbed up into the bleachers and handed the pom-poms down to their owners. The pep band struck up a song, and their new friends performed their choreographed routine. Bambi decided he liked this view. Looking at the smiles on his teammates’ faces, he figured he wasn’t alone.

Several fans from Northwestern struck up conversations with them. It seemed that their common Midwest bond was stronger than their natural rivalry, at least for tonight. Once the game started the Trojans found themselves actually audibly cheering for the Red Raiders.

During one time-out the cheerleaders did the classic yell, “Two bits, four bits, six bits, a dollar. All for Northwestern stand up and holler.”

Bambi and his friends all rose to their feet and did some hooting. Marla flashed a big smile and winked at Bambi before she turned around to watch the game. Time went by fast now that they were having fun. And to top it off, it was an exciting game for a change. The team from Iowa pulled out a four-point victory.

The Red Raider cheerleaders were excited when the horn went off. They all ran onto the court to congratulate their team – with the exception of Marla. Her first move was to approach Bambi.

“Thanks a lot for helping us out tonight.”

“It was our pleasure, believe me. It was a blast.”

“You realize that if we both win tomorrow, we’ll play each other in the semifinals. That means one of us would make it to the championship game.”

“You’re right. We both have a tough row to hoe. We’ve got that team from Wisconsin and you guys have to play the team from California that won tonight.”

“Anything can happen in the world of sports.”

Bambi didn’t quite agree with that statement, but he didn’t want to ruin the good thing he had going by contradicting her. “Well, I hope you guys win.”

“And I’ll be rooting for you guys too. Maybe we’ll come sit in your fan section tomorrow.”

That would mean they’d be sitting close to Lisa. Wouldn’t that be an interesting situation? “We could sit with you guys again. We play in the afternoon again, and you play at night.”

“That would be cool. I’ll look forward to that.” She looked out over the small throng celebrating victory on the court. “Well, I suppose I better join the rest of my team out there.” She looked at Bambi in a longing way. “Good night, Bambi.”

“See you tomorrow, Marla.”

He watched her run across the floor, pom-poms flashing up and down. *Why did she look at me that way? I wonder what it would be like to kiss her. Lisa is the only girl I’ve ever kissed. Does it feel the same with everyone?* Bambi sat there pondering those questions while his eyes took in the celebration scene in front of him.

“Earth to Bambi! Are you coming? We gotta get on the bus, or they’re going to leave without us. It’d be a long, cold walk back to the motel. And probably dangerous as well.”

Bambi looked up to see Corky standing over him. “Yeah, yeah. Hold on to your caps, mittens, and overshoes.” He got up and fell in step with his friend.

"What were you thinking about back there, anyway? You were lost in your own little world."

"Nothin'. Just nothin'."

"If you think I'm buying that one, you're out in left field. You're really acting weird lately, I hope you know."

"Yeah. I know. Weird for me anyway. Probably closer to normal people."

"I don't want you being normal. I got enough normal friends. It was kind of nice having Superboy for a pal."

Bambi shook his head. "Sorry, the 'S' must have come off in the washing machine. I feel more like StuporBoy."

"That's a perfect name to describe you a minute ago. I bet Einstein when he came up with the theory of relativity wasn't thinking as hard as you were."

"I have a question for you, Cork."

"Shoot."

"Do you think a guy should get married without kissing more than one girl?"

"Do I look like Dear Abby?"

"Now that you mention it..."

"Shut up!"

"Fine. How you doin' with Lulu?"

"Hmm. She just hangs around me to be close to you," Corky said.

"What are you talking about? She didn't even say hi to me today at the restaurant."

"Ever hear of playing hard to get?"

"Well, yeah. I'm not a total ding-dong."

Corky rolled his eyes. "I'll let that comment slip by. Anyway, that's what she's doing with you. She talks about you all the time when I'm with her. I wish you'd hurry up and get things worked out with Lisa, so I could have a decent chance with Lulu."

"Corky, I'm not standing in your way with Lulu. I've made it clear to her that I'm not interested. If she doesn't fall for you, that's not my fault. It's bad enough dealing with Lisa right now. I can't have you banging on me from the other side. Give me a break, will ya?"

"Sometimes I'd like to give you a compound fracture. And this is one of them. You're not the only one having girl troubles, you know. All you're thinking about is yourself!" Corky sped up and pulled away from Bambi.

Bambi accelerated his pace. "Hold on. Corky, listen to me. We've been friends forever. We need each other. This is no time

to be fighting. Let's just quit thinking about girls and concentrate on why we're here."

"Basketball?"

"Bingo."

Corky's eyes bugged out. "We're here to play bingo?"

"No, you smart aleck. I really have to be careful about what I say when you're in a sarcastic mood."

"Hey. Who's in a—"

Donnie stood right in their path bringing them to a halt. "What's going on with you guys?"

"What makes you think something's going on?" Corky asked.

"Criminy! I could hear you above the noise of the crowd. And also your faces are ratting on you that something is wrong."

"Maybe we should wait until we get on the bus to finish this discussion, so we make sure we're not left behind," Corky said.

The three boys resumed their trek to the parking lot. "I miss the good old days," Bambi said. "It was us against the world. That gave me a special feeling."

"Now it's us against us," Corky said.

"Doesn't have to be that way. Shouldn't be that way," Donnie said.

"Donnie's right. We've left something behind with our childhood. Something we should have brought with us," Bambi said.

"What's that? Our Teddy bears?" Corky asked.

Bambi stopped and put out his hand. Donnie laid his on top.

"Ahh. I get it now." Corky added his. They raised their hands and lowered them reciting, "One for all, and all for one."

"Ah, yes. The good old Dogs of Victory," Bambi said, as the boys continued walking.

"Gosh, that brings back a lot of memories," Donnie said. "I wonder what Brad and Troy are up to. I heard Denny is working at a company down in Sioux Falls."

"Brad's finishing college in Minnesota, and Troy joined the Army," Corky said.

"Correction. Troy was invited to join the army by Uncle Sam. I heard he survived a tour of duty in Vietnam," Bambi said.

"Dang!"

"Or Da Nang," Corky said.

"We've got it pretty good. I can't imagine being over there in that jungle with people shooting at me," Donnie said.

"You know, Donnie, if you hung out with us more, you'd know more about what's going on."

"Yeah. But Barb likes me spending lots of time with her. You guys had girlfriends a lot earlier than I did. I'm trying to make up for lost time and keep her happy."

"Don't worry about it, Donnie. If I were in your shoes, I'd be doing the same thing," Bambi said. "We have to face the facts. The Dogs of Victory have grown up. In the new few years we'll be even more out of touch. That's just the way life goes."

"You're right, Bambi. Our lives are taking us in different directions – down different paths. We'll always have those memories with us, but we're different people than we were then. I guess in twenty years from now we'll be different than we are now."

"So what's the point you two are trying to make here?" Corky asked.

"That you can't expect me to hang out with you just because I used to when we were kids. Actually, Bambi has been semi-absent since Lisa came along. And you were the same way when you were going out with Pam."

"Don't bring that name into the conversation, please."

"Sorry. Anyway, you can't be frustrated or jealous with me because I have someone else in my life that takes a higher priority. All you'll do is poison the good memories you have and mess up the time we do get to spend together on the basketball team," Donnie said.

"Fine. I won't expect nothin' out of anybody. Except to get stabbed in the back."

Corky accelerated his pace and left his other friends in his wake.

"I think somebody needs their security blanket," Donnie said.

Bambi sighed. "I'm not sure if he needs Linus's blanket or Lucy's five-cent therapy session. Maybe I shouldn't have gotten so upset when he accused me of trying to steal his girl."

Donnie and Bambi took a seat together near the front of the bus. They could hear Corky talking loudly near the rear.

"Donnie, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure. I reserve the right to not answer if it will incriminate or embarrass me."

"Did you feel I deserted you when Lisa and I started going steady?"

Donnie looked at Bambi and then turned and stared out the window. "Yeah, for a while."

"I never really thought about it. I was just so happy."

"Forget it. That was four years ago. It was hard at first. You

were my best friend, even though I knew Corky was your best friend. But you and I shared all those Friday nights together away from the social crowd that Corky wasn't a part of. I really needed that my first few years of high school. So, yeah, I was bummed out for a while, but I was grateful for the times we had shared together before my confidence level reached a point that I didn't feel so insignificant. By the time Lisa came along, I was ready to stand on my own, but it was hard at first."

"I'm so sorry, Donnie. I just never really thought much about the situation. Without you, Lisa and I would have probably never gotten together. I owed you a lot, and I just walked away without telling you how much I appreciated what you had done."

"Like I said, it's ancient history. Friday night was never a special time again for me, until Barb came along. Then I realized why you preferred Lisa's company to mine. There's nothing like falling in love to make you look at the world in a completely different way."

"You got that right. And nothing like having that love crushed to reverse the process."

"I can't believe it's crushed. You've got to have hope and faith in addition to love."

"That sounds Biblical."

Donnie nodded. "Actually, it is."

"We never really talked much about God and religion when we were kids. I know that you went to a Protestant church."

"And I knew you were Catholic. I pretty much went because my parents made me. Until Barb came along."

"What do you mean?"

"It was like she shined a spotlight on Jesus for me. The Bible says that God is love. Those words didn't really sink in until I felt the love that Barb had for me and mine for her. I know it sounds silly, but Barb helped me to fall in love with God at the same time because of her faith."

"That doesn't sound silly at all. Makes a lot of sense, really."

"And the promise of eternal life made more sense to me when I had Barb in my life. I wouldn't have wanted to live forever in the lonely state that I found myself in."

"I don't think loneliness will be present in Heaven any more than pain or death," Bambi said.

"Yeah. I realize that now, but when I was younger, I didn't see things so clearly. Four years of growing up and one beautiful fiancée make a big difference."

Bambi's eyebrows disappeared under his bangs. "Fiancée?"

"Yeah. We haven't made it known to the general public yet, but we're going to get married this summer."

"Are you sure you're ready?"

"I think so. I hope so. Barb and I got close just before the war in Vietnam ended. We got unofficially engaged shortly after we started going steady. I was so afraid I would get sent to Vietnam when I graduated from college because I got number 40 in the draft lottery. We decided to get married as soon as I graduated – just in case the worst happened. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah. I never thought much about the draft. I got number 323."

"Lucky you. When the war ended, we saw no reason to change our wedding plans, so we've been engaged for a couple of years without anybody knowing about it. Why make a big fuss over something that's so far away, especially with the number of engagements that get broken off?"

A painful look came across Bambi's face. "I can relate to that one."

"I'm sorry. It was clumsy of me to bring up that topic."

"Don't sweat it. Big boys don't cry."

"That's a crock."

Bambi grimaced. "How about big boys shouldn't cry?"

"Still not right. God provided us with tear ducts for a reason. There are times in a man's life when tears are called for."

"Donnie, I think I'm nearing one of those places. Let's change the subject before I make a fool of myself here on the bus. What do you find different with your religious life now than you did before Barb?"

"Well, I guess foremost is the way I view God. When I was a kid, God was like this cosmic judge who passed laws and then made sure they were obeyed. Now I look at him like a father. He makes rules – just like my earthly father. And he punishes his kids, just like a real dad too. The Bible says he chastens, which means punishes, those that he loves. I now realize that the rules my dad makes are for my benefit. When I realized that my Heavenly Father is doing the same thing, it changed my whole attitude about surrendering myself to his will and obeying his commandments."

"I'd like to know more. Maybe I could go to church with you sometime?"

"Sure. In fact, if we win tomorrow, my parents are going to take me to church here in Kansas City with them. You could come with us."

“Yeah. That’d be cool. Now we just have to win tomorrow so we’ll be staying here.”

Chapter 5

The next morning Bambi decided to take rash action. After ingesting a continental breakfast, compliments of the motel, he grabbed a book out of his duffel bag and walked down the corridor until he found the room where Lisa was staying. He planted himself on the floor opposite the door and began to read *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. Thirty minutes went by before the door opened. Bambi looked up just in time to watch it shut again.

Should I knock on the door now I'm sure they're awake? He shook his head and opened his book again. A couple of minutes later the door opened again and Cheryl came out, closing the door behind her.

"Hey, Bambi."

"Morning, Cheryl."

"What ya doin'?"

"Waiting to talk to Lisa."

"Ahhh...she doesn't really want to talk right now. She'd like to wait until you get back home before you guys discuss things."

Bambi stood up. "Can I ask why?"

"She just wants a little space and doesn't wish to spoil this trip – and stuff."

"And stuff?"

She nodded. "Sorry, Bambi. Good luck in the game this afternoon."

He nodded, and she went back in the room. Bambi stared at the closing door for a few seconds, pondering his next move. Fumbling through his pockets, he found a business card from the garage where he took his car for repairs. Luckily he had tucked a pen in his shirt pocket before leaving the room. Carefully, in large letters he wrote neatly on the back of the card. "Lisa, I love you!" After studying it for a moment to make sure it was perfect, he slipped it under the door. *Hopefully she'll read the right side.* Slowly, with his head hanging down, Bambi returned to his own room to continue his reading and await the bus's departure for lunch.

* * *

The emotions that Bambi had been bottling up started to ooze

out as he got dressed for the game. He was going to be playing mad for the second game in a row. Those emotions hadn't been detrimental in the first game, so as long as he didn't lose his head, he might enjoy a little competitive edge with his almost nasty attitude.

When the Trojans took the court for pre-game warm-ups, he noticed the Northwestern cheerleaders sitting in the Dakota State section. Marla waved at him as he jogged by. Some of the basketball team from Iowa sat there as well. It appeared they were going to help out their rival from the north. Bambi caught a glimpse of a honey-blond beauty sitting right in front of the cheerleaders. Corky saw her too and his face lit up with a smile and the swagger in his step increased.

"She's here!"

"I see that, Corky. She does stand out in a crowd – even when she's sitting."

"Now if the band could only break into *Down at Lulu's*. I'm head over heels in love with that girl!"

"That's nice, Big Red, but focus on the game, please. You're probably going to be playing some today."

"Don't you worry about me. I'll be ready."

The rhythmic sound of the pep-band, especially the drums, stirred Bambi's heart and put an extra bounce in his step. *This could be my last game. I'm going out with a bang.*

When the horn blew, the teams ran to the sidelines. Bambi pulled off his sweats and looked over where the cheerleaders led a yell. Lisa had her back turned. Marla and Lulu were both staring in his direction. *Maybe it's just my imagination. Hopefully Lulu is looking at Corky.* He glanced once more at Lisa to feed his anger level. He barely heard the coach's final instructions.

The Trojans got out of the gate quickly, just like the previous game, holding an eight-point lead after five minutes of play. The two teams played evenly the rest of the way and Bambi and his teammates celebrated a nine-point victory when the final horn blew. Marla and Lulu both came onto the court to congratulate him – at the same time."

"Is this your girlfriend?" Lulu asked. "I thought she was a cheerleader for your school."

Bambi felt his face get even warmer than it was from the exertion of the game. "No, Lulu. This is my new friend, Marla. My girlfriend is in the blue and gold."

"I thought you said you didn't have a girlfriend here," Marla said.

"She wasn't here – that night."

"But she probably will be tonight at our game, so you'll probably be sitting with her instead of us?"

"Not bloody likely. We're kind of...not talking right now. I said I'll sit with you guys, and I'm going to."

"Wonderful. I'm looking forward to it. See you tonight. Nice to meet you, Lulu."

"You too." Lulu looked into Bambi's eyes, her eyebrows lifted in questioning mode. "Marla seems nice."

Bambi nodded.

"And she's cute."

"Yeah. So what's your point, Lulu?"

"No point. Just remarking that you seem to have a way with good-looking women."

"You've got to be kidding. I've never had any luck with any girl besides Lisa."

"What am I, chopped liver?"

"Let me rephrase that statement. I've never had any luck with girls when I tried."

"So you aren't trying with me."

"Yes, I'm trying, Lulu. I'm trying not to get hung up on your beauty."

She beamed. "You think I'm pretty, huh?"

"Very."

"Then why are you trying to avoid me?"

"I don't play the jealousy game, and your presence is certainly not going to help me in my efforts to reconcile with Lisa."

"You really love her, don't you, sugar?"

Bambi nodded. "I really do."

"OK. That's all I need to know. I wouldn't want to come between true lovers, but I really think you and I could have made sweet music together."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"Well, if I can't have you, I might as well have a little chat with that girl of yours and talk some sense into her."

Corky came up behind Lulu and tapped her on the left shoulder but then ducked to her right. She looked over her right shoulder. "Nice try, Red. You gotta get up pretty early in the morning to fool Lulu."

"And to pull you away from Bambi."

"That's not true. It won't take much effort at all to persuade me to leave with you." She put an arm out and Corky linked his with it and the two walked away laughing. Bambi watched them go with

a mixture of jealousy and contentment. He was tempted to try to talk to Lisa again, but she had made it clear she desired to wait until they were home.

Bambi found Donnie talking to his parents and girlfriend. He greeted them all, and then he and Donnie walked to the locker room together.

"Are you still on for church tomorrow morning?" Donnie asked.

"I am. Is the offer still good?"

"Sure, but we have to leave at 8:30, and you'll need a permission slip from Coach to leave the motel without the team."

"Piece of cake."

"Don't talk about food right now. I could eat my basketball shoes."

"Don't do that yet. We need them for at least one more game."

Donnie laughed. "Besides, rubber gives me heartburn."

"Girls give me heartburn."

"It can't be that bad, Bambi."

"Sure it can. Maybe worse."

* * *

The next morning, Bambi gulped another continental breakfast and met Donnie at the lobby of the motel. His parents and girlfriend were staying in another motel. The two boys waited patiently until their ride arrived. Donnie jumped into the middle of the backseat so he could sit next to Barb, leaving Bambi the other window seat.

"This ought to be an interesting service," Donnie's mother said. "We heard the pastor at this church is a real dynamo."

"That's nice," Bambi said. *What am I doing here? I feel like an intruder. I should have stayed in the motel and slept or finished Brave New World. If Donnie starts smooching with Barb, I'm going to be ill – and jealous.* He looked out the window to avoid the pain and thought of Brave New World. *What a crazy environment where people are expected to have sex with everybody else. Those people would never get to know the meaning of true love.*

They made it to the church without Bambi having to endure a public display of affection from Donnie. It suddenly dawned on him that this was the first time he had attended a Protestant service. He had never even gone to church with Lisa due to the teaching that it was a sin for him to do so. Thoughts of his parents, who hadn't made the long trip due to illness, swam into his consciousness. If his dad was feeling better, they were probably sitting in the early Mass right now – without him for a change. *They need to get used to it. Looks like I'll either be moving out of*

town or changing churches in the near future – if Lisa will marry me.

They walked into the chapel, and Bambi had trouble feeling like he was in church. The deep reverence that the ornate church he belonged to fostered with the prohibition on speaking was clearly missing here. People carried on as if they were sitting in the auditorium waiting for a play to start. Bambi didn't feel comfortable talking in church so he kept silent, even when some strangers came up and shook his hand.

He studied the simple architecture of the building and the lack of anything artistic in nature. The only decoration in the front of the church worthy of mentioning was an old wooden cross, which was empty. Bambi stared at it and tried to picture the cross in his home church, a sculptured version with a likeness of Jesus nailed to it. *The difference between this building and mine is similar to the comparison between a gold ring and a paper cigar band. The one positive thing is that people appear to be friendly.*

The service got underway with some singing, something he wasn't used to. They didn't even have music at the earlier masses. He loved to sing, but he didn't participate since he didn't know the songs. After taking an offering and providing announcements, the pastor settled in behind a lectern in the front of the sanctuary. He scanned the congregation before he began to speak. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

Just like the church itself, the sermon was different than any Bambi had heard. It was so down to earth, yet full of humor and common sense. The first time the congregation laughed, Bambi almost jumped out of his seat. He wasn't used to hearing people laugh in church. Sometimes people even responded to the pastor's message by shouting out an *Amen* or another comment. The informality of this service was striking.

The pastor talked about the divine right of kings. Bambi had studied that theory in history class and had never liked it. The kings that he had read about showed no signs of being worthy of men's devotion. Yet the right to rule was promoted as something God had given them, no matter how horribly the king's subjects were treated. The pastor brought that philosophy to the forefront by showing what man's relationship with God should be like. The thought of a knight kneeling down and saying 'my liege' came to Bambi's mind. The story of Richard the Lionhearted and Robin Hood broke through his thought barrier as well. Those people would die for their king. The attitude of people in the 20th century

seemed to focus on what the king could give, not what people could give the king. He realized that John Kennedy's passionate speech could have used the word God instead of country.

Bambi found himself realizing that he wasn't seeking God's kingdom first. He was seeking his own and allowing God to have squatter rights on a small piece of his heart. The pastor had spoken in loving tones, but he had done a masterful job of making Bambi realize that God wanted his whole heart.

"In closing today, I want to assure you that it is not uncommon to put yourself on the throne that is intended for God. Unfortunately, that doesn't negate in any way the fact it is wrong. If you've made the mistake of withholding yourself from God's service in your own interests, I invite you to come up to the altar today and make amends. If you want prayer, one of the elders will be here to ask for God's blessing on your intentions and commitment.

Bambi watched as people started to filter down to the altar and kneel. He felt the urge to join them. *This is crazy. Why would I go down there in front of all of these people and make a fool of myself?* The urge wouldn't leave despite his trying to rationalize it away. Suddenly, he bolted out of the seat and marched up to where others poured out their hearts silently to God. He threw himself on his knees.

Oh, God, I've spent all these years worrying about my girlfriend, my sports, my career. No wonder I've been miserable the last few days. I'm not getting what I want. Lord, forgive me. Give me the power to give it up for you. Let me live for you to bring your kingdom on Earth. If you want to give me Lisa to help fulfill this mission, I'll be more than appreciative, God. But if you don't, give me the strength to keep pressing on anyway. Please forgive me for my egotism and selfishness and everything else that played a part in me not paying you the allegiance I should have.

He knelt there for a moment. When he lifted his head, he found the pastor standing beside him. "Can I pray for you?"

Bambi nodded.

The man prayed over the prone youth for five minutes. When he finished, he asked, "What's your name, son?"

"Lance Masterson."

"Lance, I feel the Spirit of the Lord telling me that you are going to be a mighty man in the kingdom. You will accomplish great things for God and your posterity will carry on your work. He will bless you for your faithfulness. I also feel impressed to tell you

to hang on to this word because times will come when you will doubt that God has spoken it to you.”

Bambi stood up, almost totally blown away by the pastor’s comments. *What do I say to something like that?* “Thank you very much.”

“My pleasure, son. Are you from Kansas City?”

“No. I’m on a basketball team from South Dakota playing in the NAIA tournament here.”

“I see. That’s too bad. I wish you could be part of my church family here because you are going to accomplish great things with your life if you continue in the promises. I saw a vision of a daughter doing great exploits as a result of your faithfulness and your influence.”

“Wow. I don’t know what to say. This is just so new to me. I guess I can’t wait to get started.”

“What career have you chosen?”

“Education. I want to be a teacher and a coach.”

“Wonderful. You’ll have lots of opportunity to influence the next generation. Well, I better make a beeline for the lobby and shake some hands. It was great meeting you, and God bless you, Lance.”

“You too. Thanks again.”

The congregation had been dismissed while Bambi was praying and most people had left the sanctuary. In a daze Bambi walked back to where Donnie’s family still sat, waiting for their guest.

“How did you like the service, Bambi?” Donnie asked.

“My life has been forever changed, I think.”

“Wow. That sounds encouraging.”

“Thanks so much for letting me tag along.”

“It was our pleasure. Believe me. A man is never as tall as when he is down on his knees. It was great to see you up there, standing tall.”

“I can’t help but wonder why I never saw some of this stuff before. Why did it take someone to bring it to my attention?”

“That’s what good pastors do. If they’re walking close to God, they’re able to share insider knowledge with us.”

“This guy must be walking side by side with Jesus.”

Donnie’s dad interrupted them. “I hate to hurry you guys along in such a beautiful moment, but we have to get you back to the motel for your bus trip for lunch.”

Bambi followed them out of the sanctuary. He turned just before he exited and took one last look at the cross. In all

probability he would never see this building again, but he figured it was indelibly etched in his memory.

* * *

At the restaurant, gratitude for the food he was about to eat filled Bambi's heart. He bowed his head and gave a long, silent thanks.

"Are you OK, Bambi?" Corky asked.

"Never been better."

"I thought you were passing out or in pain or something."

"I was just giving thanks for my meal."

"You mean praying?"

"Yeah. That's what they call it."

"I never saw you pray in a restaurant before. In fact I can't remember seeing you pray ever."

"I don't doubt that. You'll be seeing it in the future." He explained to Corky what had transpired at the service that morning. When he finished, he excused himself to go to the bathroom.

He heard Corky say to someone at their table. "He's gone off the deep end. Looks like he's decided to become a saint, or maybe a Jesus freak."

Bambi sighed. *It appears that coming closer to God might require moving further away from some people. Things are never going to be the same with my friends or family or Lisa.*

* * *

As he laced up his basketball shoes, Bambi realized that the game today was different. He was no longer angry but totally at peace. Thoughts of his senior year in high school flooded over him as he tied the lace snugly. Memories of the foul he committed that cost his team the state championship tried to burn his mind once again. This time they found nothing to consume. The guilt he had carried for four years was totally gone. That lost championship was no longer a major regret in his life.

Along with memories of the game came a remembrance of his close brush with ending his own life. It dawned on him that winning this championship wasn't a big deal in the eternal scheme of things either. However, it certainly wasn't something he would mourn, should it happen. Thoughts of Lulu and Marla were nonexistent. His mind roamed to contemplate his situation with Lisa. *If God intends for Lisa to be my wife, it will happen. No sense sweating it. I'm just going to love her and accept whatever happens.*

Bambi's quest to get the Trojans into the final game didn't last

long. On the second possession of the game, he went high into the air for a jump shot. The man guarding him lunged for the ball and positioned his feet right under the airborne Trojan. When he came back down to earth, his sneaker landed at an angle on the shoe below. The ankle turned, and Bambi went down in a heap. He thought he heard something pop before the pain hit. With an ice pack on his swollen limb, he watched from the bench as the team from Northwestern throttled his teammates.

After the final horn, Bambi hobbled over to shake hands with the victorious Red Raiders. Several of them passed along their condolences. Bambi wished them well in the final. As he turned to shuffle off to the locker room, he saw Lisa standing up ahead of him. If he continued on the same course he would run into her in the next sixty seconds. His heart started to beat faster. He felt some pre-game jitters in his stomach. *Weird. I've never had butterflies after a game before.* Suddenly a bouncy blonde was at his side.

"Tough luck, Bambi."

"Yeah. Thanks, Lulu." He didn't look at her.

After being ignored for a few seconds, she turned on the jets and pulled away from him. Lisa was still standing there. He tried to pick up the pace, but the pain wouldn't let him.

"I feel bad about you getting hurt, Lance."

He turned slightly and saw another cheerleader uniform. "Thanks, Marla. Good luck tomorrow! Take care of yourself."

"You too. It was nice to get to know you."

"Ditto."

Up ahead he saw Lulu talking to Lisa. *I'm not going to worry about what's being said there. God is in control and if things work out with Lisa, great. If not, then there must be something better out there for me. Lord, I lift Lisa and Lulu both up to you. May your will be done in their lives. And Marla's too.*

Before Bambi reached the spot where Lisa was planted, Lulu glanced in his direction and then departed, giving a small wave of her hand. Bambi returned the gesture and kept on course, hoping his notion that Lisa's eyes were locked on him wasn't just wishful thinking. She began to walk right at him.

"Do you need any help there, Hopalong?"

"Nah. I'm doing just fine, Miss Kitty. Marshall Dillon sends his greetings."

"Seriously, are you OK?"

"I was being serious the first time."

"That was a sad ending to your illustrious basketball career."

"Could have been better. However, we beat the odds, Lisa. Nobody gave us a chance down here and we took out two ranked teams, including the number one seed. I feel good about what we accomplished."

"You're taking things quite philosophically. Normally you're pretty bent out of shape when you lose. Losing big-time and getting injured too can't be the ingredients of feel-good evening."

Lance smiled. "In the old days, this would have been a disaster. Tonight, it was just an unpleasant experience."

"I don't get it. In the old days? Just a couple of weeks ago, a loss delivered a crushing blow. I always had to help bring you out of your funk, not that I'm complaining."

"I've had a change of perspective."

Lisa's eyebrows went up. "Tell me about it."

"I went to church with Donnie's family."

"He's not Catholic."

"No kidding. Anyway, I had the most unusual experience."

"I've gathered. Trying to get it out of you is worse than pulling molars with a crescent wrench."

"It's just that I'm a little gun shy about talking about it. Anyway, I felt inspired to go up and pray that I would let God have all of me. While I was there, a man laid hands on me and spoke a prophecy that my daughter would be a mighty warrior in the kingdom of God."

"Wow! Double wow! I didn't even know you had a daughter."

Bambi lightly punched her shoulder. "You're bad."

"I know. Would you like me to repent?"

"I'll think about it."

"Was that all the man said?"

"He did mention that I would be a mighty man in the kingdom of God," Bambi explained.

"Triple wow! So, what does all of this mean?"

"I've dedicated my life to God. From now on I quit playing games, and I will serve him. His Spirit will be my compass."

"That is totally awesome, Bambi. I am so excited for you. In fact, I..."

"You what?"

"I...I have a little something to tell you."

"Do I need to sit down?"

"It's not something bad. I just felt that God was telling me I needed to give you some space to help you find him. Telling you what I was doing was out of the question. Believe me; I felt bad that you couldn't understand that I was letting you be free to

discover what really matters in life.”

“I’d have felt better, maybe, if you’d just let me out on a long leash. I felt like I was spinning out of orbit for a while.”

“Sometimes we need to do that so we can find a better orbit.”

“Maybe. Wait a second. You broke your silence at the restaurant.”

“That was different. My vow was to not try to woo you back to me. There was nothing in the contract that said I couldn’t give you grief because you were eyeballing other girls. I have to admit I was hurt by your actions, and I did a little lashing out in frustration.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t trying to make you jealous on purpose. Well, not enough to turn your skin green anyway.”

Lisa shook her finger at him like a scolding mother. “Anyway, back to my vow of silence, you can imagine how hard it was for a girl like me to keep my mouth shut. I found the only thing I could to keep my sanity was release you into the Lord’s hands.”

“You too? I did the same thing!”

“Great minds....”

The two finished the sentence in unison. “Don’t go to Southern State Teachers College.”

They both laughed.

Lisa ran her fingers through her hair. “Remember that beautiful poster we saw that said something like ‘if you love something, let it go free; if it comes back, it really was yours’?”

“Kinda.”

“I guess that’s what I was doing.”

The silence that ensued made them both uncomfortable.

They both spoke at the same time, and they both stopped and laughed nervously.

“Ladies first.”

“I was just wondering...no, I better not say it.”

“What? What? Were you just wondering if I still have the engagement ring?”

“Funny you should mention that.”

“Did you want me to slip it on your finger by any chance?”

“Bambi, I think we have a problem.”

“Now what?”

“We’re standing on the basketball court and there is a group of players running out here that I think would like to warm up before their big game.”

“Would you like to carry me off. Lisa?”

“I’d love to, but my mom always tells me I have to let my man

stand on his own two feet and just support him.”

He held out his arm. “In that case, start supporting.”

With Lisa’s help, Bambi managed to limp off the playing surface.

“Seems like we dodged some players, and you dodged a question,” Bambi said.

Lisa put on her village idiot face. “Question. Did you ask me a question?”

“You know, if I should happen to lose control and tickle you to death, I think the judge might accept a self-defense plea here.”

“OK. No more playing. I doubt your tickling me in itself would cause my death, but the embarrassment of you doing it in public might. Do I want the ring? You know, sir, I could stand on propriety here and demand that if you wish me to wear your ring, that you propose all over again.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“Wait. There’s still the issue that started this whole frost at the equator situation in the first place. Are you willing to have a husband who’s Catholic?”

“If his heart is totally devoted to God and not the church, I could live with that.”

“It’s kind of hard to separate those two – it seems to me.”

“Probably.” The smile vanished from her face.

“So you might be interested to hear that I made the decision to worship wherever you want almost a week ago. Unfortunately, I couldn’t pass that information along since you were avoiding me like a skunk with rabies.”

“Bambi. That’s wonderful news!” Her smile broke through the clouds and caused Bambi’s face to light up with the reflection.

“That you avoided me like a rabid skunk?”

She laughed. “No, The other part.”

“So if God was telling you to be silent, why didn’t he tell you I was ready?”

“Because you weren’t. Just deciding to tag along with me to church wasn’t enough. He needed to have you put him on the throne and not me. Make sense?”

Bambi nodded. “It wouldn’t have a week ago. Now it does.”

“And for that reason, I don’t require you to propose again. Maybe it’s my turn to step out on the limb. Mr. Masterson, I’d be honored to be your wife, should you choose to slip that diamond on my finger.”

“Are you proposing to me?”

"If you like to put it into those terms, sure."

"Can I think about it?" he asked.

A hurt look came over her face. "Yeah. I suppose."

"Thank you." He put his finger on his forehead like the scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz*. Two seconds later he said, "That's enough thinking. I can't slide the ring onto your finger."

"You can't? You mean you don't want to?"

"I said I can't, and that's what I meant. The ring is back in South Dakota, and we're in Kansas City. You'll have to wait until we get home, future Mrs. Masterson."

She threw her arms around him, almost knocking him down. He yelped in pain. "Oh, Bambi. Sorry! I forgot about your ankle."

"I wish I could. Anyway, it seems to me that my basketball career didn't end with the Northwestern fiasco. I'm still in uniform. My career ended with you draped around my neck begging for an engagement ring. I did manage to go out a winner."

"Begging? Maybe the final horn hasn't sounded yet." A stern look on her face froze his blood.

Seconds later she thawed it and allowed Bambi's circulation to return to normal as the smile broke out again. "I'm just getting you back for that 'I can't give you the ring' remark. Now you know how it feels to be on the receiving end of a painful practical joke."

"You got that right. I thought my heart was coming up into my throat."

"I wouldn't want that." She pressed in close to him and carefully pressed her lips to his. "Is it back in the right place now?"

"Definitely!"

"I hate to shoo you away so soon, but you need to get into the locker room and change. They might have the police putting out an APB on you. At some point they're going to lock the locker room, and you'll be stuck sitting around in your uni."

"You're right. I totally lost track of where I was. All I was thinking about was you."

"I'll give you just eighty years to stop that," Lisa said.

"You want to live to be a hundred?"

"Only if you're with me."

"Sounds like a worthy goal."

"I'm going to stand right here and wait for you. We can watch the other game together. OK?"

"You know what they say about wild horses. By the way, what did Lulu say to you?"

Lisa laughed. "Does a girl have to reveal all her secrets when she accepts that ring?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"OK. She told me that I would be crazy if I let you get away from me."

"Wow. That girl was smarter than I gave her credit for."

"Can we talk about something besides other girls?" Lisa asked.

"For example?"

"When we're going to get married?"

"Put a bookmark in that topic. I need to get dressed, and then we'll discuss marriage plans. OK?"

"KO."

Bambi hobbled to the locker room, and twenty minutes later he returned. Lisa had her back turned to him so he was able to sneak up on her and brush the back of her neck gently with his lips, startling her in the process.

After she came back to Earth, she put a hand over her heart. "You turkey! You know I'm going to get you back for that."

"I know." He turned his back and exposed his neck. "Go for it."

"That's not exactly what I had in mind for payback. But as long as the opportunity has presented itself, I guess I should take advantage." She nuzzled him with her lips.

"I'm gonna give you just sixty years to quit that."

"Speaking of sixty years of marriage."

"Oh. That's right. We have an unfinished conversation, don't we?"

"You bet your sweet bippee," Lisa answered.

"So the million-dollar question is when will we hold the wedding. In the fall when I start working, maybe. What do you want?"

"I've decided I'd really like to have the wedding in May before all of our classmates scatter to the four winds."

"That's makes sense. But if we get married in May, where will we live for the next three months? We won't have any money saved up or any income. Financially, we're not ready for marriage."

"My parents would probably let us live with them for a short time."

Bambi pulled his neck away and turned to face her. "Isn't that kind of weird?"

"I've been doing it my whole life."

"That's different, Lisa. You're their daughter."

"I see. So it'll only be weird for you to live with my parents?"

"Uhh...One out of two ain't good in this situation."

"How about if we lived with your parents?"

"Wouldn't that be strange for you?"

"Yeah, but I could gut it out. You know what John Wayne says about pilgrims."

Bambi nodded. "Sometime a pilgrim's gotta do what a pilgrim's gotta do,"

"That the one."

"Who am I to doubt John Wayne? Trouble is, I'd feel weird living at my house too. I was hoping for more privacy if you know what I mean."

"I do. Me too, but you don't always get what you want in life."

"Ain't that the truth!"

"There is another possibility, Bambi."

"I'm all ears."

"OK, Dumbo, there is a possibility we could get a loan."

"What bank is going to give us a loan to rent an apartment? They give people money to buy stuff which they can repossess later if the payments aren't made."

"I understand that. I didn't fall off a produce wagon, you know," Lisa said.

"Yes, dear, my almost-a-college-graduate sweetheart – definitely not to be confused with a turnip."

"Remember that. Anyway, I wasn't talking about the bank. My parents would probably loan us enough money to get us through until the paychecks start coming in. We can start paying them back right away."

"I hate owing people money."

"I know. But would you rather not owe money or enjoy some honey?" She made a provocative movement with her lips.

"Hmmm. Now that you put it that way, my reservations against incurring personal debt are fading into oblivion. Honeycomb, won't you be my baby?"

"I'll hit up my dad as soon as we get home."

Bambi slapped himself on the side of the head. "I almost forgot to tell you. Before we left for the tournament, I tossed a couple of job applications into the mail."

"That's exciting! Where to?"

"Lennox and Egan."

"Both pretty close to home."

"Exactly," said Bambi.

"Hopefully you'll land something soon. Aren't we going to go watch the other basketball game?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not really interested. I'd rather talk to

you.” He leaned over and gave her a passionate kiss.

When he came up for air, she said, “I thought you wanted to talk?”

“There’s more than one way to communicate.”

“In that case, let me try that again, big boy.”

Bambi bent over again, trying not to trigger pain in his ankle. He was right in the middle of a long kiss when he heard someone clearing their throat behind him. Quickly he retracted his lips, and turned to see who was interrupting his conversation.

Corky stood grinning like a Jack-o’-Lantern. “I see you’ve reached the kissing point. Can I assume you already took care of the making-up part?”

“Oh, yeah. How’d you like to be the best man at my wedding?”

Corky’s teeth flashed again. “Really? There was never any doubt about that. If I show up for your wedding, I’ll be the best man there.”

“Thumper.” Bambi bit his lower lip to suppress a smile.

“What?”

“Thumper. If you can’t say something nice, don’t say nothin’ at all. I’m holding my tongue on that one. By the way, where’s Lulu?”

“In the gym. She sent me out to get some popcorn.”

“Is she eating out of your hand yet?”

“I’m workin’ on it. Maybe we’ll get married before you do.”

Chapter 6

A week after the basketball tournament, Bambi called Lisa.

"What's up, handsome?"

He tried to keep his excitement from leaking out. "I got a phone call this afternoon."

"Anybody I know?"

"Nope. Me neither – yet. It was from the superintendent of schools at Egan. He wants to interview me."

"That's wonderful, Bambi! When?"

"Friday afternoon."

"Wow. That soon, huh? What would your duties be?"

"I'd teach history and government and be the head coach for girls' basketball, boy's basketball coach for junior high, and girls' track coach for high school."

"Wow. You'd have a full plate. I'm sure the girls would enjoy having a handsome young coach."

"Are you worried?"

"Not about you and me. I'm a little worried about the girls developing crushes on you."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"Not so much my own. I've had friends who had crushes on teachers."

"They survived it, didn't they? Grew out of them no doubt."

"I guess so. Maybe, I'm just a worrywart."

"Well, stop worrying. Besides, I don't even have the job yet. Don't enumerate your progeny before the complete process of incubation has been fully realized."

"All right, I won't count those chickens until they hatch. That would be cool if you got it though. Egan is close enough that we could drive home for the weekends."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Lisa."

"Why not?"

"If we want people to accept us as part of their community, we need to be involved in their lives beyond the school. We should go to church there and socialize with people. I'd like to open the gym up on Saturdays for the kids to play, especially the younger ones."

"But we'll be able to come home and see my parents quite

often, won't we?"

"Time-out, Lisa. We don't need to cross this bridge unless we actually take this road. Let's not get all bent out of shape over possibilities. Make sense?"

"Yeah. You're right. I need to have trust in you, and more importantly, trust in God. He'll take care of us."

"That's the girl I came to know and love. Hey, I have an idea."

"Am I going to like it?"

"I don't know. What do you think about riding over to my interview with me?"

"That's not a smart thing to do. They might think you're scared to do it alone or something."

"Maybe. I wasn't suggesting you went to the interview with me. Just ride along and you can check out the town while I'm talking. That way you'll know almost as soon as I do how things went, and you can decide if you'd like living there."

"I like that part. Luckily I don't have any classes Friday afternoons so I don't have to cut anything. Count me in."

Bambi smiled. "Super! You'll make the drive much more enjoyable."

"I'm glad I'm good for something. Just make sure you keep your hands on the steering wheel and your eyes on the road."

* * *

On Friday afternoon Lisa and Bambi drove into Egan shortly before the interview time. They had no trouble finding the school. They sat in the parking lot for a few minutes, and Lisa prayed a blessing over Bambi.

"Thanks, Lisa. I don't know if that'll help me get the job or not, but it helped remove some of the butterflies in my stomach."

"You're more than welcome. I don't know how long your interview will last, but I can see clearly that it's not going to take very long to see this whole community. I could probably knock on every door in town and still get back here before you finish."

"Yeah. It's smaller than I thought. Maybe you could stop at that restaurant and have some pie or something. Those small town cafés are great places to meet people."

"Why do I want to meet people before you get the job?"

"I'd like you to try to find out more about the place for me. What's the attitude of the people toward the school, the staff, and the athletics program? Maybe I won't want to teach here if you find this isn't a positive place to be."

"So I'm supposed to be your spy?"

"Think of it as being my scout."

"Do I get a merit badge for this?" she asked.

"No. I'll give you a big kiss though."

"In that case, I want payment in advance."

"You drive a hard bargain, but...OK."

Bambi pulled her into his arms and coupled his lips with hers. When he finally released her, she said, "That'll work for the down payment. I'll collect the rest later."

"Deal! And thanks for removing the last of the butterflies."

He got out of the car, and Lisa walked around to the driver's door.

"Good luck, Tiger. Or should I say God luck?"

"How about both. Be back here by four. I don't think it should take much longer than that."

"What if it takes less time than that?" Lisa asked.

"I'll walk over to the café and find you."

"Gotcha."

Bambi watched her drive away and then eyeballed the school. *Well, Lord. Here we go. I'd appreciate your help on this one, if it be your will that I work here.*

Forty-five minutes later, Lisa was surprised to look up and see Bambi standing over her at the restaurant. "That was fast! Does that mean they didn't like you?"

"They didn't like me." He watched her smile morph into a frown, causing him to laugh. "They loved me. Come on, let's go and I'll tell you all about it."

Lisa paid for her snack, and the two got back into Bambi's car.

"Lisa, they asked me to sign a contract right there."

"You're kidding?"

"No."

"Did you?"

"No!" he said.

"Why not?"

"No!"

Lisa punched his arm. "Earth to Mr. Broken Record. Why didn't you sign on the dotted line?"

"I want some time to think. It's dumb to make life-changing decisions without sleeping on them first. Also, I wanted to get your feedback about the town before I made the leap. What do you have to report?"

"Not much. This town doesn't have a lot going for it. Everyone goes to Flandreau, Madison, Brookings, Sioux Falls, or Pipestone, Minnesota for entertainment."

"I'm not so worried about the entertainment factor. My plans

are for you to entertain me.”

“In what way?”

“Use your imagination.”

“Ahh. You want me to play the piano for you.”

“Close, but no cigar. Let’s head on home. I can give you some clues on the way. I almost forgot. Did you ask about housing?”

Lisa nodded. “I did. They don’t have any apartment buildings in town. The only thing for rent right now is a basement of a house.”

“And someone lives in the top part of the house?”

“Exactly. The good news is that it’s only eighty bucks a month.”

“That’s not bad. Not even a thousand dollars a year. I’d get paid about seventy-five hundred with the coaching assignments.”

Lisa twirled her hair. “I’d suggest we look at it before we get excited. I wouldn’t want to live in a basement like the one in our house.”

“You’ve got a point there. Let’s see if we can check it out. If we can’t find suitable housing here, maybe that’s a factor that leads to me turn this one down,” Bambi said.

They got directions from a waitress to the house in question. After seeing the building and talking to the owner, they returned to their car and started the journey home.

“I could live there,” Lisa said.

“It’s not my dream home, but living anywhere with you will be better than living in a palace without you.”

“Why, Mr. Masterson. I do believe you’re starting to like me.”

* * *

After dinner that night, Bambi went over to Lisa’s to pick her up for a movie.

He sat on the couch, Lisa sat down next to him and leaned against his shoulder. “You’ll never guess who called today while we were at your interview.”

Bambi nodded. “You’re right, because I’m not going to try.”

“I had a call from the superintendent of schools in Milbank. They want to interview me for a teaching job.”

Bambi felt his jaw tighten up. “Wow! That’s great. Milbank’s a nice town. But, you never told me you applied there.”

“I didn’t. One of my girlfriends is from there, and she told him all about me and gave him my phone number. How awesome is that? Getting interviews for a job you don’t even apply for.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“You’re not happy, so don’t fake it.”

"It's that obvious?" Bambi asked.

"You might as well be holding a picket sign. So what am I going to do?"

"I don't know. If you accept a job up there, I certainly can't take the Egan position – unless you want to just see me on weekends."

"That's out of the question. We either both have to take jobs near the same area or one of us is going to stay at home or find a new career. This job actually pays more than you'd get at Egan, even with the extra you'd get for coaching. It's a pretty good opportunity."

"How do you know all that?"

"I called my girlfriend and she gave me all the nitty-gritty."

Bambi looked up at the ceiling and blew out a big puff of air. "I'm torn. I want you to have this shot, but I don't want to screw up my own chances."

"I know exactly what you mean. We need to remember that interviewing isn't the same as signing a contract. We can check things out and not lock ourselves into anything until we're ready."

"What if we hold off until all the jobs are filled?"

"That's a valid concern. Timing is everything, huh?"

Bambi jumped up from the couch. "Wait! Let's get the list of job openings out and see what other opportunities in that geographic area are listed right now."

"We should have thought of that right away," Lisa pointed out.

"I'm slow sometimes, but I get there eventually."

They located the last placement offering from the college.

Bambi smacked himself in the forehead. "Wait, we need to study a map first to see what towns fall in a small radius around Milbank. Let's make a list of the towns and then compare the openings to our list to see if there are matches."

"A stroke of genius. You ought to be a teacher."

"Funny. Maybe I will be someday if you get to work on the map."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

They perused the map. It didn't take long to figure out that not many communities with schools were within a comfortable driving distance of Milbank.

Bambi shook his head. "Looks like we have two desirable options: Big Stone City and Ortonville, Minnesota. What are the odds of hitting one of those two places?"

"Slim to slimmer, no doubt. But let's not guess. You take half and I'll take half. With only two towns to remember, this won't be

tough.”

Bambi pulled a couple of sheets off the staple and handed them to Lisa. “Too bad these aren’t in alphabetic order by city. We’d know in a couple of seconds.”

“You’re wasting time complaining.”

“Excuse me for breathing.”

Lisa ignored his last sentence because she was scrolling down the page. Bambi started the same process on his sheets. Lisa threw one sheet down on the table and started on a second. Bambi wasn’t far behind. He turned over the last page and began again.

Lisa threw down her last sheet. “I struck out.”

Bambi reached the end of his list and threw it down. “Me, too.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “When do they want you to interview?”

“I don’t know. They just left a message for me to call them tomorrow.”

“I say go for it. If I’m able, I’ll go with you. If they offer you the job, you can ask for lots of time to think. That would give me a chance to find something.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive – I think.”

“OK. That’s a pretty long trip. That means if we moved up there, we wouldn’t get home very often.”

Bambi shrugged. “We can’t have everything the way we want it – unless we get luckier than snot.”

“How lucky is that?”

Bambi thought about what he’d said. “Poor choice of words.”

Lisa grinned and nodded.

* * *

Three days later, Bambi and Lisa made the hundred-mile trip to Milbank. While Lisa was interviewing, Bambi drove on to Big Stone City. He stopped at the high school there. After studying the building for a few minutes and getting up the necessary courage to pay a cold call on the superintendent, he exited the car, strolled up the sidewalk and entered the office.

A young lady hastened over to see if she could be of assistance.

“I’d like to see the superintendent for a few minutes if possible?”

“What is this concerning?”

“I’m looking for a teaching job.”

“Oh! Have you applied?”

"Not yet. There were no openings here in my area of certification. I just happened to be in the neighborhood and thought I'd introduce myself. My fiancée is interviewing in Milbank right now. Bambi thought he detected some disappointment in the girl's face. *Might just be my imagination.*

"This is highly irregular. However, since you're here, we might as well try. What's your name?"

"Lance Masterson. I'm graduating from Dakota State in May."

"Hold on. Be back in a sec."

She came back in a second with a tall gentleman trailing her. The man walked up to Bambi and held out his hand.

"Are you *the* Lance Masterson who played basketball at Dakota State or are there two of them down there?"

"I have to plead guilty."

"Well, come on into my office. I have to say I was very impressed by your making it to the national semifinals."

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, Bambi walked back out to his car. *I made a very good impression but what good does it do if they don't have an opening?*

He returned to Milbank and read a book while waited for Lisa. She came out with a big smile on her face.

"Looks like things went pretty well by that look on your face."

"Yeah. It was good. They have five candidates to choose from. They'll be deciding in the next week or so. How did you do?"

"The superintendent was a fan of mine. Never hurts to have people know who you are in this game."

"Unless you're a dirtbag."

"Well, yeah. I didn't list that on my résumé so maybe it'll slip by unnoticed."

Lisa punched his arm.

* * *

Three days later, Bambi answered the phone. "Masterson residence, Bambi speaking."

"Are you sitting down?"

"Lisa? Why do you ask?"

"Cause I don't want you to fall down. Milbank called."

"Oh! And?"

"They said they really had some good candidates for that position."

"Lisa, I think they always say that."

"You're probably right. I don't think they always say, 'We want you.'"

Bambi looked up at the ceiling. "Are you kidding? Oh, my gosh! How much time are they going to give you to decide?"

"Twenty-four."

"Twenty-four days? That's great!"

"Sorry to pop your bubble. That's twenty-four hours."

"I should have been sitting down."

"Yeah. That's what I said," Lisa reminded him.

"Egan gave me a whole week."

"Maybe they didn't have some other great candidate they don't want to lose in case you turn them down. It looks like they really want you."

"Looks that way. Also looks like Milbank wants you. It's nice to be wanted – unless it gets your picture on the post office wall."

"Or 100 miles apart from your hubbie. What am I going to do?" Lisa asked.

"Give me twenty-four hours to tell you what I think. You have to make the decision yourself. I can't tell you that you shouldn't take the job."

After some small talk to get their minds on their dilemma, the pair hung up. Bambi went up to his room and grabbed the latest posting of job openings. He scanned up and down the list trying to arrive at a solution that would be mutually satisfying. There were some openings in small towns across the eastern part of the state. Many were far from their home and a long way from a community big enough to offer shopping, medical care, and other services that they had taken for granted. "God, we need your help here!" There was no answer to his appeal.

* * *

The next day when Bambi awoke, the thought of the impending decision struck him before the other worries such as an upcoming wedding and a history test that morning had a chance to bother him. "God, you know I really hate this kind of thing, don't you? If all of adult life consists of these kinds of problems, I'm gonna wish I'd stayed eighteen my whole life."

That's not much of a prayer. "Was that me thinking or did you just say that to me, Lord?" Again there was no answer. Bambi sighed. "OK. That wasn't much of a prayer. Sounded more like whining, didn't it?" He got down on his knees. After reciting the Lord's Prayer, he continued. "Father in Heaven, make smooth our path if it be your will. If not, give us the wisdom, strength, and courage to face whatever adversity comes along. Help us to make this decision. I would ask that if you lead me to tell Lisa to take this job, that you'll provide something for me. I'm afraid I'd go

crazy staying home. Besides, I really want to coach next year. Help me to say 'thy will be done, not mine.' Help me to mean it. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen."

Bambi went through the normal morning and arrived at home for lunch. He was munching on a sandwich when the phone rang. "Oh, no. Don't be Lisa yet! I'm not ready for this!" He picked up the phone and answered with an uncharacteristic, "Hello?"

A male voice on the other end said, "I'd like to speak to Lance Masterson, please."

Bambi's heart rate accelerated. "Speaking."

"This is Dr. Wold, superintendent from Big Stone City."

"Hi, Dr. Wold. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. Are you still in the market for a teaching job?"

Bambi's heart played music that could accompany the Watusi. "Yes, I am? Did you have something open up?"

"No. Not really."

"Oh, darn."

Dr. Wold laughed. "Actually I kind of pried something open. I explained to our longtime basketball coach that you were interested in teaching here. His plan was to teach one more year and then retire. He's old enough now, but he wanted to have thirty years here when he quit. After talking it over, he decided twenty-nine was just as good a number as thirty. He will step aside a year early, but only if you take the job."

"But I haven't even interviewed."

"That's true. I did speak to several of the people down in Madison who are familiar with your character and your persistence. We'd like to have some of that enthusiasm up here. You can come up here, do your official interview, and sign the contract. What do you say?"

"I say this is highly irregular."

"You're right. I've never been in this position before myself, so I'm blazing a new trail. Guys like you don't come along very often. We'd be proud to have you influencing our kids to find their future."

"You probably wouldn't believe me if I told you that this phone call was an answer to prayer."

"As a matter of fact, I would, since I'm a man of faith myself. That only confirms my decision further."

"I have one question. If I chose to live in Milbank, would that be a problem?"

"We really would prefer you to live here, so you can be a part of our community as well as the school. However, we'll take what

we can get.”

“That’s great! My fiancée is going to take a job at Milbank, so we’ll have to decide who is going to be doing the commuting and who gets to work near home.”

“I see. Whatever works the best for you. Can you come up tomorrow afternoon around two?”

Bambi thought for a minute. “Sure. I’ll be there. Thanks so much!”

As soon as Bambi hung up the phone, he dialed Lisa’s number. “Are you sitting down, Lisa?”

“Oh, no. Now what?” she said.

“I want you to take that Milbank job!”

“What? I was just about to call them and tell them I wasn’t going to be able to accept the position.”

“I thought you were supposed to talk it over with me first to find out what I decided?”

“I figured there was no sense putting you in a position feeling bad one way or the other. I was just going to bite the bullet. I’m still going to bite it. I’m not going to sacrifice your happiness for mine, Bambi.”

“Nice sentiment. However, in this case, nobody is sacrificing anything. This will not be a *Gift of the Magi* situation. Oh, wait. I take that back. Somebody will have to sacrifice.”

“You’ve got me going around in circles. Did you know you were going to make me dizzy when you called, and that’s why you suggested I sit down? What is Heaven’s name are you talking about?”

“I got a job.”

“You’re kidding! I don’t know what question to ask first. What’s the sacrifice you mentioned?”

“Somebody is going to have to drive eleven miles.”

Lisa didn’t answer for a second. “Eleven miles? Only Big Stone City is that close.”

“Bingo!”

“You didn’t even tell me they had an opening and you applied there.”

“That’s right. Because I didn’t apply. They applied to me. I’m going up there tomorrow afternoon to sign the contract. Care to come along and look for a place to live?”

“Just try to stop me from coming!”

“No thanks!”

“I’d love to talk to you forever, Mr. Basketball Coach, but we better get off the phone, so I can call Milbank. We wouldn’t want

them pulling the offer because I didn't get back to them in time – because you were whispering sweet nothings in my ear.”

“Got the hint. I'm gone. Love you!”

“Love you, too! Bye.”

* * *

The next afternoon Bambi signed on the dotted line and handed the contract to Dr. Wold. “Here you go.”

“Looks like you're all set, Lance.”

“Not quite. Now I need to find a place to live.”

“If you're not set on living in Milbank, I might be able to help there. I bought a rental house as an investment. My tenants are moving out at the end of July.”

“And school starts in August, right?”

“Affirmative.”

“That's perfect since we won't have any money coming in until September.”

“Let me call my wife. She can show it to you.”

An hour later, after checking out the rental house, Bambi and Lisa were heading back to Milbank where Lisa had an appointment to ink her own contract. They then left immediately for Madison, bubbling over because both had jobs, and they had an affordable place to live. They were ready for a wedding. Bambi's only regret was that Lisa was the one who would be stuck with the drive.

* * *

Bambi had planned his wedding to be like no other. Since all his friends and family would already be gathered at the church, he decided it was the perfect time for his baptism. With the bride standing at the back of the sanctuary and watching, the pastor of Abundant Life dipped Bambi under the surface and brought him up again. For a moment he stood there, enjoying the spirit of the moment and the appreciation of all the people who were clapping. Then he bolted for the dressing room to dry off, blow-dry his hair, and don his tuxedo.

Bambi stood looking in the mirror as he smoothed out his hair with a brush. *This is strange. Lisa is marrying a man she has never met. I just came out of the water as a new man in Christ and Lisa is stuck marrying me. The fact that the new me will be even better than the old me should help her get over the trauma. In a way I regret getting baptized today. My wedding will always have to play second fiddle to this experience.*

Corky, Donny, and Terry, a teammate from the tennis team, were the groomsmen. Two of the other college cheerleaders and

one from their high school days made up the list of attendants for the bride.

The pastor returned to put on his official wedding suit. He sidled up to Bambi and looked at him in the mirror. "I think she'll marry you even if you're having a bad hair day."

"You think?"

"We need to get back out there. I've seen weddings held up for strange reasons, but for the groom to hold up the proceedings to obtain the perfect coiffeur has never been one of them."

"OK. I don't want to spoil that perfect record. Let's do it."

The two returned to the sanctuary and stood in the spot that they had used in rehearsal. Bambi nervously surveyed the church, which was almost full. High school classmates, college classmates, friends of their families, and family members themselves filled the large room. There were several people he didn't recognize, but he knew the majority of them. All this diverse group of people had come for one reason: to see and hear him pledge himself to Lisa and vice versa. A chill went up his spine at the thought. *Some of these people will share the most important day of our lives, and then we'll never see them again.*

Music began to play, and the ushers escorted the surviving grandparents to their seats. They then returned to the lobby to reload their arms with Lisa's mother. One final trip completed the parental procession as Mr. and Mrs. Masterson took their place. Bambi looked over at his mother and winked. *Is there a word for half-laughing and half-crying? I think it would apply to my mom right now.*

He looked toward the back of the church again and saw the ring bearers, two of Lisa's young cousins, starting their magic carpet walk. Grins broke out on both sides of the church as the two youngsters struggled to stay in perfect step. Three bridesmaids made the march accompanied by Bambi's right-hand men. Corky intentionally poked Bambi with his elbow as he took his place beside him. Bambi fought off laughter as the wedding march started to play and he caught a glimpse of Lisa in all her glory. He had to remind himself to breathe. His eyes filtered out the rest of the congregation and he saw only her and his future father-in-law. *There is the man who has taken care of her during the first twenty-two years of her life. I'm the man who will take care of her for the rest of it. Lord, help me to be up to the task.*

Chapter 7

Bambi looked into the mirror as he was shaving. *Tomorrow is our six-year-and-six-month anniversary. Where did the time go?* He watched as Lisa tried to sneak up behind him, but he pretended he didn't see her. She nuzzled the back of his neck.

"Lisa. Don't get anything started. You've got to leave for school."

"Tell me something I don't know. I just thought I'd give you a little sample to help you make it through the day and make you want to come home tonight."

"There's no danger of me losing my eagerness to get back to your side – even if your pear-shaped figure has been transposed into a pineapple figure."

"I'd like to see what you'd look like with a six-month-old baby kicking against your insides."

"Use your imagination. That's the closest you're going to get to seeing that picture."

"Why does time go so slow? I'm ready to pop this baby out of the oven," Lisa said.

Bambi laughed. "Yeah. The first six years of our marriage flew by, and now the last six months are crawling. We're both ready to get started on being parents – now. You better get going. There are reports of black ice on the roads, so you need to be extremely cautious today."

"Yes, Dad. Or should I call you 'Mom'?"

"Lisa, I'm serious. At this time of the year, I regret having you teach eleven miles away. I think this will be the last year. I want you to be a stay-at-home mom when our child arrives."

"I'd love that, if we can afford to live on one income."

"It'll be tight, but we can do it. I'll get a summer job. We can talk details later. You have to get going."

"OK. Kiss me, and I'm outta here."

Bambi wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. After a gentle kiss, he released her and grabbed her jacket, which he helped her to put on. "You have a wonderful day."

"You're bossing me around again."

"Deal with it." Bambi opened the door and held it for her grand

exit. "Love you!" were his last words before he pulled the door closed again. He shivered from the blast of cold air that greeted him while playing doorman. *Now I have to get a move on or I'll be late.*

Twenty minutes later he walked out the door and tramped the four blocks to school. Not having to drive to work was an awesome blessing. Wrapped in a warm coat and marching at a pace that got his blood circulating, Bambi enjoyed the frosty hike. He regretted that he had to stop walking and go into the stuffy school with radiator heat that sometimes caused him to have to open the windows in his room.

He walked into his classroom and found the school secretary sitting on his desk reading a book.

"Good morning, Lois, to what do—"

Lois dropped the book on the desk and almost ran toward Bambi. "Lance. You need to go to Milbank! Lisa's been in an accident. The ambulance was just loading her up when Roy Brown called to leave a message for you."

"Is she OK?"

"He didn't know. He came upon the accident after they got her out of the car."

"What about my classes?"

"I'm here to cover for you till you get back."

"Thanks. I'm on my way."

Bambi struggled to don his coat again as he ran down the hallway and back into the cold air, where he increased his speed. A million thoughts and worries passed through his imagination as he sprinted home in his dress shoes to get his vehicle. *Oh, God. Please let her be all right! And the baby, too!*

Ignoring his own advice to be on the lookout for black ice, Bambi throttled the engine into a pace that matched his own heartbeat. After a mile of driving like a wild man, the thought came to him that she was in the hands of the Lord and the doctors. Getting himself killed trying to reach her side would be a nightmare. Wiping someone else out in the meantime would be a real tragedy. He forced himself to take the pressure off the accelerator and back his momentum down to the speed limit. He still covered the twelve miles to the hospital in Milbank in twelve minutes.

After parking his car, Bambi went into sprint mode once again. He almost ran into someone coming out the front door of the facility. He threw a "Sorry" over his shoulder as he kept on trucking. Despite his desire to find out as soon as possible what

the situation was, he shifted gears into a fast walk once inside the building. After what seemed to be a lifetime, he arrived at the front desk.

His words came out like bullets out of a machine gun. "My wife was in a car accident. Can I find out how she is and where she is?"

"Sir, you'll have to slow down. I can't keep up with you."

Bambi bit the finger of his glove and counted to three. He began again, keeping himself under control so he could deliver his questions at less than warp speed.

"Sir, I'm really sorry. If she's just arrived in the ambulance, she wouldn't be checked into the hospital yet. She'd go directly to the emergency room. All you can do for now is take a seat. I'll tell the staff you're here, and someone will brief you on the current conditions as soon as they're able."

Bambi nodded and turned around to find an available chair. Feeling more helpless than he ever had in his life, he walked to a vacant seat and stood over it for a few minutes before he finally placed his rear end on the cushion. He tried to pray some more, but he couldn't concentrate. After scanning through the pages of a copy of *Sports Illustrated*, he realized he was just going through the motions. His eyes had gone across the paper, but he didn't remember anything that he'd read or pictures that he'd seen. *I'm going nuts. I can't take just sitting here. I have to do something.* Visions of people pacing back and forth and jokes about wearing out the carpet played in his head. *Now I understand what propelled that seemingly perpetual motion.*

He looked up at the clock. Only fifteen minutes had elapsed since he first spoke with the receptionist. Crazy thoughts went through his head. *Maybe if I had kissed her longer or not kissed her at all, she wouldn't have had the accident.* He blew out a deep breath and looked at the clock. He sat there watching the second hand migrate from the top of the clock to the bottom and back again. Almost every minute of his life had flown by in the past, but now he knew what it was like for people who watched the clock.

The minute hand made a full revolution before a doctor came to rescue Bambi's sanity.

"Lance Masterson."

"That's me!" He jumped out of the chair and briskly walked to the man's side.

"I'm Dr. Rogers. Can you come with me, please?"

"Of course. Can you tell me how my wife is?"

"Your wife should be just fine."

"Oh, thank God!"

The doctor opened a door and gestured for Bambi to enter. The door closed ominously behind him.

"Lisa will need to stay in the hospital for a few days, but her injuries were not life threatening. However, she did suffer a puncture wound to the uterus and lost the baby."

Bambi's head sunk into his outstretched palm. "Oh, my God. Does Lisa know?"

"Not yet. I didn't want to compound the shock she's already in from the accident with the news her child didn't survive. I gave her a sedative to allow her to relax."

"So I can't talk to her for a while?"

"No. It'll probably be about three hours before she's awake again."

"So, what can I do?"

"Really nothing you can do at this point unless you want to talk to her while she's out."

"Did you want me to break the news to her?"

The doctor removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "If you think that's best. I'll leave that decision up to you."

Bambi turned and looked out the window. It was beginning to snow. His eyes returned to look into the doctor's. "I think I need to do it."

"OK. If you need anything from myself or my staff, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thanks, Dr. Rogers."

"Our sincere condolences. Several of our staff members' children have been Lisa's students. She is greatly appreciated in the community."

Bambi nodded. "We're grateful for the work you do here also."

"Speaking of work, I need to get back to another patient. I just wanted to handle this conversation myself. Lisa is in room 222 whenever you're ready to see her."

Bambi wandered out of the room and stood in the lobby for a few seconds trying to figure out which way to go. *I can't sit and watch the clock for three hours. The guys with the butterfly nets will be coming to take me away. Wait, I have a book in the car.* He returned to the parking lot and pulled a copy of *Exodus* by Leon Uris out of his trunk. *No danger of finishing this one in three hours.*

One hundred and twenty-four pages later, Lisa began to stir. Bambi put a bookmark in place, closed the book, and positioned himself over the bed so Lisa would see him as soon as she opened her eyes. He began to stroke her face very gently. A

couple of minutes later her eyes popped open.

"Bambi, where am I?"

He took one of her hands and held in between both of his. "You're in the hospital, honey. You had an accident."

"I remember now."

Bambi watched Lisa's face go through gyrations as she apparently replayed the details of the incident in her mind.

"I hit some ice, spun around, and then smacked into a tree. Oh, no! I've wrecked my Pinto."

"It's OK, Lisa. Cars are easy to replace. Wives, especially one as special as you, aren't."

"How badly am I hurt? Everything's OK with the baby, right?"

Bambi choked up a little, making it hard to speak. He groped for the right words. *Maybe I should have prewritten this speech. It didn't seem like it would be such a hard thing to do three hours ago.*

"Bambi, talk to me!"

"Lisa, I'm trying." He removed one of his hands from the hand sandwich he had formed and pressed it against his forehead. "If you weren't injured, I'd smother you with a hug right now. Just feel hugged in your interior, please."

"Something bad happened?"

"Yeah. The baby isn't all right. You lost it."

The tears that hadn't made their way out earlier now flowed like a stream during spring thaw. Bambi placed his cheek next to Lisa and the two of them poured out their liquid emotion together.

After the crying session came to a halt, Bambi wiped her face with a tissue.

As he was wiping his own, Lisa said, "There must be a reason for this. All things work to the good of him who loves God and is called according to his purpose."

What good can come from the loss of a baby? "Yeah, sure, Lisa."

"You don't sound convinced."

"Frankly, I'm having a little difficulty right now."

"I understand that, Bambi, because I am too. But right now we need our faith more than ever. After all, we still have each other and can still have lots more babies in our future."

"Right."

Visions of the nursery they had already furnished haunted him. *I've got to do something about that room. I don't want Lisa dissolving into tears every time she walks by it.*

"Shouldn't you get back to school?"

"And leave you?"

"I'll be fine. It was great having you show up, but I don't need a babysitter. And you need to be there for basketball practice in a few hours."

"Gosh. I forgot all about the team. I should be there for that. It won't be long till tournament time, and we still have a long ways to go to challenge for a district title."

"Then go and don't worry about me."

"I'll be back tonight after practice."

"That sounds good. I'll get rested up this afternoon so I'm an enthusiastic hostess. Maybe I'll take a peek at some soap opera action."

Bambi rolled his eyes but held the caustic comment that jumped to the end of his tongue. He kissed her on the forehead. "Love you, Lisa."

"Love you back, Bambi. Drive carefully."

* * *

After basketball practice, Bambi made the trek back to the hospital. His mind focused on the future as he drove. *I think it's time to make a career move.*

Immediately after kissing Lisa and finding that she was doing all right, Bambi launched into the explanation of his ideas. "I think it's time for me to find something that pays a bit more."

"More than visiting a hospital?"

"No, silly, more than my teaching job. With the pathetic wages we get paid here in South Dakota, we'll always be just getting by. I'd like you to be in a position to spend more time at home as well."

"To watch soap operas?"

"If that's what floats your boat. Creating culinary concoctions suitable for a king is also an option."

"Ahh. I see a glimmer here. You're hoping I turn into Betty Crocker."

"That would be better than Betty from the Flintstones."

Lisa shook her head. "So, are you thinking of moving to a state where the teacher salaries are higher?"

"Negatory. I'm thinking about a new career."

Lisa frowned. "What can you do besides teach?"

"Nothing right now. I've been thinking that I could go back to school and get a degree in computer programming. Dakota State is now a computer-oriented school, you know."

"Yeah, I know. But you don't know anything about computers."

Bambi nodded. "Not yet. Some of those people make over fifty

thousand dollars a year.”

Lisa blinked. “That’s double what the two of us make together.”

“Now maybe you understand why this move appeals to me.”

“That would be really great, if I had....” She broke into tears.

Bambi wrapped his arms around her. “I’m sorry, honey. I shouldn’t even bring this topic up until you’re home and this nightmare is behind us.”

When the tears stopped flowing, Lisa wiped her face. “I’m not sure this will ever be behind us. The doctor said that I suffered some damage that might make it hard for me to have a child in the future.”

“Oh, my Heavens! That changes the complexion of this problem.” Bambi stood up and paced around the room. “I don’t want you to be sitting at home bored and feeling unfilled. I don’t want you driving a long distance to work every day either.”

“We’re on the same page there. That drive was getting a little grueling. I’d be content with substitute teaching. Then I wouldn’t have the preparation time and have to be at school every day, but I’d still get enough stimulating interaction with others. Also, my stay in the hospital has triggered in me a yearning to maybe become a nurse so I can feel I’m helping people every day.”

“Really?”

Lisa nodded. “And I’d make more money as well. I’d have to go to nursing school first, and that will have to wait until you get switched over into your new career.”

“Wow. That’s quite a switch for you too.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I don’t know. It’s a bit of a shock to me. I guess you must have felt the same way about my change.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess the key factor here is God’s will. What does he want us to do?” Bambi asked.

“Good point. Prayer is required on that one.”

“The strange thing is, now that I’m in a position to actually do something about this idea, my feet are getting cold.”

“That might be from not wearing overshoes.”

Bambi shook his head. “I haven’t worn overshoes since I was a kid. I meant I’m getting a little scared of actually going out on a limb.”

“Since when is Lance Masterson afraid to take on a challenge? Just one more mountain for you to climb.”

Bambi gazed into her eyes. “What would I do without you?”

"I don't know, and I hope you don't find out anytime soon."

Bambi bent down and kissed her forehead. "Not half as much as I hope and pray you and I are together until the end of time."

Chapter 8

Bambi dressed quietly and started to exit the bedroom.

"Aren't you going to give me a kiss goodbye?"

"Lisa, I thought you were sleeping."

"You thought wrong, obviously. Give me a smooch, please."

"Don't have to ask me twice." He complied with her wishes and then gave her another one for the road. "By the way, I'll be late tonight."

"Again?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry. We have a rush project to get done. I've got to do the overtime thing."

"I wish you got paid for working more than forty hours. You work a lot more hours than you did as a teacher."

"Yeah. I've noticed. It comes with the territory. Can you believe it's been almost seven years since we made the decision for me to take this path?"

"I was thinking about that the other day – when you were late getting home. I do quite a bit of thinking when I get left home alone."

"Do you regret letting me make the change?"

"Bambi, it's too late to take it back. Why agonize about milk already over the dam?"

"I could always go back to teaching. And I'd love to sit around and discuss how milk goes over the dam, but I gotta run. Take care."

"I'll have to. I'm not feeling good today."

"Sorry about that, honey."

"It's not your fault. Bye."

Lisa lay in bed and listened to the front door shut. A wave of nausea washed over her. "God, I'm glad I don't have to teach today."

* * *

Lisa was sleeping when Bambi got home from work. The next morning she appeared to be sleeping still. He started out of the room.

"Trying to sneak out without paying your bill again, huh?"

"Doggone it, Lisa. You scared me. I thought you were

zonked.”

“I was. Woke up just in time to catch you trying to avoid me again.”

“You know darn well I wasn’t doing anything of the kind. How are you feeling today?”

“I’m urpy again.”

“Touch of the flu?”

“I don’t know. There are no other symptoms.”

“Maybe you should go to the doctor.”

“Over a little bit of nausea?” she asked.

“Yeah. There are a lot of serious things that start out with nausea. Remember, we have health insurance, so you have no excuse not to go.”

“Bambi, I’m fine. I—”

“Lisa, please!” He looked at her with that look that always got what he wanted.

“Fine. I’ll go to the doctor. Remember this the next time you’re under the weather, and I ask you to visit the doc.”

“All right. You have permission to nag me when the time comes – if it does. You know I never get sick.”

“Hardly ever. That’s true. It’s just that when you are sick, you’re such a big baby it seems like it happens more often than it does.”

“Oh, brother. I’d better get out of here before I get sick to my stomach.” He gave her a big kiss and headed for the office.

* * *

“How long you been having these spells of nausea?” the doctor asked.

“About three days I guess.”

“Any dizziness or body aches?”

Lisa thought for a moment and shook her head.

“When was your last period?”

“I just had one around Halloween I guess.”

Dr. Burnett’s face contorted, rearranging his wrinkles. “Lisa, it’s approaching Christmas! That was over six weeks ago.”

Lisa’s hands flew up to her head. “Oh, my gosh!”

“I’d like to give you a pregnancy test.”

Lisa rolled her eyes. “Should I study for it?”

The doctor grinned. “You’re a bright girl. I think you can wing it.”

“I hope you know I’ve been trying to get pregnant for seven years.”

“I can’t quite remember the lyrics, but if you whistle the

melody I might be able to chime in,” the doctor joked.

Lisa shook her head. “You must be related to my husband.”

“Maybe. I’ll have to check my genealogy. Now we’re going to check your hormonal status.”

After Lisa was through, the doctor escorted her to the waiting room.

“How soon till you know, Doc?”

“Someone will give you a call this afternoon or tomorrow.”

“I still can’t believe this might be happening. I’d almost given up on the dream of having children.”

“You are approaching the age when it gets a bit harder.”

“Thanks for that reminder, Doc.”

“Sorry.”

She patted his hand. “No need to be. I was just joking around. I inherited the habit from my husband. Oh, wow. Speaking of my husband, he has no clue what’s going on. I’m going home and sit by the phone. He’d be so jazzed if we were going to have a baby.”

* * *

Lisa didn’t receive a phone call that afternoon, so she busied herself with getting dinner for Bambi.

He walked in the door and gave her the customary greeting kiss. “How you feeling, honey?”

“Fine.”

“Did you get into see the doctor?”

“Yeah.”

“What did he find?”

“Nothing – yet.”

“Are you going back?”

“I don’t know.”

Bambi rubbed the back of his neck. “Now I know how dentists feel?”

“What?”

“When they’re pulling teeth. And women accuse men of being close-mouthed. You’re acting like the president of the Marcel Marceau fan club.”

Lisa deadpanned and started moving her hands like a mime. The phone interrupted her act and she sprinted to it, getting there just ahead of Bambi.

“Hello!”

“Lisa?”

“Yes.”

“This is Dr. Burnett. We got your test results back. You passed.”

Lisa's face flashed a bright crimson. "Doc, what does that mean? Passing for one person is failing for another."

"I know that. Since you are anxious to have a baby, passing means you came up positive."

Lisa squealed and jumped into the air. Bambi eyeballed her from the stove where he was sampling from the bubbling pot.

"Thank you so much, doctor."

"My pleasure. I delayed the news just so I could personally have the thrill of passing this info along to you. Just a reminder to cut down on the alcohol consumption."

"Doc, I've never had a drink in my whole life."

"Good for you. Your baby will thank you for it. I'll want to see you again in a few weeks, so please call the office and make an appointment."

"You're on, Doc. Thanks again."

She hung up the phone and turned to Bambi. She bit her lip to try to suppress an impish grin spreading across her face.

Finally he threw his hands up in the air. "What was that all about?"

"Wrong number."

"What?" Bambi stormed over to the desk that the phone called home. A finger poke in the fleshy part of her side started the action, and soon he was tickling her all over her body. She collapsed in a heap on the floor and giggled like a teenager.

"Now, are you going to divulge all of that top-secret information you just obtained?" He continued the tickling attack while he waited for the response.

Lisa was almost out of breath. "Bambi, enough, you might hurt the baby."

Bambi's hand froze in midair. He slapped the side of his head a couple of times. "Sorry, that's my trick ear. I thought you said the word 'baby'."

"You don't have a trick ear, George Bailey. I did say it."

Bambi jumped to his feet. "What's the mother of my future child doing lying on a hard linoleum floor?" He gently helped her to her feet and then gave her a gentle hug.

"Bambi. I think both the baby and I can survive a more satisfying hug than that. Pretend I'm a roll of Charmin."

He tightened his grip. "Tell me when."

"When!"

Bambi grinned. "Speaking of Marcel Marceau, we're going to have our own little mime."

Lisa loosened herself from his grasp. "What do you mean?"

"Matthew Isaac Masterson. M-I-M, get it? Mime."

"There's no 'e' on the end so the pronunciation would rhyme with 'him'."

"I swear you love to spoil my fun."

Lisa grinned. "It's tough work, but somebody's got to do it. Besides, how do you know it will be a boy?"

"It better be. I've been waiting for a son to follow in his old man's basketball shoe prints for a long time."

"Ah, yes. A chance to bring the Bulldog Compact back to life again."

A look of wistfulness came over Bambi's face. "I hadn't thought of that, but you're right. The Dogs of Victory will be ready to run again."

* * *

Eight months later, Bambi dreamt he was being slugged in the back. A second blow caused him to enter the world of semi-consciousness, where he realized he had just received a real blow in the fleshy part of his side.

"Bambi, wake up! I think my water broke."

"Call a plumber." He scooted toward the side of the bed to get out of range.

"Bambi! That means I think I'm going into labor!"

He looked over at the clock. The red digits told him it was two a.m.

"Can't these babies be trained to arrive at a convenient hour? Tell you what, I'll go back to sleep and when you're sure that you've started labor pains, let me know, but please don't use your fists to wake me up again."

"You didn't respond to my voice," Lisa pointed out.

"I was in la-la land. I doubt I'll go that deep again tonight."

"You got that right. I'm not going to – Ouch! That hurt."

"Remember what they told us in our birthing class. False labor pains are very common."

Lisa frowned at him. "If that's a false pain, I don't want any of the real ones."

Bambi rolled over and looked at her. "Honey, the pain is real, it's just the labor that's false."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know. I'm just saying it could be. Maybe your labor has really started, but we need another pain to judge the time between them. OK?"

She nodded.

Bambi was just about asleep again when Lisa yelled out,

“Ouch!”

He opened one eye and looked at the clock.

“That’s ten minutes, Bambi!”

“Yeah, I picked up on that. You might be further along than I thought.”

“Thanks for noticing.”

Bambi looked up at the ceiling. “It doesn’t look like I’m going to get any sleep tonight.”

“I’ll guarantee you I won’t keep you awake with my snoring.”

“You know, I need to do the backups on the computers at the office. I think I better go down and do that now, so when you’re ready to go to the hospital my responsibilities are all taken care of.”

“How long will that take?”

“About an hour and a half.”

“I don’t know if I can hold out that long.”

“Lisa, it’s not like you’re delaying the arrival of the baby by holding back, like it’s a sneeze or something. You’ll be fine.”

“I better be. If anything happens to this baby...”

“I know, Lisa. I won’t let anything happen.”

“Fine. Go do your backups and then get back up by my side.”

“On my way.”

* * *

Bambi reached the office and pulled the removable disks used for backups out of the closet. He inserted the first two and started the programs running that copied the vital data. After making sure that all was well, he opened up the code for a project he was working on. His mind was just focusing in on a problem area when the phone rang.

“Bambi. I’m ready to go to the hospital. Now!”

He looked at the two disks that still needed to be inserted and shook his head. “OK. On my way!”

After firing off a quick email to a coworker explaining what needed to be done with the backups and announcing his absence, Bambi retraced the route he had taken to get to the office, at almost double the speed. Without turning off the car, he flung his door open, ran around to the passenger side and ripped that door open as well. He sprinted up to the house and almost ran into Lisa, who was coming out to meet him. He grabbed the suitcase out of her hand and led her down the steps and sidewalk to the open door. A fierce pain hit her just as he was trying to get her seated. After it subsided, she managed to wedge her swollen body into the small seat and Bambi closed the door. He sprinted

around to his door and had the car backing out of the driveway before the door got shut.

"Fasten your seatbelt, Bambi. And take it a little bit easy. We certainly don't want to be in an accident now."

The painful memory of several years earlier caused Bambi to ease up on the accelerator. Traffic was light at such an early hour, and they made it to the hospital without complications. After Lisa was admitted, Bambi waited in a hallway, pacing up and down.

One of the nurses walked up to him, "You can get ready and go in with her now." She handed him a mask, some disposable foot covers, and a paper cap. "Here you go. When you get those on, follow me."

"How you doing, Dad?" the doctor asked when Bambi entered.

"I'm doing fine. Haven't had a single pain yet."

Lisa groaned. "I've had enough for both of us."

Bambi took one of her hands in his. "So, how are you doing, Doc?"

"We have a little problem. The heart rate of the baby is dropping. We can't afford to wait for a natural birth. We're going to have to operate."

Bambi looked down at Lisa. She was already under the influence of the anesthesia used to permit the C-section but yet still conscious. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

Oh, God. Please let everything go all right.

For the next fifteen minutes Bambi tried to keep his imagination from visualizing what was going at the foot of the bed. The idea of cold steel slicing across the skin of his beloved wife like a frog in biology class was too much for him to even contemplate. He kept his eyes focused on Lisa's eyes.

The doctor cleared his throat. "Mr. Masterson. If you'd care to look this way for a minute, you can check out your new daughter."

Bambi looked up in surprise and beheld a bundle of skin and dark hair. The sight of blood caused him to turn away again, and the nurse took the baby away to clean her up.

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Masterson," the nurse assisting in the operation said.

Daughter? Daughter! That meant this was a girl. He looked down at Lisa.

"I'm sorry, Bambi."

"What do you mean? Everything came out all right."

"You didn't get your little Matthew Isaac. The good news is that Madison has a girls' basketball team now. She can still be a

player.”

Bambi blinked. “Yeah. The girls’ team has never been to state. If that’s still true when Matthew...oh...We have to find a new name. Mattie?”

“I never mentioned it because I know how much you wanted a boy, but I had a name already chosen, one that allows you to get your little mime.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Well, are you keeping it a secret?”

“How does Maria Isabella Masterson sound to you?”

“Very Spanish. I like it! A name fit for a princess. What else would I expect from such a regal mother?”

“I’m not feeling very regal right now. I feel like we’ve been on a weeklong campout without a shower.”

“It’s only been a few hours.”

“Remember that marathon you ran, Bambi? You said it felt like you were running for a week. It took you under four hours.”

“I see your point. Maybe the nurse can lend you a comb so you can smooth it out.”

The nurse returned with Maria Isabella wrapped in a blanket. The red badge of courage that had adorned her newborn skin was conspicuous by its absence. Bambi looked down in amazement at the little human being that he and Lisa had created together.

“Would you like to hold her?”

Bambi’s mouth dropped open. *Hold a baby? I have to be careful. They have a soft spot and I have to support their neck and who knows what else.* “I’m a little afraid.”

The nurse smiled. “She hasn’t teethed yet so there’s no danger of her biting you.”

“I know, I just don’t want to, you know, hurt her.”

“Let me show you.” The nurse demonstrated the proper way to hold a newborn. “Now are you ready?”

Bambi swallowed hard and nodded. He reached out his arms, and the nurse laid the bundle of joy into his waiting hands. He gazed for a moment at the little girl who already looked like a miniature replica of Lisa.

Lisa cleared her throat. “Do you mind letting me get a good view?”

“Oh, honey. I’m so sorry. I totally spaced.” He turned and leaned close to Lisa so she could brush the baby’s face with her fingers and stroke Maria’s little arm. “Nice little fingers. I think she’ll be a good dribbler.”

“I hope you’re talking about basketball, Bambi, and not eating habits.”

Chapter 9

One year later Bambi and Lisa held a small cake with a solitary burning candle toward Maria.

"Blow it out, sweetie," Lisa pleaded.

Maria reached her hand quickly toward the flickering flame. Lisa pulled the cake back just in time. "I guess she's not ready for the tradition of blowing out the birthday candles. Watch me, honey, and next year you can do this." Lisa blew, and the flame disappeared. A baffled look came over Maria's face, causing both parents to burst into laughter.

"The pretty fire went bye-bye. Are you ready to open some presents?" Bambi asked.

Maria clapped her little hands together. "Dada."

"Lisa, did you hear that. She just said her first word."

"That was just sound."

"No, I swear. She just said dada, daddy with a bit of an accent."

"If it makes you feel happy, I'll go along with you. Her first official word was 'dada'."

"Yeah!" Bambi pumped his fist. "Come on, pumpkin, I have a big surprise for you in the living room."

He took one hand and Lisa took the other as they slowly escorted their little precious, who was still trying to perfect the art of walking, into the room where her gifts awaited.

"Walking today and on the verge of running tomorrow," Lisa said.

"I just hope she can dribble the basketball at full speed."

Lisa shook her head. "Do you ever take a vacation from your dreams?"

After showing her how to tear open the wrapping paper exposing a doll, Maria appeared anxious to practice her newfound skill of destroying pretty wrapping paper. After all the gifts but one was exposed, Bambi presented her with his pride and joy. The package was bigger than the recipient. She just stared at it.

"Come on, Maria. Tear it open. Just a couple of snip snip here and snip snip there—"

"And a couple of la de dahs," Lisa added.

"Yes. Mustn't leave out the la de dahs."

Maria pawed at the paper until a section of the paper came away exposing something orange. She stopped and gazed.

"Do you need some help here, Maria?" Bambi grabbed some of the paper and pulled. The one-year-old looked up at her daddy's face, and then swatted his arm, causing Lisa and Bambi to erupt into laughter.

"That wasn't a smart thing to do," Lisa said.

"Giving her a basketball set?"

"No, I mean laughing at her when she hits. We don't want to teach her that violence is funny."

"Oh, man. I never thought of that. We have to really be careful about what we say or do now, because she'll be watching and learning from us."

"Exactly. Just like the proverbial copycat."

The little girl pulled off some more paper until the entire plastic basketball hoop and the accompanying miniature Nerf basketball were free from the paper jail. She looked at her parents.

"Time for lesson number one," Bambi said. He set the little hoop so it stood upright against the wall. "Here's how you do it." He sent the Nerf ball through the air, and it split the cords of the net. "Nothing but net. The old man hasn't lost his touch."

He handed the ball to Maria. She studied it for a moment and then brought it up to her mouth.

"Hold on, kiddo." Bambi rescued the ball from being slimed. "First rule of playing basketball is never eat the ball. Remember that. Let's go back to the kitchen and see if you're any better at eating cake than you are at blowing out candles."

"Can you believe our daughter is one year old already?" Lisa asked.

Bambi thought back to that day in the hospital when the whole miracle had unfolded. "You know what they say about time flying. And this has been fun."

"Are you still disappointed she wasn't a boy?"

"Nah. I hardly even think about it anymore. Besides, she can fall in love with a basketball player, and I can have the best of both worlds."

* * *

A cake with two unlit candles lured the little girl to reach out to grasp.

"Ah, ah, ah! Not yet, Maria. We have to wait until Daddy gets home."

A short time later, Bambi strolled in the door. "How are the two loves of my life doing?"

"Someone has a hankering for cake."

"Besides me, you mean? Let's get it on. Do I get the honors of lighting the candles?"

"We share. Let's each do one."

"Cool. We'll share the joy." He removed a wooden match from a box and struck it against the side. Moving it carefully to keep from extinguishing the mini blaze, Bambi lit the first candle and handed the match to Lisa, who took it and lit the second candle.

"Maybe we shouldn't have lit the match in front of Maria," Bambi said.

"Too late now. Just make sure we keep this box out of her reach, or she might be doing a Nero imitation someday."

"Good idea." He turned his attention back to Maria. "Are you ready to blow these little babies out?"

"Babies."

"Yeah." He held the cake out toward Maria. She started to reach with her hand again. Lisa intercepted the arm and held it back. "No, no. Ouch. Pain."

"Ouch."

"That's right, Maria. Just blow, like this." Lisa blew into Maria's face. Her eyelids batted as the air hit, causing her parents to laugh again. The little girl didn't get it.

"OK, kiddo," Bambi said. Looks like you need a refresher course. I'll blow one out and then you do the other one." He blew on Maria's arm so she felt what he was doing and then aimed his breath at one of the candles. It winked and went out.

"Oooh," Maria gurgled.

"Now you do it. Blow."

"Blow." Maria turned back to the candle and blew. The flame bent and straightened itself out again. A puzzled frown came over Maria's face. She blew again with no luck.

"Three for a quarter, kid. One more try."

"Three!" She held up four fingers, causing more laughter. She eyeballed the problematic candle one more time and a look of determination came over her angelic countenance. She huffed and she puffed, and she blew that flame out.

"You did it, Princess!"

Maria basked in the glory of her triumph over the little yellow foe.

The trio followed the tradition of the previous year and adjourned to the living room to open presents. A gleaming pink and white plastic car in the form of a shoe soon became Maria's focus of attention.

"Shoe!" she cried out.

"That's my daughter!" Bambi said proudly.

Lisa coughed.

"Sorry. That's our daughter."

Lisa nodded and smiled. "At least she's not trying to eat this one."

Bambi lifted Maria high in the air. "Touch the ceiling!"

She reached up and slapped the plaster and then laughed. Daddy hugged her and then set her down on top of the shoe.

He tried to teach her how to move the car forward. "Honey, I'm afraid you're stuck not only with Flintstone brakes but also foot-power propulsion. It's just like walking while you're sitting down."

Maria looked up at him with a distinct look of being lost. It reminded Bambi of a look he once felt on his face in one of his college courses. "I'm talking a little over her head, aren't I?"

"Yes, Professor. Why don't you push her? She'll figure it out eventually."

"Good idea." He guided the pink vehicle around the living room doing a slalom course around other presents and wrapping paper.

"Shoe!" Maria cried out as she clung tightly to the steering wheel.

"Just look at what you have to look forward to in fourteen years, teaching your daughter to drive," Lisa said.

"Remember we share," he responded. "I'll teach her to drive to the hoop on the basketball court, and you can be the instructor with the automobile. Not to worry though, that's a long way off. You'll have time to bring your driving skills up to snuff."

Lisa punched him playfully in the arm.

* * *

A group of three-year-olds sat around the table with their parents behind them. Lisa set a cake with three burning candles in front of Maria. One of the kids across the table tried to blow them out from long range.

Maria frowned and said, "Mine!" Without further ado, she proceeded to blow out all three candles, one at a time. The ensuing applause, coupled with her success, caused a smile to grace everyone present.

"You're going to have fun keeping the boys away from that one in a few years," one of the dads said to Bambi.

"Thanks for reminding me." Bambi thought of the locker room chatter of his youth and shuddered.

A short time later Bambi broke up a squabble between Maria and Zeke, one of her friends from the toddlers group at church. The poor lad had been playing with one of Maria's new birthday gifts.

When the kids and parents had departed, Bambi had his first long father to daughter talk. He wasn't sure how much she absorbed, but he was satisfied he had done his best to teach the lesson. Lisa was pleased with his efforts.

"Lisa, I don't know if having a party for kids at this age is such a good idea. Maybe next year we could just do a grandparents thing."

"As long as my dad doesn't get an urge to play with one of her new dolls."

Bambi laughed. "I think we should risk it."

"That is perfectly fine with me. I'm exhausted after planning and hosting this little extravaganza. These birthdays seems to coming much too close together for me."

"And no doubt much too far apart for Maria."

* * *

The doorbell rang. "I'll get it!" Maria yelled, running to the door and finally getting it pulled open just as her dad arrived to help.

"Happy Birthday, Maria!" Grandma Masterson said and scooped the celebrant into her arms.

"Thanks, Grandma. My other grandma is coming today too!"

Grandpa Masterson took one of her hands. "What about me. Do you have a kiss for your grandpa?"

"Of course. Mama says love isn't love until you give it away. So I give away as much as I can, even to people that aren't my family." She laid a wet kiss on his cheek.

"How old are you today?" Grandma asked.

Maria scrunched up her face. "Come on, Grandma! I told you yesterday I was going to be four. Did you forget already?"

Everyone laughed.

The little entourage made it into the living room just as the doorbell rang again.

"I'll get it!" Maria said excitedly. Her grandmother put her back on the floor and her rapid little strides carried her quickly to door.

"She's quite the little runner," Grandpa said. "Inherited the Masterson athletic genes, looks like."

"I hope so, Dad."

After the party was over, Bambi took Maria outside. "I have one more present for you that you don't have to open."

"I like to open the gifts."

"I know, honey, but this one would have used a couple of rolls of wrapping paper."

"Is it a pony?"

"No, Maria. It's not a pony. Wrapping paper and ponies wouldn't make a good combination, would they?"

"I don't think so. I think the gift would unwrap itself."

Bambi laughed. "You stand here in the driveway and I'll be right back." He opened up the garage door and wheeled out a large basketball pole, bang board and hoop."

"That's a basketball hoop," Maria said, staring up at it. "It's way too high for me."

"Let me show you something. This one is adjustable. I can make it anywhere between seven feet and ten feet." He slid the hoop to its lowest level and then tightened the screws.

"That's still way over my head."

"Don't worry. That's the way it will be when you grow up to be tall like your mom and the basket is raised up to the top level. You'll get used to it. Hold on a second." He ran back to the garage and came back carrying two basketballs. He handed Maria the one she had received for her third birthday but had used only for kicking. Barely jumping, he slammed the larger ball through the hoop.

"That's not fair, Daddy. You're almost as tall as the basket. I'll never be able to dump it."

"Dump it? Oh, you mean dunk it?"

"Yeah."

"Don't worry, honey. There aren't a lot of guys that can dunk it, including your dad. But I can shoot the eyes out of the basket from twenty feet away."

Maria looked up and examined the hoop. She frowned.

"What's the matter, Princess?"

"I don't see any eyes in this basket. You must have already shot them out."

Bambi laughed and picked Maria up. "Touch the ceiling!" he yelled.

"Daddy, there's no ceiling out here, except for the sky. I can't touch the sky."

"You're right. What I meant was, dunk the ball now." He held her as close to the hoop as he could and she lifted her arms and dropped the ball through.

"Hooray. You dunked it! You're shooting a hundred percent."

Lisa came out of the house and joined them. Bambi threw the big ball to Lisa, and she took a shot, missing everything and going

into the neighbor's yard.

Maria dropped her ball. "I'll get it, Mommy." She ran into the grass to retrieve the wandering globe.

Bambi walked over to his wife. "I hope she only inherited your looks and not your basketball skills."

"Maybe I did that on purpose."

"What? Why would you cause our basketball to trespass on the neighbor's property?"

"So we could be alone for a second, so I could do this."

She wrapped her arms around him and gave him a big smooch. "Now, would you rather have me able to sink jump shots or kiss like that?"

"I can't have both?"

"You're impossible, I hope you know that."

Maria wedged herself between them and thrust the basketball into her mother's arms. "Here, Mommy. Try again. You really need practice."

Bambi laughed and retreated from a fake throw at his face from point-blank range. "Come here, Maria, and I'll show you how to shoot."

After several minutes, Maria was able to get the ball up high enough to hit the bang board once in a while. A few minutes later she said, "I'm tired of this. Can I go ride my trike now?"

Bambi frowned. "Sure, honey. We'll do it some more later." He swore he saw Maria's lips curl up in a scowl as she ran away to get her trike.

He stood there looking at the basket and trying to remember the first time he had held a basketball in his hand. The earliest memory he could conjure up was fifth grade where he had a coach for the first time. He remembered how high the basket had seemed to him at that age. *The game got a lot more fun as I got taller. Maybe Maria just needs to have more success to get her excited about the game.*

* * *

"Three seconds remain in the game. Masterson takes the long inbounds pass and dribbles twice. He launches a rainbow toward the basket as the horn sounds." Bambi arched the ball at the hoop, but it thudded off the rim. He stood and looked at the hoop like there was something wrong with it.

"Do you still play that silly game?"

Bambi whirled around and faced Lisa. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to realize you were back in your dream world

again. Doesn't that make-believe stuff lose its flavor on the bedpost over twenty-some years, especially when you actually lived the dream?"

"I did live it, didn't I? It seems so long ago that it almost feels like it was all a dream. Now I'm just a middle-aged bum."

"Come on, Bambi. You're still in better shape than most high school kids. You run and lift weights and play city league basketball. And you'll never be a bum. Unless you don't get in the car and get over to Grandma Nielson's to pick up Maria's new bicycle for the party today."

"I can't do that."

"What do you mean you can't?"

"Physically impossible. I already did it. The bike is hiding out in the trunk of the car. Shh! Here comes Maria."

"Hi, honey. Did you come out to play basketball with Daddy?"

"Do I have to? It's my birthday today. I thought maybe I could do what I wanted today instead of what you wanted."

Bambi looked over at Lisa. He hoped she could sense the pain he was feeling. "Sure, honey. This is your day. You choose what you want to do."

A family rode by on bicycles. Maria looked at them longingly. "I want to ride a bicycle."

"You don't know how. You're still a little young. You can ride your trike."

"My trike is getting boring. I'm five years old now, Daddy. I'm not a baby anymore. I'm going to school next week."

"Yes, you are."

"I am *not* a baby!"

"Simmer down, Princess. I meant you're going to school."

"Oh. Can I get a bike soon?"

"I don't know, Maria. Bikes are a bit dangerous. I think you'll have to wait for a little while longer."

"I hope by little while you really mean little 'cause I want one real bad. Did you have a bike when you were a kid?"

Bambi thought back to his childhood. He didn't remember the first time he held a basketball, but he vividly remembered the first real bike he owned. He was only five, and his feet barely reached the pedals. His dad had helped him get on, and then he'd ridden the bike around the block. That green machine was his companion until he started driving a car. *Whatever happened to that old bike? Did it end up at the junkyard?*

"Yes, Maria. I had a very special bike when I was a boy." He looked over at Lisa. She read the question in his mind.

"Our parents will be here in an hour or so. They want to videotape all the excitement."

Bambi nodded. "I'm sorry, Maria. You're going to have to wait a while for your special bike."

She walked off, pouting.

"I wish we didn't have to wait so late in the day for her party," Bambi said. "It's killing me to not give her the bike right now."

"I know, dear. Unfortunately, my parents couldn't make it any sooner. You have to remember that her birthday isn't just special for her."

"I know. Sorry I'm being so whiny."

"Another thing, it won't kill Maria to learn how to have patience to get the good things out of life. Kids today live in a microwave world. They need to learn how to wait for good things."

"You're preaching to the choir, Lisa. I understand this problem all too well, but that doesn't make it any easier for me to deny Maria something she wants so badly."

Lisa put her arm in his. "I know what you're saying. I'd do almost anything to keep from seeing the pout break out."

An hour later the grandparents made their appearance and the party got underway. Maria opened all of her presents. When the last one was tucked away with the rest, she sighed sadly and looked around the room. "Thanks, everyone."

"Oh. I spaced out!" Bambi cried out. "I forgot to bring the soda in from the car. Maria can you help me carry it in?"

"How much did you get?"

"Enough for a big party."

The two walked out the front door with Lisa right behind them with the video camera. While they went to the trunk, Lisa positioned herself behind them so she could get a shot of the contents of the trunk and Maria too. Bambi handed the key to Maria, and said, "Here. It's time you learned how to do this." He showed her how to turn the key.

After a couple of tries, the trunk popped open and Maria pushed the lid up before looking inside. It wasn't hard to tell when she had spied the contents. She jumped straight into the air. By that time all the grandparents had arrived at the scene to partake of the joy of a five-year-old.

"Daddy, can you take it out for me? No, wait! First let me give you a hug!"

Bambi absorbed her hug and then lifted the bike gently onto the ground. "Maria, there's one big lesson I want you to learn on your birthday today."

"What's that?"

"God is your father in Heaven."

"I already knew that!"

"I'm not done yet. And he gives his children gifts sometimes, but in his own timing. I could have given you this bike a couple of hours ago. The best time was for you to get it when all your family could enjoy it with you. So Daddy was holding back on you until the time was right. God does that too. Just because you don't get something you want in life, don't get mad at God. He knows what's best for you. It might even turn out that what you wanted was going to be trouble, so he might not let you have it in order to protect you. Does that make any sense?"

"Sounds like grown-up talk to me, Daddy."

"It is, honey. To put it simply, just trust God. Things will work out in the end."

"OK. I can understand that. Can I go for a bike ride now?"

"How about you wait until after your grandparents leave. We don't want to have the star of the party leave in the middle."

Maria nodded but with a hint of a pout developing.

"Tell you what, you better ride it down to the end of the driveway and up to the garage. We need to make sure the wheels work, so we can take it back to the store if we need to." Bambi reached into the trunk and pulled out a box.

"What's that? Another birthday gift?"

"Yep. A bike helmet. This will protect your head if you crash."

"I'm not going to crash, Daddy."

"Honey, I hate to tromp on your beliefs, but everybody crashes sometime."

"Even you, Dad?"

"Boy, I took a lot of dumps when I was a kid. Loose gravel, ice, and not paying attention all brought me down at one time or another."

"Why are the training wheels on this one?"

"Until you get used to riding with four wheels, I'm not going to let you ride with two."

"That's one more wheel than my tricycle has!"

"I can count, honey. Trust me on this. The training wheels are great for getting you started and building your confidence."

"OK. Help me get on, please."

Bambi assisted her in getting onto the seat and then walked beside her as she pedaled to the end of the driveway. He had to help her make the turn, but she motored up the driveway without a problem. Lisa got a great shot of all the action.

"Are you going to get a bike so you can go riding with me sometimes, Daddy?"

"I hadn't thought of that. What a wonderful idea. I believe I'll go out and buy bikes for both me and your mother. We can go on family rides."

Maria flashed him a big smile. "Perfect!"

* * *

"I don't like my birthday," Maria said.

"What? You don't want us to have a party today? At six years old maybe you're too old for parties?"

"Wait a minute. I said it wrong. I like my birthday and everything, but I don't like that my birthday comes in the summer. Lots of the kids bring cupcakes or cookies on their birthday, but mine comes when there's no school."

"Ahh. Now I see the problem. Perhaps we can send treats the very first school day of every year. How many of your friends are doing that?"

"None, I'm sure. That's a great idea, Mommy. We can celebrate my birthday and a new year of school at the same time."

"And all the kids in your class will love you."

"Even the boys?"

"Especially the boys. Didn't you know the way to a boy's heart is through his stomach?"

"Mom, that sounds like grown-up stuff. We didn't learn anything like that in kindergarten. And I don't want the boys to love me. They're wierd, especially Zeke."

Lisa laughed. "I forgot. When we were in kindergarten, we learned how to take naps and play together and do finger paintings. Oh yeah, and we learned the alphabet. As far as the boys are concerned, you'll change your mind when you get older."

"I knew the alphabet when I was three. When did you learn to read?"

"In first grade."

"School is probably going to be boring for me this year in that case. I already know how to read."

"Maybe you can be a teacher's helper. In that way, you can improve your skills at the same time you help others. One thing I'd really like you to remember. Your mom and dad were both teachers. You've gotten a head start on the other kids. That doesn't mean that you're better than they are. It doesn't even mean you're smarter than they are. It just means you know more now. So don't get any ideas that you are something or someone special."

A puzzled look came over Maria's face. "But Daddy told me to never forget that I'm someone special. I'm a child of the king and than makes me a princess."

"Oops. Let me back up. I mean that you're not any more special than all the other kids. You're all special because God made you all, whether you're smart or not so smart, talented or not talented, good-looking or not. Do you see what I mean?"

"I think so, Mommy. I don't think I'll change my mind about boys, though."

* * *

Bambi entered Maria's bedroom and kissed her on the forehead. She stirred and her eyes flew open. Daddy, you scared me. What are you doing?"

"I'm the handsome prince come to waken Sleeping Beauty with a kiss."

"Oh. In that case, it looks like it worked."

"Yes, it did. Happy birthday, honey!"

"Thanks. Do I ever get too old to celebrate my birthday?"

"Definitely not while you're living with me, pumpkin."

"Will I always live with you?"

"I'm afraid not. You're going to grow up and get big and independent and want to live your own life. Then you'll move out and maybe get married."

"To a boy?"

"Of course. Well, hopefully he'll be a man by that time."

"Yuck. I'd rather stay with you and Mom."

Bambi laughed. "Remember that your daddy, once upon a time, was a creepy boy too."

"But you aren't anymore."

"Thanks for the compliment. Maybe it was because I grew out of it. People change a lot when they grow up."

"I don't want to change. I like me just the way I am right now."

"So do I, Maria. I love you just the way you are right now. Now, I've got to go to work. I didn't want to leave without wishing my favorite seven-year-old a happy birthday. Sorry I couldn't take a day of vacation on your special day this year. Lots of stuff going on at the office."

"That's OK. A nighttime party is just fine."

"Maybe you can practice your shooting today?"

"Daddy, I don't really like basketball all that much."

Bambi sighed heavily. "I gotta run, honey. Bye."

"God bless, you. I love you, Dad."

"Love you, too."

* * *

"Happy birthday, Maria. How does it feel to be eight?" Lisa asked.

"I feel just the same way I did last night when I went to bed."

"Sleepy?"

"No, Mom. I mean I don't feel any different. How does older feel anyway?"

"Good question, Maria. I don't know how to answer."

"How old are you, Mom?"

"Forty-six."

"Wow. You're like a dinosaur, almost."

Lisa laughed. "Almost."

"Did forty-six feel different than forty-five?"

"Nope. But forty felt different than twenty, at least psychologically."

"What does sikogeology mean?"

"'Psychologically' means in my head it felt different because of the way I looked at it. When I was twenty I felt like I was going to live forever, and there was no hurry to accomplish anything in life."

"And at forty."

"I realized that my life was half over if I live to be as old as average people. My time to get something done that's of any value was growing short."

"Mommy, are you afraid to die?"

"Yes and no, Maria. I'm afraid to leave you and Daddy here on Earth alone. I don't want that to happen, but sometimes God calls us home early. It would be like playing with all your friends at the park and Suzy gets called home early for dinner and she can't play anymore. It's sad. But when I die, I'll go live with Jesus, so that makes me happy instead of sad. It's the people left here that are the ones that suffer more from death."

"Even if they don't know God?"

"Well, that too. If they haven't accepted God as their father and Jesus as the Son of God and savior, then they will probably be afraid of death."

"In that case, I'm not afraid to die either, but I don't want to leave you and Daddy here alone without me either. So I'll try and stay around for a while."

* * *

"Where are you going, Daddy?"

"My usual Saturday morning jog at the track."

"Can I run with you?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Not at all."

"Do you have running shoes?"

"Yep."

"OK, get them on. I'm pretty sure you're not going to run for very long with me, but you can walk around the track while I run."

"I won't get tired. I can keep up."

"Maria, I'm going to run three miles. That's like from the high school to the Catholic cemetery. And my legs are a lot longer than yours and I've been doing this for about thirty years. So the chances of you keeping up with me are about equal to Barbie and Ken having real babies."

"That's not a very good chance. They're not even married yet."

Bambi rolled his eyes. *Is she serious, or has she inherited my sense of humor?* "We need to get going. There is a certain young lady having a tenth birthday celebration this noon."

"Really. Anyone I know?" Maria ran off to get dressed.

I think she is joking around with me.

After they arrived at the track, Bambi began stretching his muscles.

"Why do you do that?"

"The muscles need to get warmed up first. If I don't stretch them out, I might pull a muscle or something."

"If the muscle is under the skin, how do you pull it?"

"That's just the way that doctors talk about it. It's not like pulling out your teeth or hair."

"Or pulling your leg?"

Bambi scratched his head. *She's doing it again.* "Anyway, if you pull a muscle, it hurts pretty bad, and you can't run for a while. I don't want that to happen."

"Me either." Maria began to mimic the stretches that her father did.

"OK. Enough warm-up. You ready to go?"

Maria nodded.

"Remember, don't feel bad when you have to quit running and walk."

"OK. Same for you."

Bambi laughed. He took off at a slow pace, and Maria stayed at his side.

"This isn't so hard, Dad."

"No, but we've only run about a hundred yards so far. The longer we go, the harder it will get."

They finished their first lap around the track and Maria was

still with him.

"Very good, Pumpkin. I didn't think you'd make it this far."

"We're going pretty slow. Do you normally run like a turtle?"

"Not quite. I'm slowing down a little bit because I like having you with me to talk to. It makes the time go a lot faster."

"I like being here with you too."

That almost makes the pain of her not liking basketball go away. Almost.

When they reached the end of four laps, Maria said, "I think I'm going to have to take a break. You were right. I can't keep up with you."

"But you did much better than I expected."

"Really?"

"No joking, honey."

She smiled. When they reached the end of the lap, she began to walk. Bambi picked up his pace. When he got around the track to where Maria was walking she starting running with him again. The stop and start continued until Bambi finished his three miles.

"You did really good, Maria. I bet you ran two miles today."

"It was fun."

"Didn't it hurt?"

"Yeah, some. But not bad. On my next birthday, I'm going to run the whole way with you."

"You're going to have to practice during the year to reach that goal."

"I will, Dad. I will. Just keep taking me with you, and I'll get there."

"In the winter time, we won't be able to run."

"I heard the new facility they're building up at the college has an indoor track."

Bambi wiped some sweat off with his T-shirt. "Really? We'll have to check that out. If that's true, we can run all year round. I like it."

* * *

"Mom, don't forget your promise. When Dad and I get back from running, you're going to teach me to bake cookies, so I can make my own treats this year for the first day of school."

"I won't forget. Good luck keeping up with Dad today for three miles. He's really been looking forward to this. Do you think you can do it?"

"Let me tell you a little secret, Mom. I know I can. I've been dropping out lately just to let him think I'm tired, but I could keep going."

"Don't underestimate your father. The spirit of competition burns strong in him. He doesn't like to lose. This might turn into a race."

"I understand, Mom. Those competitive juices flow through my veins too."

"I just don't want you to be extremely disappointed if you fail."

"Nope. I'll just be more determined to kick his butt next year."

"Maria, you shouldn't talk like that!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's not ladylike."

"Neither is having sweat pouring down your face as you keep putting one foot in front of the other with your face grimacing from the pain. I'm just taking a mini-vacation from being a lady."

"Hmm. I don't know what to think about that statement. There is a time to laugh, a time to mourn, a time to gather stones and a time to cast them away, a time to be a lady and a time—"

"To kick butt?"

Lisa laughed "OK. You've got me emotionally involved in this challenge. I want to come watch."

"Be my guest. Bring a crying towel for Dad to use afterward."

The three made the journey to the track. The two runners stretched out and warmed up their legs, and Lisa took a seat in the bleachers. "May the best man slash girl win."

"Your mom makes it sound like it's a race."

Maria smiled at him.

"You think it's a race too."

"You're not worried are you, Dad? No way you could be afraid of an eleven-year-old girl."

"You got that right. Are you ready?"

She nodded. The two lined up next to each other at the starting point on the all-weather track shared by Madison High School and Dakota State University.

"Go," Bambi said, and the two began their first lap. Maria waved at Lisa as they ran by for the end of their first 400 meters.

For two miles the two ran side by side. When they reached the starting point for the end of lap eight, Bambi shot forward. Maria sped up to catch him. When they reached the starting point again, Bambi increased his pace yet again. Maria matched him but began to labor. At the end of the tenth lap, when the pace picked up even more, Maria faltered and dropped way back. She continued to jog all the way to the end but finished two hundred meters behind her father.

Bambi waited for her at the finish line and gave her a big hug.

"Very good try, Maria. You made it three miles without stopping."

Lisa came down to join them. "Are you all right, honey?"

Both of the runners answered her, "Fine!"

"I was talking to Maria. I know you're fine, Bambi."

Bambi shrugged and walked away. "I'm going to do a cool-down lap."

"Fine. We'll be here."

"He's been sandbagging on me, Mom. He never ran this fast before."

"Should I put the crying towel back in the closet, or did you want to use it?"

"Funny, Mom. Keep it around for next year. I'll beat him when I'm twelve."

"I'm going to walk around the track the other way and meet your father."

"Go for it, Mom. I'll be here recuperating."

When Lisa hooked up with Bambi, she frowned at him. "Did you have to do that?"

"Do what?"

"Ahh. Kick her butt like that?"

"You know, Lisa. I thought about letting her finish in a tie with me, just to make her feel good. But I think that girl has talent. I believe she has the stuff to be a champion runner, but she has to keep hungry. I have to keep setting the bar higher for her. I knew if I whipped her this year, she'll train even harder in the next year to beat me on her next birthday."

"Well, it looks like you called that one right. I hope you know what you're doing."

"Not exactly, but her running is making me forget about basketball. Running is a sport where a team might not be involved. In a basketball game I couldn't win anything without my teammates holding up their end of the weight. In track or cross-country, you can win all by yourself."

"Yeah, but the whole team can still lose in cross-country."

"True, but they can't take away that first place finish no matter how bad the rest of the team does."

"That sounds kind of selfish."

"Yeah, maybe, but it gives a person a chance to compete when their teammates don't give a rip."

* * *

Bambi dreamt he was being kissed on the forehead. "Lisa." His eyes fluttered just as he felt a kiss moisten the skin above his eyebrows. "What are you doing, Maria."

"I'm playing the role of the princess kissing Sleeping Beauty and bringing him back to life."

"What time is it?"

"Time for you to get your butt out of bed so I can kick it."

"Oh, that's right. Today's the day. Happy Birthday, honey."

"Thanks, Dad. It's going to be really happy after I leave you in the dust sucking wind."

"Why are you waking me so early?"

"We need to get this out of the way before church today. My party's this afternoon."

"Where's your mother?"

"Digging in the linen closet I think. She's dressed and ready to go."

"She's coming again this year?"

"I believe she's been looking forward to it almost as much as me."

"Scary. OK. Exit the room, please, so I can get dressed. You are going to permit my body to wake up before the gun goes off, right?"

"I guarantee you'll be awake by the time the first lap is done."

"Gonna push me this year, huh?"

"That's the plan, Stan."

"Good, I like a challenge. I think your feistiness has woken me up."

"Wonderful. I don't want you to have any excuses." Maria said.

Lisa came into the bedroom a short time later as Bambi was pulling on his running tights.

"Why do you wear tights in the summer?"

"Obviously you weren't a runner. When I wear shorts, I rub the skin off my legs unless I put lubricant on. I hate that junk so I go with the tights."

"Aren't they hot?"

"Surprisingly not. I'll be as snug as a bug in a rug as I make her look like a slug."

"Are you going to crush her spirit this year?"

"Nope. I'm going to inflame it though."

"I can't help but wonder where this feud is going to end up."

"Eventually she's probably going to beat me. Every year I get older and slower and she gets bigger and faster. I'm going to push her for as long as I can. Hopefully she won't be able to beat me until she's old enough to drive us up to the track."

"That's four years from now. My gosh! My baby is going to be

behind the wheel of a car in four short years. I can't believe it. We just gave her a tricycle a few years ago."

"That was eight years ago. Only seven years left until she graduates. Our little girl is going to be a woman soon."

They heard the sound of the car door slam.

"We better hurry out there or she'll be honking the horn and waking the neighbors," Bambi said. "She's pretty fired up for this."

Bambi let Lisa drive to the track. This time Maria pushed the pace at the beginning. Bambi let her open up a hundred-yard lead in the first mile and then started to reel her in during the second. He came up beside her as they finished the eighth lap.

"Having fun yet?" he asked.

She just looked at him as he started pulling away from her. She tried to stay with him and ended up stopping and walking off the track when she got to the end of lap nine. She watched him cruise the last three laps by himself from the bleachers with her mother.

He walked over to them after he finished.

"Go ahead and say it," Maria said.

"Say what?"

"Whatever it is you want to say to rub it in."

"Why should I rub it in?"

"Because I stunk up the track. I did worse than last year despite another year of training. I didn't even finish." Maria looked like she was ready to spill tears.

"First of all, I trained for another year too. You're pushing me to get faster. Second of all, you went out too fast. You have to learn to pace yourself. If you go out too fast, you're in trouble. If you go out too slow, you'll get so far behind that you'll never catch up. The trick is learning to run within your limits but right at the max that you can sustain."

"I figured I'd get the lead on you and discourage you from keeping up with me."

"That might work with just one more person in the race. Without other people involved, one or two might get discouraged, but it would be doubtful that everyone would. If you want to be a champion, you have to run a smart race."

"Champion? I hadn't really thought about that. I've just been trying to beat you."

"I might be wrong, Maria, but I suspect that when you run against some other girls, you're going to find out that you're a very good runner. Just because you can't beat Dad, that doesn't mean you're not champion material – as long as you don't quit."

"Gosh. I was about ready to do that. I sat there in the bleachers wondering why I was killing myself on my birthday to accomplish something that wasn't that important."

"I think you're old enough to hear the story."

"What story?"

"Of the Bulldog Compact. I was just a little older than you when I wrote it, and it changed my life."

"I want to hear the whole story."

Bambi started at the beginning. He talked the whole way home and during breakfast. He finished just in time for them to get ready for church.

"Thanks for sharing that story with me, Dad. I don't ever want to be a quitter either."

Bambi gave her a big hug.

* * *

Maria walked into the kitchen.

"Happy birthday, new-time teenager."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Did you still want to go through with the race this year? You haven't been running with me as much."

Maria attempted a fiendish laugh. "That's because I've been doing secret training."

"With whom?"

"Zeke."

"That little boy that you fought with over the birthday present ten years ago."

"One and the same. He's not so little anymore. And he's a terrific runner. He's been prepping me for this event."

"Should I be scared?"

"I don't know, Dad. You figure it out."

"I didn't eat any breakfast, so I'm ready to go any time you are. Best to get it out of the way before the heat builds up."

"Works for me. Let me grab a glass of fruit juice, and I'm ready."

"Where's Mom? Is she coming?"

"Not this year. It's too painful for her to watch anymore. I don't think she likes us competing against each other."

"I think you're right."

The two drove to the track and went through the ritual. Another man was running on the track. Bambi didn't know him but said hello.

This year Maria ran right behind her father for ten laps. At the start of the eleventh, he picked up the pace but didn't shake her.

He pulled away slightly at the end to beat her by ten yards.

He continued walking after he finished, trying to catch his breath again. Maria caught up with him and the two walked and gasped together until their breathing returned to normal. The man who had been running on the track stopped and began to walk with them.

"Interesting competition between you two."

"It's a family tradition. Every year on Maria's birthday, we duel it out."

"Happy birthday. Do you go to Madison High School?"

Maria shook her head.

"Bummer. I'm the new cross-country coach here, and I was hoping I'd have you on my team."

"Maria just turned thirteen today. She'll be a seventh grader."

"Thirteen?"

Maria nodded.

"You always talk so much?"

Maria shook her head.

Bambi laughed. "She'll be fine after the oxygen tanks arrive. The old man drained her today. Believe me, she might talk your ear off when she gets back to normal."

"Let me ask my question again. Do you go to Madison Middle School?"

Maria nodded.

"Hallelujah. You can be on my team – for the next six years!"

"You want Maria to be on the varsity as a seventh grader?"

"It's legal. As long as you'll let her."

"I have no problem with it. Her mom might not be too crazy about the idea though. Are you sure she's good enough?"

"I timed you guys. There's nobody coming back from last year's team that would have beaten her."

Bambi gulped. "Wow. I thought it was pretty cool that I made varsity as a ninth grader. Seventh grader is unbelievable."

"Actually girls are often better runners at this age than they are in high school. After puberty hits they tend to get a bit heavy for running sometimes. By the way, I'm Tom Fischer."

"Lance Masterson."

"And Maria, right."

Both of the Mastersons nodded.

"I'll be talking to the middle school principal and getting you some paperwork to sign. We have a team meeting tomorrow at seven p.m. I'd love to see you two there."

"Tom, I'll talk this over with my wife and hopefully you'll see us

there tomorrow night.”

“Catch you then.” Coach Fischer took off jogging again.

“Do you want to try this, Maria?”

“I think so. Let me talk it over with Zeke.”

“Since when did you and this Zeke kid get to be such good buddies? Didn’t you used to detest him?”

“That was a long time ago. I decided he was cool a couple of years ago.”

“So, do you even care what your dad thinks?”

Maria flung her hair out of her eyes. “You don’t have to tell me. You pushed me to play basketball and were disappointed when I didn’t like the sport. I bet you’re salivating at the thought of me competing in varsity athletics for six years. I could run track too, probably.”

“You’re right on both counts.”

* * *

Bambi walked into the kitchen. A boy, who was seated at the table with Maria, got up and stuck out his hand.

“Good morning, sir. My name is Zeke, I mean Ezekiel Collins.”

“Ahh. This is the infamous Zeke, huh? Glad to make your acquaintance.”

“Zeke wants to run with us this year, if you don’t mind?”

Only fourteen and I’m already getting aced out by another male. I’m not sure I’m going to survive her teenage years.

“Fine. It’s still a race between me and you though.”

“Right, Dad.”

“OK, I just wanted to make sure that I’m not being ganged up on here. And he better not block me either so I can’t get around him.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, sir. I just want to run to encourage Maria.”

“Yeah. Things are a little different this year. She has one year of varsity cross-country and track under her belt. The challenge threshold seems to have gone up for me. Well, let’s get it over with. I’m not fond of running in the August heat.”

“I hear you, Mr. Masterson. It’s not fun.”

The three piled into the Mastersonmobile and made the annual journey to the track.

Having Zeke around was strange for Bambi. He wasn’t used to sharing his little girl. They talked to each other while warming up. Bambi felt a rising of jealousy within him. *Is this normal for dads to go through?*

The two kids ran side by side and dad ran in their shadows

the whole way. With two hundred meters to go, they all began to sprint. Bambi passed Maria with about forty yards to go. He caught up with Zeke just before the finish line and passed him. It took him several minutes to recover his breath and work the lactic acid out of his muscles.

"You're an animal, Mr. Masterson. Congratulations."

Bambi nodded.

"Yeah, Dad. Congratulations." Maria gave him a big hug. "I gave it my best shot this year and you still had more than me."

"Not much. We're pretty even right now."

A voice hailed them from the bleachers. They looked up and saw coach Fischer.

They waved, and he descended to chat with them.

"Another fine race this year. Happy birthday, Maria."

"You remembered," Bambi said. "How did you do that?"

"I went home last year after I met you and put a red circle around this date. It was a red-letter day in my coaching career. Maria had a good season last year, and I'm expecting big things from her this year. You're holding up pretty good for an old man yourself. Do you do any road races?"

"Not anymore. I have one race a year, and this is it."

"Well, I have to go. I look forward to seeing you at some of the meets this year."

"I'll be at every one I can make it to."

Two weeks later, Maria crossed the finish line as the winner of the first meet of the season. It was one of several wins for the year. She won a fifth place medal in the 3200-meter run at the state track meet in the spring.

* * *

When Maria descended the stairs on her next birthday, she found her father lying on the carpet in the living room stretching. "Trying to get a head start on me, huh?"

"After last year, it's pretty clear I have to do something to keep beating you. I turned fifty this year, you know. The old gray stallion, he ain't what he used to be."

"Yeah, I remember the over-the-hill party they threw for you with the black balloons and stuff."

"Is Zeke coming this year?"

"He's meeting us over at the track."

"Great."

"You sounded sarcastic with that 'great'. I didn't get a Tony the Tiger type impression."

"It's hard for me, Maria, to see your heart pull you away to

another male.”

“I’ll always be your little girl, Dad, even when I get married.”

“What happened to the gal who said ‘Yuck’ about boys and wanted to live with Mom and Dad forever?”

“You and Mom were right, I have changed. Now I see that I want to be married to a man just like you.”

Bambi’s heart fluttered and his eyes watered up.

“Something the matter, Dad?”

“It’s nothing. Just got a little piece of something in my eye.” He dabbed at the corner of both eyes with his finger.

“Which eye was it, Dad?”

“I wasn’t sure, so I cleaned both of them.”

“Mom’s coming this year. She’s not worried about you cleaning my clock. The opposite problem has crossed her mind though, and she wants to be there to pick up the pieces if necessary.”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks for giving me some bulletin-board motivation material. Picking up the pieces, hah! She better be ready to give me a victor’s kiss.”

On the way to the car, Bambi jumped up and swatted the basketball net.

“Don’t you think you should conserve your energy for the nemesis on your premises?” Maria said, biting her lip to keep from smiling.

“I got plenty of energy left over to take care of you, kiddo.”

Lisa drove while Bambi fiddled with the radio dial and found an oldies station. He was singing *It’s a Beautiful Morning* with the Young Rascals when they arrived at the track.

Zeke was jogging slowly around the oval when they arrived. He ran over and joined them in their stretching routine. “Happy fifteenth, Maria.”

“Thanks, Zeke.”

“Good morning, Mr. Masterson. Are you ready for this?”

“As ready as I’m ever going to be. Every year it seems to get tougher.”

The race went very much like the year before. Except this time when the sprint started, Bambi was unable to motor past either one of the kids. Maria crossed the finished line five meters ahead of him.

She got congratulations from Zeke, her mother, and Coach Fischer, who had dropped by with his stopwatch again.

When Bambi was recovered enough from the ordeal to talk, he walked up to Maria. “Congratulations, honey. You finally did it.”

"I'm so happy, Dad. I finally reached that goal I've been shooting at for five years. But I feel empty inside at the same time. This will be our last race."

"Why? Just cause you beat me once, did you think I was going to quit?"

"That's right. You never quit. So, we're on again for next year?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. I'm not going to let you rest on your Hardies."

"My what?"

"Your Hardies. You know, *Laurel* and Hardy. Rest on your laurels...."

"Dad! That is absolutely the worst joke I've ever heard."

"Obviously you don't get out enough. In any case, thanks for dashing my dreams of becoming a stand-up comedian."

"That's good, Dad. With that material you'd be falling down."

Bambi showed his teeth like an angry dog. "Remind me to show no mercy next year."

Chapter 10

Maria bounced down the stairs. Bambi was lying on his back with his toes touching the floor above his head, stretching his back and his legs at the same time.

"I'm supposed to remind you not to show mercy today."

Bambi brought his legs back down to the floor on the normal side of his body and looked up at her. "Thanks for the reminder, but I didn't need it. This year I've been the one waiting for this day. By the way, happy birthday sweet sixteen."

"Thanks, Dad. Just don't break into that Neil Sedaka song about it."

"You don't like my singing?"

"Let's put it this way. I love it when you sing tenor, ten or twelve feet outside of my hearing range."

Bambi bit down on his lip. "Emily Dickinson you're not this morning, kiddo. You're going to motivate me to dust you off."

"I think you mean Emily Post, father dear. Dickinson was a poet. Post wrote about etiquette."

"Whatever. Your lack of etiquette stands out like a hippie at a Future Farmers of America meeting."

"Dad, there aren't any hippies anymore. Can't you make reference to something contemporary?"

"How can I? The modern world is distasteful to me. I'm filtering it out."

"So you're stuck in a time warp?"

"Stuck indicates something that happens to you by accident. I'm doing this on purpose so the word 'positioned' fits better here."

"Whatever. Are you ready to suffer the agony of defeat?" Maria asked.

"My feet have been hurting for a long time already."

"And you're causing my head to ache. Let's get it on. I have to go take my drivers' test today and get my license."

Bambi pressed his palm against his forehead. "Speaking of headaches."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nuttin, honey."

"Ooh. A contemporary commercial. You haven't filtered the

whole modern world out.”

“Must have snuck into my subconscious during a sports broadcast.” He jacked up the volume of his voice about fifty decibels. “Lisa, are you ready to go?”

She walked into the room. “I’ve been waiting on you guys.”

Maria started back up the stairs. “In that case I need to finish getting ready with a little more prep work.”

Bambi groaned. “Let me translate that. You mean Zeke’s going to be there again, and you’ve got to put on your face.”

“You’re pretty smart – for a dad.” She disappeared from view before he could issue a comeback.

“Are you going to beat her this year?”

“Not a chance. I’ve haven’t mentioned this, but my time has gotten quite a bit slower this year. I guess age is just catching up on me. She’s going to burn me today, but I have to put on my own face, my game face, and do a psych job on her. I’m afraid this year, that’s the best I can do.”

“Growing old isn’t Heaven, is it?”

“That’s a polite way to put it. I can’t understand why there’s so much difference between fifty and fifty-one. I felt great last year.”

“You’re still a hunk in my opinion.”

Bambi rose from his stretching position and gave her a big hug and then a kiss.

“What was that for?”

“Calling me a hunk. I need a little reassurance from time to time.”

“Maybe I should do it more often. Have you seen any of our old classmates lately?” asked Lisa.

“Yeah. Pretty sad. Oh, that reminds me. Corky was in town yesterday.”

“How is the old Cork?”

“Bummed out. He and Lulu got divorced a couple of years ago. I think he still misses her.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. How did he look?”

“I can’t think of a polite way to say it. Like a middle-aged little man.”

“He is over fifty,” Lisa said.

“I know but I just didn’t expect him to ever get...heavy.”

“You mean fat?”

“I was trying to say that word without actually saying it. That’s what I meant.”

“Not everybody kept training after their school days were over.”

"No kidding. Donnie still looks great. He looks like he can still dunk a basketball."

Maria bounced down the steps again. "I'm ready."

Bambi chuckled. "I don't know why you put that stuff on your face. You're just going to sweat it off again."

"You think I'm going to have to work up a sweat to beat an old man?"

Lisa waved her index finger in the air. "Maria! Show some respect to your father!"

"It's OK, Lisa. As Popeye says, 'I am what I am.' And I'm old."

"I was just kidding, Dad. You're not old. Just older."

"Ooh. Nice spin job. Thinking of going into politics when you graduate?" Bambi asked.

"I haven't even thought about graduation. I still have three years of high school to enjoy."

"Never too early to start thinking about it."

"OK, Dad. Let's go. I think you have to stop by the post office later today to pick up your social security check."

"And you accuse me of bad jokes."

"Can I drive to the track?"

"I guess I could take my bicycle and meet you guys over there. That'll help me get warmed up, plus protect my sanity and my life."

"Funny, Dad. If you rode your bike to the track, you wouldn't have enough energy left to make it three miles."

Lisa signaled time-out. "If I might play referee here, let me step in between you two and end the bickering."

"Mom, we're not bickering. We're playing a game."

"I don't like that game."

Bambi nodded. "We know, Lisa. That's why we play it mostly when you're not around."

"In any case, I'll drive. Maria will be legal after today and can drive all the time."

"That's true. Go for it, Mom." Maria jumped into the back seat.

Zeke was waiting for them at the gate to the track. He gave Maria a big hug.

"No fair, giving her extra energy!" Bambi said.

Zeke laughed and held out his hand for a shake. "Nice to see you again, Mr. Masterson. You, too, Mrs. Masterson."

With the stretching out of the way, the trio lined up at the starting line. Lisa yelled go to start them. The two kids led the way for the first lap with Bambi staying close on their heels. Maria looked back on the second lap and saw that her father had fallen

way behind and was wobbling a little. Suddenly he collapsed and fell on the track. Maria slammed on the brakes and reversed direction. She put on a full sprint to reach the place where her father lay prone. From the other side of the field, Lisa was headed to rendezvous with them.

"Dad! Are you all right?"

Bambi struggled to sit up. "I don't know. I kind of blacked out, I think. And I have a pain in my side."

Lisa arrived. "What happened?"

"Dad passed out."

Lisa bent down beside him. "I think we need to get you to a doctor, ASAP."

"I'm fine. You nurses are always out drumming up business for your employers."

"Bambi, this is no joking matter. People don't just pass out without cause."

"Maybe I forgot to breathe or something."

"Whatever. I'm standing firm on this one. Either you go to the doctor, or you can sleep on the couch tonight."

"Mom!"

"I'm serious. This isn't a matter to be taken lightly. I'm not going to stand by and let your dad play Mr. Tough Guy at the risk to his health."

Bambi held up a hand. "Fine. I'll go visit the doctor. It's been a while since I've been there, so I probably should get a check up. But I'm not going to the emergency room of the hospital."

"OK. I'll get on the phone and see if Dr. Redpath can get you in sometime today."

"Heck of a way to spend Maria's birthday."

"Don't worry about me, Dad. We need to get you taken care of."

Lisa gently brushed some dirt from Bambi's leg. "You've skinned up your legs. I'm going to have to clean that up for you."

"That's nothing."

"For the last time, Bambi Masterson, any small cut in the skin is enough to let in deadly bacteria. Even a paper cut can kill. We're going to get those wounds sterilized as soon as we get home."

Zeke joined the group.

"Zeke, sorry about this, but we're going to have to go home."

"That's cool. Anything I can do to help?"

"Maybe you can help us get Daddy to the car."

"Sure."

"I'm not a—"

Maria emphatically flipped her hair back. "Dad! Put a lid on it! We're helping you to the car!"

He rolled his eyes. "Fine, but I'm going on my own power."

They helped him stand up and each woman held one of his arms. Zeke walked behind him to catch him if he should fall again.

They made it to the car without incident.

"See, I told you I was all right."

"I want a second opinion," Lisa said, "from somebody who knows more about the human body than from a sports injury perspective."

"I'll call you, Zeke," Maria said.

"OK. I'm going back and finish my run. God bless, Mr. Masterson."

"Thanks, Zeke."

The Masterson trio arrived home, and Lisa made the phone call immediately upon entering the house. Then she grabbed a washcloth and some iodine and went to work on Bambi's abrasions.

He thought back to his young days when his mom dressed his wounds with tincture Merthiolate, causing his skin to look painted red for days. *I swear that stuff hurt more than the wound itself.*

"The doctor can slide you in at 12:30. He's cutting his lunch short just for you."

"Now you make me feel guilty for causing a guy to get indigestion or go hungry. This could have waited a few days."

Lisa pointed a finger at him, which coupled with her stern gaze, was all the communication he needed to get the hint he was supposed to shut up.

* * *

Three hours later he was sitting in the lobby of the clinic perusing *Sports Illustrated*.

"I hope that's not the swimsuit issue," Lisa said.

"Nah. Even better. College football preview issue."

"Lance Masterson."

Bambi closed the magazine and threw it on the table. "Let's get this over with."

He and Lisa walked up to the lady who had announced Bambi.

"Hi, Connie."

"Hello, Lisa. This must be your husband."

"Guilty as charged." Lance held out his hand, and Connie shook it.

"Follow me please."

An hour later they were back home. Maria arrived shortly after.

"Where's Dad, and what did you find out?"

"Your father is taking a nap. The doctor didn't really find anything. He scheduled some tests though. Turns out Daddy dear been having some pains in his abdomen but never told me."

"That sounds like Dad."

Lisa nodded. "So, I assume you passed your driver's test."

"Oh, yeah. That seems like a small thing compared to what's going on with Dad, though. Maybe he pushed himself too hard just so he could beat me this year."

"I don't think so. He confided in me he'd been unable to train as hard because of the pain. Something's not right."

"I'm worried, Mom."

"Me too, honey. Me too."

"When will he have the tests?"

"Friday."

Maria blew out a heavy sigh. "That's three days to wait,"

"I know, but that was the best we could do."

"What are we going to do?"

"We'll keep on living just as if there's nothing wrong. That's what your dad and God would both want. And maybe there is nothing wrong. You'll get ready for school and keep training. I'll go to work and take care of sick people like usual."

"But what if"

"We'll jump that hurdle when and if we get to it." She wrapped Maria in her arms and the two held each other for a few minutes.

"Thanks, Mom. I needed that."

"Ditto, kiddo."

* * *

On Thursday Bambi had to fast from food and that night drink a concoction given to him by the clinic. He sat in front of the TV trying to force down the chalky substance through a straw.

"How does it taste?" Lisa asked.

"If this is all they have on their menu, they're going out of business. I can't help think that scummy pond water would be more potable."

"Bad news is you have to drink another bottle tomorrow morning."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"In a way you're lucky. The barium stuff they used to make you drink was like totally liquid chalk. And then they used to have

you drink both bottles at the clinic just before the scan.”

He shuddered. “Good grief! I can hardly force this stuff down slowly. I can’t even imagine chugging it. I’m hungry.”

“Too bad, you’re not allowed to eat for about another sixteen hours.”

Bambi rolled his eyes. “Good thing I’ll be sleeping for half of those. I might not be able to resist.”

“Are you saying I should put a padlock on the kitchen door?”

“It might help me fight temptation. Of course I could always get in the car and run to the store for a snack.”

“If you need some motivation abstaining from food, let me run this fact by you. If you eat, you’ll mess up the results of your test, and they’ll have to do it over again. Which means—”

“I’d have to fast for twenty-four hours again plus drink some more of the Kickapoo Unjoy Juice.”

Lisa laughed. “Exactly. Maybe you’d like me to pick up a six-pack?”

“You just gave me all the motivation I need to keep from breaking my fast, thank you very much.”

“Glad I could be of some help.”

* * *

The next morning, Bambi forced down another bottle of the nasty beverage. Shortly after, they called his name and took him into the imaging room. After finishing the CAT scan, he dressed himself and went back to the waiting room to get Lisa. “Let’s get out of here. Have I ever told you how much I hate medical facilities? I don’t see how you can work in this environment all the time. It depresses the heck out of me.”

“I do it so I can help take some of that depression out of the equation. You’ve been very fortunate with your health, Bambi. Lots of people spend more time with their doctors than they do with their families.”

“I pray for them, and thank God he’s blessed me. Of course, the fact I help take care of myself might enter into the situation. I think my running and other exercise has helped me fight off illness.”

“You might be right. So you’re saying not all the thanks goes to God?”

“Think about it. If we give God the thanks for all our health, do we also have to blame him if we don’t have health?”

“I don’t think I like the question.”

Bambi nodded. “Probably not. It’s not an easy one. If God is doling out health as he sees fit, those who get illness instead of

health can feel a little shortchanged.”

“Yeah, if they think about it and themselves all the time. If they just focus in on God and give him thanks for whatever they do have, they’ll be much happier. The attitude of gratitude principle. So, in other words, even if God gave me illness, I praise him for it because he knows what’s best for me.”

“I’m not sold. I think God gives us some responsibility for taking care of ourselves, and if we don’t, we can only look in the mirror when we’re handing out blame.”

“Your Catholic roots are showing.”

“I might have to change hairdressers. In the meantime, let’s change the subject. Have I ever mentioned that I was hungry?”

“Not more than once every five minutes for the last twenty hours.”

“I thought so. Well, now’s a good time to bring it up. I’ve been fantasizing about a feast all morning. “

“What did you have in mind?”

“Pizza Ranch, all you can eat lunch buffet. I’m going to pig out.”

“Don’t eat too much or you might be bringing up a new topic, if you get my drift.”

“Honey, it’s only been twenty-four hours. It’s not like my stomach has shrunk and grown unaccustomed to having food in it. I can slam pizza and salad down for an hour with no problem.”

“OK, Mr. Cast Iron Stomach. Let’s see what you do,” Lisa said.

“Where’s Maria? Maybe she can join us?”

“She drove Zeke out to Lake Herman. They’re going to run around the park a couple of times and then have a picnic.”

“So she’s the chauffeur for Zeke?”

“He’s not old enough to get his license yet. She’ll be his wheels for the next few months, if they don’t break up.”

Bambi shook his head. “Let’s go eat.”

They made the drive to the small restaurant on the edge of town and paid for their lunches. Bambi made eight trips to the buffet, consuming three plates of salad and a dozen pieces of pizza. Shortly after they returned home he made one trip to the bathroom and deposited all of his pizza and salad into the sewage system.

After he dragged himself into the bedroom, he looked up at Lisa. “I hope you’re not going to say I told you so.”

“I wouldn’t do that, would I?”

"You've been known to do that from time to time. That really frosts my buns. Paid all that good money and then barfed it all away. As soon as this nausea passes, I'm going to be famished again."

"You did enjoy it going down, didn't you?"

Bambi groaned. "Much more than coming up again."

"Please spare me the graphic details. So it's not like you totally wasted your cash."

"You're just a little Pollyanna, aren't you?"

"I try," Lisa answered.

"By the way, when are they going to have the results of the CAT scan back?"

"Monday."

"Great, another three-day wait. Well, I'm going to work on Monday. I took two days off this week. I'm going to burn all my vacation at this rate."

"They'll just make a phone call. If they need to do anything for follow-up, they'll make an appointment."

Bambi nodded. "Until then, I'm going to forget about it. I'm now officially hungry. Want to share a snack with me?"

"I didn't do a Porky the Pig imitation out at the restaurant, but I ate enough to tide me over at least until dinner tonight. So you'll be eating on your own."

* * *

On Monday afternoon, Bambi was studying a problem with some of his code when the phone rang. He picked it up without taking his concentration off his screen. "Lance Masterson speaking."

"Lance, this is Dr. Redpath. We got your scan results back."

"Yeah?"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to come in and talk with me about the findings."

Bambi looked up from the screen and examined the phone, which he was operating in speaker mode. "You can't tell me over the phone?"

"It's not that simple. I'd prefer to do it in person."

"Can't you give me a hint of some type?"

"I don't want your imagination running rampant. You need to get all the facts at once."

Bambi looked at the ceiling. "Fine. When can you see me?"

"How about at five tonight? I'll stick around a little late."

"That works for me."

"OK. See you here at five."

Bambi pushed the off button on his phone to end the call. His heart was beating rapidly, and he had butterflies in his stomach. *If they didn't find anything, why would he need to talk to them? They must have discovered something bad.*

His concentration was shot for the rest of the day. He stared at his code, but his mind didn't focus, and it looked like gobbledygook to him. After printing it out, he tried to decipher it on paper and didn't have any more success. He kept returning to ideas about what might be wrong with him. *The doctor wouldn't tell me because he didn't want me imagining things. How stupid is that? That statement fed my imagination steroids.*

He left the office at four thirty. There was no sense trying to work until the last minute like he usually did because he wasn't accomplishing anything. He was perusing the *Sports Illustrated* football issue when Lisa walked into the waiting room in her uniform.

Bambi put the magazine on the table. "What are you doing here? I thought you were on duty at the hospital."

"I am. Dr. Redpath wanted me in on this so I took my lunch hour right now."

"He called you over at the hospital?"

"One of the nurses did."

"This sounds like trouble to me."

Lisa didn't answer, but Bambi interpreted the look on her face to pick up an affirmative response. *Looks like I'm in deep doo doo.*

The doctor started the discussion with small talk.

"Doc, excuse me if I'm being rude here, but let's get straight to the point. What did you find, and what do we do about it? And I don't want the spin doctor version of it."

"OK, Lance. The fact is we found a tumor."

Bambi looked over at Lisa. Fear was etched into her face. She didn't take her eyes off of the doctor.

"It could be non-cancerous, right? What's that word? Sounds like one of the vitamins," Bambi asked.

"Benign."

"That's the one."

"It could be, but we have to expect the worst here," the doctor stated.

"So, what's the plan of attack?"

"Surgery first to remove the growth. Then we do a biopsy on it to find out if it's cancerous. If so, then you'll need aggressive chemo treatments."

Bambi closed his eyes. "When will you do the surgery?"

"Not me. I want you to go to Sioux Falls to have a specialist do it."

Bambi grimaced. He looked over at Lisa, who was fighting back tears. With a quick motion, he grabbed her hand, squeezed and held on. "I guess we gotta do what we gotta do."

"There are two specialists down there who would do a good job. My nurse will give you the contact information, and you can make an appointment with the one you choose."

Bambi stood up. "Thanks, Doc."

Lisa took a tissue out of her purse and dabbed at her face as the two began the sad procession out to the parking lot.

"Do you want me to drive you home?"

"Lisa, I need surgery. I'm not dead. Besides, then you'd have both cars up here."

"Maria could come back with me to drive your car home."

"Not necessary. I can do it. Please, don't try to baby me!"

"Fine. I'll be home around nine." She kissed him on the cheek and then walked up the hill to the hospital."

"Would you like a ride?" Bambi yelled.

"It's only half a block."

"I know. I was just checking to see how you like being babied."

Lisa shook her head and continued her walk.

* * *

Instead of heading home, Bambi pointed his car toward Lake Herman. He parked in the same spot he had stopped at over thirty years before with the intent of ending his life. His gaze skimmed the sun-drenched water. A hundred and fifty years ago, Indians had gazed on this same body of water. A hundred years ago new pioneers chose to build near its shore. He'd enjoyed this view for almost fifty years himself. Was he now going to make his exit, just like those who had gone before him? *God, is this the end of the road?*

He thought of Maria. She was only two years younger than he had been when the urge to quit living had almost overcome him. If he had followed through with that impulse, Maria wouldn't be walking on the planet today. Lisa would be married to some other guy. *Lord, maybe this is all I get of earthly life, but I do thank you for what I've had. And now I better get home. Maria needs to find out what's going on. I need to be strong for her and Lisa. Lord, give me the strength to endure!*

The drive home triggered lots of memories of cruising along that same route whether in a car or on a bicycle. *How many more such trips are in my future?*

When he pulled into the driveway, Maria ran out of the house.

"Dad, I've been worried sick about you. Mom left a message saying you had a five o'clock appointment with the doctor. What's up?"

Bambi forced himself to smile. "I have a little challenge. They're going to remove a growth from my gut that was causing the pain."

Maria's eyes widened. "Cancer?"

"Maybe. Won't know for sure until they biopsy it. How was your first day of school?"

"Dad! How can you talk about school when—"

"When I'm hungry? Good point! Let's go in and eat and then we can talk about your day." He took her hand and led her toward the house. "How's the cross-country team looking this year?"

* * *

The next morning Bambi got up and started putting on his running shoes.

Lisa rolled over in the bed. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Same place I usually do in the hot season before work, for a run."

"But you're sick."

"I feel fine. Besides, I haven't run in five days now. Without my exercise fix, my nerves start going wacky on me."

"My nerves are already wacky worrying about you. What if you collapse out there on the street?"

"I guess I'll be late for work."

"Lance Masterson! Oh! Sometimes you tick me off!"

"What are you talking about? How can I make you mad by going jogging?"

"You just collapsed three days ago while running."

"I was trying to run hard. Today I'll be taking it easy. Just kicking in the endomorphins and keeping my muscle tone."

"Don't you ever think about anybody but yourself?"

Bambi's voice went up a few decibels. "What kind of a question is that? I've been doing this for about thirty-five years now. No one has ever accused me of being selfish because I kept myself fit and healthy. I thought you liked the fact that I'm not overweight like some of our former classmates."

"You don't need to yell. You're going to wake and scare Maria. You and I have never had an argument in front of her. In fact, we haven't really had an argument since she was born."

"Then why are you starting one now?"

"Me? You're the one being obstinate!"

Bambi took a deep breath and let it out. He counted to ten internally and then went and sat on the bed next to Lisa.

"Honey, you can't force a leash on me now just because of this operation I have coming up. If I don't live my life, I'll already be dead. So, please, let me do what I can do while I can do it."

Lisa wiped back tears from her cheeks. "Fine. Then I'm going with you."

"You can't keep up with me."

"I can on my bicycle. If we're going to have to fight cancer, we're going to have to do this as a team, Bambi. I know it's been a long time since you were really part of a team that competed. You've been running solo for a while. It is absolutely imperative that you get the concept of fighting together back because that's what we have to do to beat it. And this will be the most important competition you've ever faced."

Bambi nodded. "You're right. But remember, we'll be fighting, not running away. I'll do what gives me the best shot at beating it, not trying to prolong days of sickness here on Earth. Do you understand?"

"Let's not talk about it anymore. You haven't even got the diagnosis yet. We could just be wasting our time talking about it."

"For once in my life wasted time would be a blessing," Bambi said with a small smile.

"You've got that right. Wait one second while I slip on something more comfortable – for biking."

"Good thing you qualified that. I was thinking that nightie was about as comfortable as you're gonna get. That does bring up a question."

"What's that?" she asked from the closet.

"Will you want to make love to a man with cancer?"

There was silence for a moment. "Of course, dear." She popped her head out of the doorway. "It's not like cancer is contagious. I'll make love with you as long as it won't hurt you."

* * *

A week later Bambi watched the checkerboard fields fly by as Lisa drove him home from the hospital in Sioux Falls. The green of the maturing corn contrasted with the brown of already harvested oats and the bright yellow fields of sunflowers. Bambi usually looked to see that the sunflowers were all pointing toward the sun, but today he paid no attention. *Does it matter?* At first Bambi had been happy that he'd been able to get the surgery done on a Friday so he could recover over the weekend and miss the least amount of work possible. Now, even that didn't matter.

Right now Bambi was having a hard time finding anything that mattered besides survival.

He was sure that he was going to face this challenge like a man. The battle might end up in a loss, but he was going to give it a Dogs of Victory effort. That intention was a lot easier to conjure up when he was still in doubt about whether his own body was betraying him or not. That doubt was now history. When the cancer relay of life took place this year, Bambi would be one of the people the runners and walkers were trying to help. He had participated for several years. Maybe some of the benefits of his activity would come back to bless him.

Bambi glanced over at Lisa, who was oblivious to the patchwork of crops they were passing since her head turned to neither the left or the right. Bambi could only imagine the thoughts running through her head. He tried to imagine what it would be like for him right now if the roles were reversed, and she was the one facing radiation and chemo treatments. *If either Lisa or I had to go through this, I'm glad it's me, but I bet she feels just the opposite.*

He couldn't remember ever being alone with Lisa without a single word being spoken between them. The silence today was almost reverent, reminding him of his churchgoing days in the Catholic Church. *Should I break that silence and intrude into her thoughts?*

"Lisa, I was thinking about passing on the chemotherapy and radiation. That stuff is going to weaken my body and make me sick. I'm wondering if some type of natural cure might be better. The doctor said pancreatic cancer patients have a four percent chance of living for five years. I don't have much to lose. I'm almost certain to die if I use traditional methods. I might likely die with the natural methods as well, but they give me a chance to cure the thing."

"I've been a nurse for several years. I only know the traditional methods. My trust lies with the world of science, not the fringe group."

"So, if I opt for the holistic approach, you're going to be upset at me again."

"You said you wanted to do whatever will give you the most chance of ultimate survival. I think the doctors give you that opportunity."

I'm probably going down no matter which way I choose, so I might as well bow out with Lisa's full support. I can't fight her and cancer at the same time. Oh, my God. Why have you forsaken

me, and how are we going to tell Maria about this?

* * *

"Mom, I want to quit cross-country so I can spend more time with Dad."

"Honey, that sounds like a very noble thing to do, but I don't think it's a good idea in this case."

"Why?"

"Your dad needs something to keep his life stable. Something to give him something to enjoy. Your running gives him joy. You're not just running for yourself and your teammates and your community; you're running for your dad, too. Your success is his success."

"Are you sure?"

"I think so, Maria."

"In that case, I'll run like the wind in every meet I compete in. Every step I take will be to help fight his cancer."

Lisa hugged her. "I think that's just what the doctor ordered."

"We have a home meet after school next Wednesday. Do you suppose Dad can come?"

"He's decided he's going to work as many days as he can. But I bet he'll adjust his schedule to go see you run. He's allowed some flexibility in his schedule so he can do a six a.m. to three p.m. shift and get off in time to see you."

"Cool. Since I'm not giving up cross-country, I'll be giving up my chilling out with the kids so I can hang out with Dad. Please don't try to talk me out of that."

"I won't. But he might."

"That's tough, but I'm not going to listen. If I'm only going to have my dad here for a few more months or years, I'm going to take advantage of the chance."

"That's very thoughtful of you. In reality, we all should have that attitude about our loved ones all the time because we never know when we're going to lose them."

* * *

Maria won that meet and every other race she participated in. Only one girl in the state had a better time than she did. The two were destined to collide at the state meet with unblemished records. One of them, if not both, would fail in their attempt to go undefeated. Both were only sophomores.

The day of the state meet dawned clear and cold. Bambi's stocking cap, which he wore to cover his bald head, fit right in with many of the other spectators who had bundled up to keep warm.

A woman near Bambi started to exercise to get the blood

flowing.

Bambi smiled at her. "Did that warm you up?"

"Certainly did. Unseasonably cold here today."

"No debate from me on that topic. You must have a family member here to brave this cold?"

"Actually we have two. I have a daughter and a son both running today. How about you?"

"I have a daughter running. Where you from?"

"Aberdeen. Our kids go to Roncalli."

"Really. You must know Angela Hawkins?"

"Fairly well. She's been living with us for the last fifteen years. Alicia Hawkins, at your service. My husband went to the car to get something. I'll introduce him when he comes back."

Bambi shook his head. "What a coincidence!"

"Since you have a Madison letter jacket on, I assume you're from Madison?"

"Guilty as charged."

"You must know Maria Masterson?"

Bambi laughed. "Should I start singing, 'It's a Small World After All?'"

"Maria's your daughter?"

Bambi nodded. "This should be interesting. May the best girl win."

"Is Maria's mother here?"

"She was staying in the car until the race is ready to start. She's a bit of a wimp in the cold." Bambi glanced back toward the parking area. "Oh, here she comes now." *I wonder who the guy is walking with her.*

Mrs. Hawkins looked back. "I see another Madison jacket headed this way. Is she walking next to a tall man in a green jacket?"

"That's my Lisa."

"Another coincidence. That's my Roger walking with her."

Bambi laughed again. "Looks like the Hawkins and Masterson families are going to get well acquainted today. I just hope Maria can stay close enough to Angela to make them feel close to one another."

"And I'm hoping they don't notice each other until after the meet is over because Angela has a big lead to keep her mom from worrying."

Bambi smiled. "Looks like we'll have a mini version of Family Feud going here today."

The runners exited from the golf course where they had been

permitted to stretch and keep their bodies warm before the race. Maria was one of the last girls out of the clubhouse. She jogged over to Bambi and Lisa on the way to the starting line. The first thing she did was give her dad a hug.

"This one's for you, Dad."

The Hawkins girl was also talking to her parents.

Bambi pointed to Angela. "Did you get a chance to meet Angela?"

Maria shook her head.

Bambi took her arm and pulled her over to the group from Aberdeen. "Alicia and Roger, I'd like to introduce you to my daughter, Maria."

Maria gave them one of her gleaming smiles. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. And this is our daughter, Angela."

Angela turned and looked Maria up and down. "So you're the Masterson girl who's going to eat my dust today."

Maria's mouth dropped open. The Hawkins girl turned and headed toward the starting line.

Maria's eyes narrowed as she watched the retreating figure.

"Don't you have to go line up, honey?" Lisa asked.

"Yeah. I do. I have a war to go to." She jogged toward the girls already getting ready for the start.

Bambi watched the angry posture of his daughter recede. *Looks like we'll have a full-blown version of a family feud going here today.*

Alicia touched Bambi's shoulder. "Sorry about our daughter's attitude. We've been trying to break her of that cockiness, but it ain't working."

"It's OK. She's a kid. Somebody will come along someday and take her down a peg. Some people just have to learn the hard way." *I hope Maria's the one who does it, and today's the day Angela gets schooled.*

Due to her second best time in the state, Maria was positioned right next to Angela at the front of the pack for the start. The two immediately separated from the crowd, Angela in the lead with Maria playing her shadow.

The girls got smaller and smaller until they disappeared after cresting a hill on the course. Bambi put a pair of binoculars to his eyes. When they came into view again, he smiled. "Maria is still right on her heels. They're way ahead of the next group of runners. Looks like we've got us a two-girl race."

The loop back course allowed the spectators to get another

close-up view of the participants as they ran by. Maria still trailed by two steps.

Bambi cupped his hands and yelled. "Hang in there, Maria. Halfway home." He looked over at Alicia Hawkins. Maria definitely had her worried.

The lead runners reached the turnaround point and headed back to the finish. Bambi kept everyone in hearing distance up to date on the status of the leaders, which hadn't changed the entire race.

The yelling started to pick up as the girls loomed on the near horizon. As they got closer everyone could see that Maria had pulled out of the shadows and was now running side by side with the Aberdeen girl. The shouting increased in intensity, and Bambi joined in with the loudest of them.

Maria pulled slightly ahead, but just before they reached the finish line, the Hawkins girl put on a final sprint and crossed just in front of the Madison runner. Maria, who had her eyes straight ahead the whole time, didn't realize she had lost immediately. Despite her exhaustion, she was trying to do what her dad had always taught her, to keep moving after the race to walk off the lactic acid and get her breathing back to normal.

On her walk back toward the fans, Maria gritted her teeth and attempted to congratulate the winner by offering a handshake. Her outstretched hand was ignored. Maria stood there for a moment and then shook her head and walked away toward where her parents stood, right next to the Hawkins family.

She walked up and took the jacket from the outstretched arms of her mother, put the jacket on, and then threw herself into her father's arms. "Daddy, I'm so sorry I let you down." She began to sob.

Bambi patted her back. "Honey, you didn't let me down. You got second place in the state. You broke your best time by fifteen seconds. There is absolutely nothing in the world for you to feel bad about right now."

When Maria finally let go of her dad, she turned to find Angela Hawkins standing nearby looking contemptuously at her.

"Some people are real cry babies," Angela said aloud and walked away.

Maria started going after her. Bambi grabbed her and pulled her into his body again. "I think you need another hug, honey."

"I need to wipe that smile off her face."

"Yes, you do. But not by confrontation. Do it by running your feet, not your mouth or fists. Understood?"

"I understand turning the other cheek, Dad, but this time it's just too hard."

"Do it for me, honey. The strongest person in the world is the one who controls himself or herself. Believe me, I already had to repent for my harsh feelings toward her. People like that need our prayers, Maria, not our anger."

"You're right, as usual. If somebody else should smack her alongside of the head, is it OK if I rejoice just a little?"

Bambi chuckled. "You're human. I think a little bit would be OK. I might even find that a bit satisfying myself, but we both would have to repent the next day."

Chapter 11

Maria walked into the bedroom that Bambi had converted into an office. He was busy cutting out newspaper clippings and putting them into a scrapbook.

"Hi, Dad. How you feeling?"

"Not too bad today. It's been a week since my last chemo treatment. The side effects are wearing off."

"That's good. When do you go back for a checkup?"

"Next week. We'll find out if all this toxic stuff has been doing its job and killing the bad cells along with the good ones."

"I sure hope you get a good report. Whatcha doin' here?"

"Making myself a scrapbook of your exploits."

"I already have one."

Bambi nodded. "I know, pumpkin, but this one is for me. When you leave home, you'll want to take yours with you, so we need one to keep here at the house."

"Did your parents keep one of your daring deeds on the basketball court?"

"Nope. I started one in college, but the high school opportunity flew right by. Now with the modern technology, we can add video and digital photos to the memorabilia pile. Good thing your mom is handy with the video camera. If I had to take the shots, whoever watched the results would get carsick watching them. I do more bouncing around than a basketball with flubber."

"There's not much excitement to filming a cross-country race, unless it's a close finish like at state."

"Nevertheless, I get a kick out of seeing you run on the silver screen."

"I wish you had more film of you playing basketball?"

"Me too. Wouldn't that be a kick to watch yourself play basketball over thirty years later?"

"Since I'm only sixteen, I can't even fathom thirty years from now. However, by then I'll probably be excited to see myself run."

"Bank on it."

"Dad, can I ask you a difficult question?"

"As long as I'm not being graded on the answer."

"I promise this one won't show up on your report card." Maria

scratched her forehead. "Actually it might, but not here on Earth. Do you ever get mad at God?"

"Ooh. You're right. That is a tough question." Bambi played with his stocking cap, which he even wore in the house. "I guess, if I was going to be perfectly honest, I'd have to say affirmative on the anger thing."

"About your cancer?"

"Sometimes."

"It's just not fair. There are so many bad guys in this world that get away with all kinds of stuff, and you're the one who gets stricken with cancer."

"I'm not the only one. There were over half a million people in the United States that died just last year from cancer. I saw a statistic that said the one out of three people eventually will die from cancer."

"Wow! That's more than the population of Wyoming. It would be like every year every resident of Wyoming passes away from cancer. That's mind-boggling."

"That's true. Now back to your question, kiddo. Some days when I'm feeling yucky, it gets hard not to whine a bit about my fate. But I keep looking to Romans 8:28."

"All things work together for good to them who love God and are called according to his purpose."

"Bingo. Lots of people grab on to that verse. The part that is a little foggy is 'called according to his purpose.' Who is called? Does that include everybody? The end of that verse is somewhat ignored. It says that these people will be conformed into the image of Jesus that he might be the firstborn of many brethren. That reminds me of what Christ went through on the cross. How can I sit here and throw a pity party for myself because I'm battling a little pain and some sickness, and my life might be snuffed out at fifty something?"

"Do you think that Jesus struggled at all with having to go through the ordeal he did?" Maria asked.

Bambi nodded. "Remember, he told his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, but if not thy will be done, not mine. I'm trying to use that as my model. I say, 'Lord if my death can be of any benefit to your kingdom and it's your will that I leave my family and friends behind, then I embrace it.' But if it is your will that I should live, then work a miracle in my life. This is the only way I've found to combat the bitterness and anger that I'm tempted to spew out."

Maria turned away. He gently turned her back toward him and

wiped teardrops from her cheeks.

"Oh, Dad. The only way Mom and I can handle this is to do the same thing. The mother of Jesus suffered almost as much as he did and then had to remain alive to remember it all. If you die, you're suffering will be all over instantaneously. Death really impacts the living more than the deceased."

"You're absolutely right. We need to embrace this together as a family. I think your mother needs to join us in a conversation along these lines. Your grandparents should probably be involved as well. In a way, I need to write up a new compact that says we will strive to do everything we can to bring God's kingdom to Earth. I had a great idea when I was a kid. But now I've put away the things of a child, and I see the purpose of man more clearly. We chase after fortune and fame and other attractive but worthless junk, but miss out on what we should be striving for."

"Becoming more like Jesus?"

"That's part of it. Ironically, though, that should be the outcome more than being the goal. If we set out to become like Jesus, we start looking in the mirror and measuring our progress and focusing on ourselves. It's like Peter trying to walk on water. He started to sink as soon as he took his eyes off Jesus. We can do wonderful things in this life if we step out in bold faith and keep our eyes on the author of the miracle."

"Maybe I should quit running. After all, I'm just out there trying to set PR's and winning medals and trophies. It's all vanity, isn't it?"

"I'd like to tell you no, honey, but in a way, you're absolutely right. However, you can work for God's kingdom through this. Because you're a star, people look up to you and give you a chance to speak into their lives. Maybe God gave you this talent so you can use it for his kingdom. Paul said we all have a race set before us, and we need to run the good race. In your case, this might literally be true. You'll have the chance to minister to lots of young ladies over the years – if you seek the opportunity."

"I never looked at running as a ministry before."

Bambi smiled. "I once ran in a road race next to a guy who wore a T-shirt which read 'Jesus Lives' on the front and 'Glory to God' on the back. He was witnessing coming and going. I never got a chance to talk to him. Maybe he wasn't the kind of guy who could witness to other people about Jesus through verbal communications. He let his T-shirt and his running do the talking."

"I don't think the coach will let me wear something like that in a meet."

Bambi laughed. "Obviously. You'll have to wear your Jesus Lives mentality on your face. If you light up other's lives like you light up mine, the message will get through."

Maria gazed at her father's face. Impulsively she melted into his arms and held him. "Have I ever told you I love you?"

"Not nearly enough. It sets my heart to fluttering every time you do."

"In that case, I love you. I love you. I love you."

"Whoa. Take it easy, or I might have a heart attack from all that fluttering. And save a few of those for the future."

"Dad, I've got lots more for the future."

* * *

Maria was sitting on the couch doing homework when Bambi quietly slipped in the front door after his workday. He snuck up on her and put his hands over her eyes. "Guess who?"

"Aren't I a little old to be playing that game?"

"No matter how old you get, you'll always be my little girl."

"Maybe so, but that doesn't mean I'll always play little girl games." She got up from the couch and gave him a big hug.

"By the way, Maria, a little bird told me you've been engaged in some extra-curricular activities that you never told me about."

"What do you mean?"

"Basketball."

"I should have known that you'd find about it."

"Honey, I think it's wonderful. Why did you keep it a secret?" Bambi asked.

"Dad, I didn't tell you because I was waiting to make the team first. And I didn't make it, so it's all a moot point."

"I thought you didn't like to play basketball. What prompted you to try out?"

"I was doing it for you. Everyone knows how you wanted a boy who could follow your footsteps on the basketball court. I can't do that, but I could at least give you some pleasure of participating. Now that hope is gone up in smoke."

Bambi lovingly took Maria's chin in his hand and pulled her head up. "Maria, you don't have to be on a basketball team to please me. Every time I hear your voice or see your face, I have pleasure. That was a wonderful thing you did, but it was totally unnecessary. Besides, you're a cheerleader for the boys, so you're part of the basketball team. So cheer up. I wouldn't want you suffering through a few months of doing something your heart wasn't into just for me. Capeesh?"

Maria nodded. "I get it."

"In that case, your face should break out in a smile to light up my life."

"You're not going to sing that song to me, are you?"

"No. I'll spare you the misery. Speaking of singing, if you want to do something that brings me pleasure and you like to do, perhaps you could get into a singing ministry."

"How?"

"I'll talk to the worship leader at church and see if they are looking for people to do solos or sing in groups. Hearing you sing a song that touches people's hearts would be even more satisfying to me than you making the starting five of the basketball team."

Her face sculpted the smile he was waiting for. "Really?"

"You bet your booties."

"Dad, you taught me not to gamble."

Bambi smacked his palm into the side of his head. "Silly me. I never stopped to think about what that expression meant. How does 'no fake, Jake' work?"

"Whatever, Dad. I get the point, and I'd like to do it."

"Totally cool. By the way, I got a report back from the doctor."

Maria's smile froze.

"He said that the progress of the cancer is stopped."

"You're cured?"

"No, honey. It's a Mexican standoff right now. I'm holding my own, and so is the cancer."

Maria nodded.

Bambi went into the bedroom to change his clothes. The sound of music emanated from the living room. Soon Maria's voice joined the melody, causing Bambi to smile. *That's my angel!*

* * *

"Lisa! Are you ready to go? We need to get on the road!"

She came through the doorway carrying a couple of suitcases.

"Let me play the gentleman and carry those out to the car for you."

"Are you sure you're up to that and the long trip?"

"I'm feeling fine. In fact the spring seems to be rejuvenating me."

"We're sharing this fight. I'll carry one bag and you can carry the other."

Bambi rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Whatever. Let's get going. I don't want to get out there and miss part of the meet."

"Just our luck that they're having the state meet in Rapid City

this year. Usually it's in Sioux Falls, and we wouldn't have to drive very far."

"Oh, well. I haven't been on a trip in a while. It'll do us both good."

"Maybe. If you get too tired, let me know, and I'll put over so you can rest."

"Lisa, you're going to be driving. What do you think I'll be doing in the passenger seat besides resting?"

"Maybe chewing your fingernails down to the cuticle worrying about my driving."

"That's a distinct possibility," Bambi said.

"If you get scared, just do what I'll be doing."

"What's that?"

"Closing my eyes."

"Now I feel really warm and cuddly inside."

"Just don't nag me. I hate having someone critique my driving while I'm doing it. If you want to turn in a review on my performance, do so at the motel, double-spaced with a twelve-point font."

Bambi laughed. "Looks like I better go to sleep then. I need the shuteye anyway."

He opened the trunk and added Lisa's suitcases to the ones he had packed earlier. They jumped in the car, and Lisa got them started on their 400-mile journey.

About eight blocks from home, Bambi said, "You did put the video camera in your suitcase, right?"

Lisa didn't answer. She flipped on her blinker and made a left turn twice, heading right back toward their house.

"Dang good thing I asked that question now instead of near Chamberlain."

"Next time you might try asking before we leave the house."

Bambi nodded. *Will there be a next time? Is this the last chance I'll have to see Maria run?*

* * *

The car came to a stop. Bambi opened his eyes and looked out the window. A familiar sight greeted him. They were at the rest stop along the Missouri River near Chamberlain. It was a family tradition to stop here whenever they traveled through in order to look out on the expanse of water below them, winding around the rolling hills like a serpent. A few puffy clouds adorned the spring sky, and the scent of wildflowers filled the air. Bambi thought about a magazine article he'd read about *Dances with Wolves*, which was filmed a few miles to the northwest of their current

location. The big city people working on the movie reported they had fallen in love with the area. That knowledge had forced him to realize he took his beautiful homeland for granted. All the people in the state combined wouldn't provide enough people to make the top-ten list of cities in the US. He gazed at the somewhat primitive land around him. *Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam.*

Lisa put her arm around him. He could sense she was feeling the power of the land also. They had talked about it on numerous occasions. They could have moved to another area and made a lot more money. The weather was sometimes brutal and the incessant wind annoying, but South Dakota was the place they had mutually chosen to live and die.

"I love this spot. It would be great to live here."

"Maybe, Bambi, but if you lived here, you'd get used to it and you wouldn't get the same chill you get every time we stop by."

"You're right. Familiarity might not always breed contempt, but it does breed...I don't have a word for it. Let's call it the spirit of taking things for granted."

"I don't know a noun that applies there either, but that's a great way of looking at it."

Bambi smiled. "Are you ready to go again? We really need to push on."

"Sure. We can maybe stop here for a longer period of time when we come back home."

"Do you want me to drive for a while?"

"I'm doing just fine. You keep resting! Today we'll even the score for all those trips when you insisted on driving the whole way. Actually we won't even it, just balance it out a little bit."

"What can I say? I'm a control freak, and I admit it. When someone else is behind the wheel of a car that I'm in, they're in control of my life. One false move on their part, and I could be dead or a quadriplegic. I don't like putting that power in other people's hands if I can help it."

"I understand, Bambi. The trouble is that when you're on the highway, you're putting your life in control of other motorists. Do you realize when we're going down a two-lane highway, we're only inches away from a head on collision the whole trip. If some idiot reaches down to change the radio station or something at the wrong time, they might wander into your lane. You're never going to have total control of your own destiny."

"After suffering from cancer, I'm totally aware of that fact, my dear."

A few hours later they pulled into Wall to fill up the tank with gasoline. Bambi did the honors with the gas pump while Lisa cleaned the windows.

"You know, Lisa, I think this is the first time I've ever been to Wall without visiting Wall Drug. It seems weird knowing it's just down the street there, and we won't be going to drink of the ambience."

"We'll try to make up for it on the way back. It's too bad we couldn't have come a day earlier to do our sightseeing thing."

Bambi replaced the gas hose. "This does seem more like a business trip, doesn't it? Maria has a little business to take care of with a little girl with a big mouth from Aberdeen."

An hour later the Mastersons passed the first freeway exit for Rapid City, one of many. Bambi got out the map he had printed off the Internet from MapsOnUs. "This is the most sprawling town I have ever seen. We want to take the third exit." He looked down at his watch. "We have fifteen minutes till the meet starts."

"We can miss the first part of the meet, can't we? We just don't want to miss Maria."

"Honey, the 3200 meter is the first race of the night session. Apparently I didn't do a very good job communicating that to you."

Her voice went up an octave as she pressed down on the accelerator "I don't think you communicated that to me at all."

"I swore I told you."

She shook her head. He closed his eyes and counted to ten. And then fifty.

"OK, There's the third exit. Which way do I go from there?"

"Take a left."

After they had negotiated the exit, Bambi looked down at the speedometer. They were going forty. A speed limit sign flashed by. It had a big three and a zero on it.

Bambi cleared his throat. "Just don't get picked up for—"

A flashing blue light behind them stopped him in mid-sentence.

"What were you saying, honey?" Lisa asked.

"Too late."

Lisa hit the brakes and slowed down. "Maybe he's going to a crime scene."

Instead of flying past her in the left lane the squad car pulled in close behind the Masterson car in the right lane.

"I don't think so, unless you consider speeding a crime." Bambi slammed his hand down on the dashboard as Lisa pulled

the car off as far right as she could get.

"I'm sorry, Bambi."

She rolled down the window as the officer approached. He hadn't even made it all the way to Lisa's side before she began to wail. "I'm sorry officer that I was going to fast, but I have to get my husband to the stadium ASAP. He has cancer."

The officer was standing next to the window by the time Lisa's sentence ended. He took off his hat and wiped his brow. "Ma'am, do you mean your husband has cancer, and you have to get him to the hospital, ASAP?"

"No, to the stadium where the state track meet is being held. Our daughter is running in just a few minutes, and he's going to miss it. This might be the last...." She put her hand over her mouth and then glanced over at Bambi.

"Ma'am, I like track myself. I wished I wasn't working today so I could watch the meet, especially the battle between the Masterson girl and the Hawkins girl that the papers are all writing about."

"That's her! That's our daughter! Maria Masterson. We're going to miss her race!" Lisa began to cry.

The officer looked over at Bambi. "I shouldn't be doing this. In fact I should be writing out a speeding ticket, but follow me. I'll get you there on time." He literally ran back to his car.

Bambi gripped Lisa's arm. "Honey, snap out of it. The nice policeman is going to escort us to the track so get ready to follow. I can't believe he's doing this."

A few minutes later, they pulled into the parking lot. Bambi waved at the law officer as they went by him into the parking lot, and he tipped his hat. Lisa drove right up to the stadium entrance.

"You take the video camera and get in there. I'll park the car and come find you."

Bambi looked at his watch. He didn't like the plan, but there wasn't any choice. There was one minute till the race was scheduled. He scrambled out of the car as soon as it stopped. *Luckily the line for tickets is short.* A gun went off before he got through the line. *Dang!*

After what seemed like an hour he finally got his ticket and made it through the gate. He got his video camera out and mounted it on the tripod. He scanned the track to find Maria, but there was no sign of her.

A voice over the loudspeaker called out, "Last call for the class A 3200 meters."

What? Last call? Then...oh, man! Bambi slapped himself

along the side of the head and then bent down and turned off the video camera.

A few minutes later Lisa found him. "Did you get here in time?"

Bambi nodded.

"Are you recording?"

He shook his head.

"What's the problem?"

"Maria's not in this race."

Lisa's mouth dropped open. "What? Did she scratch?"

"Did she have an itch? Lisa, this is class B. We got here with probably fifteen minutes to spare."

Lisa stared at him for a second and then looked back at the track. "There's Maria down there getting loose." She threw her head back and laughed. "I'm so embarrassed. We hijacked a Rapid City policeman all for naught. We'd have gotten here in plenty of time."

"If we didn't get lost, and if he didn't take forever in writing that ticket."

Lisa put her hand up to her cheek. "Oh, my. I did talk him out of a speeding ticket on top of the escort."

"Yes, you did. When you start bawling, men just can't resist your charms."

"Lance Masterson! You're making it sound like I manipulated the guy. I simply had an emotional reaction. There was no hidden agenda."

Bambi used his best Swedish accent when he replied. "Yeah, sure, you betcha."

Lisa clenched her fist. "One of these days! To the moon, Bambi."

He laughed. "Better put that fist back in the holster. I wouldn't want to see you get arrested again today."

"OK, funny boy. Since we have time until Maria runs, let's go find the best place to record from. I suspect you took the first open spot you found."

"Bingo. Good idea, honey. I knew I brought you along for something."

"Besides driving?"

"And video-recording. Now that you're here, this baby's all yours."

They found a good spot, and Lisa set up the tripod where she wanted it. A few minutes later the last straggler crossed the finish line and the runners from the class A contest started moving up to

the starting line. The runners peeled off their sweat clothes and handed them to teammates before lining up. When the starter gave a signal the runners on the outside moved up to their stagger spot. Maria and Angela both started from the inside lane. They wouldn't have to break to the pole on the other side of the track, a distinct advantage. The gun went off and so did the pack.

Just like in cross-country, Angela had the best time and Maria the second best time in the state. A few runners on the outside sprinted to the inside and took the lead. The two favorites passed them all before they finished the second lap. Maria dogged Angela's footsteps just like she had done in cross-country. Toward the end of the seventh lap Angela pulled up next to a teammate to lap her, but instead of being passed, the slower runner put on a burst of speed to keep pace with the leader of the race.

"I don't like that, Lisa," Bambi said.

"Don't like what?"

"It looks like they're trying to box Maria out."

"Bambi, how can two people box her out? She can go around them."

"Yeah by swinging out wide. She'd burn some precious energy besides having to run a little further. And also it messes up her concentration. I think she's already in doubt about which lane to run in."

"Is that legal?"

"As long as they don't do something blatant, they can just claim they were both running at the same pace. There is no rule against that, but they can't intentionally impede her progress." He stood up and yelled, "Stay with them, Maria," and then sat back down so he didn't obstruct the view of the people behind him.

As the bell sounded for the final lap, Angela and her teammate put on burst of speed. Angela went past her teammate and settled into the first lane before they reached the turn. The other girl veered to the outside and pulled up on Angela's side again.

"Oh, man. They caught Maria unprepared."

"What's the difference?"

Now the other girl is running the extra distance. Come on, Maria. Don't try to pass them on the turn."

"Why shouldn't she pass on the turn?"

"Because the other girls will speed up, causing Maria to run for a while in the third lane which would make even more extra distance."

"She's back to running in Angela's footsteps."

"That's good, but she can't do that the whole race or she comes in second again. She has to make a move."

As soon as they rounded the curve and hit the straightaway, Maria put on a burst and pulled to the outside. The other girls sped up to match. The three flew down the track together. Maria couldn't get around the blockade. The last curve of the race loomed.

Bambi stood up again. "She ain't gonna make it. She'll lose momentum if she slows down to get back to the inside lane and then goes to the outside again. She's toast." He looked back and saw that everyone else had stood up too for the finale of this exciting race, so he stayed on his feet. Lisa joined him.

Maria chose the evil of running the extra distance and kept trying to pass. Angela opened up a lead using the advantage of the curve. Maria forged by the other girl and got far enough past her to take the second lane before the curve was completed. Another burst took her past Angela, but not far enough to take the inside position and cause the Aberdeen girl to have to pass to the outside. The two thundered toward the finish line as the crowd roared. The third girl walked off the track and dropped onto the infield. Shortly before the finish line, Maria slowed.

"She's spent! She used too much energy to get by them and now she's wasted. Look at her stride. Her form is gone, meaning she's struggling just to get to the finish line now."

Maria arrived but Angela preceded her across the line. Maria staggered down the track after she coasted to a walk. It was obvious she was having trouble walking it off.

Everyone sat back down as the rest of the runners continued circling the spongy oval.

Lisa had her hands up on her head. "There are moments in life when I wish I could be unladylike and not suffer any guilt pangs."

"I know the feeling."

"You're trying to be ladylike?"

"No, I mean I wish I could rip out a few cuss words without feeling like a dork afterward. Unfortunately, I know there is no vacation from being a Christian. Blot out your conscience, and you may never get back on the right road again."

"Is that what happens to people who fall away from God?"

"I think so, in some cases. They get mad and let it blow and decide they like not worrying about their behavior."

"Can we file some kind of protest against Aberdeen for playing dirty?"

"I can't. The coach has that power. I doubt the officials would do anything about it. It was obvious to us, since we're biased toward our daughter, but not blatant. They have to give the benefit of the doubt, although there is no doubt in my mind what just happened. Watertown did the same thing to one of our guys back in high school. I never forgot that, but, unfortunately, I never warned Maria about it either. I'm not sure what she could have done differently though. She played it pretty smart and ran a great race. She has nothing to be ashamed about."

"She's going to be disappointed that she didn't win for you."

"I know. Another father-daughter talk will cure that. All I expect from her is her best effort. We saw that today, and I couldn't be prouder."

"Make sure you let her know that."

"Duh!"

"I can't stand seeing her lose to this girl. And she has two more years to run into her."

"I know. Reminds me of my high school basketball days with Huron. We just couldn't ever beat them."

"Until the last game," Lisa said.

"Yep. We did get them once, when it really counted."

"Maria is going to get this girl too."

"I hope so, Lisa. I hope so."

"Maybe tomorrow in the 1600 meter."

"Maybe, but Maria seems stronger in the longer distance. Angela is faster. Next year Maria needs to work on building up her speed. I'd be pleasantly surprised if she wins tomorrow, but don't get your hopes up too high."

* * *

The Mastersons arrived the next morning at the restaurant where the Madison team was having breakfast. There was no sign of the kids yet. Instead of taking a table, they sat in the waiting area and chatted. A few minutes later, a horde of maroon-clad athletes descended upon them. Several of the kids greeted the Mastersons as they walked by. Maria was one of the last to enter. She gave her dad a hug first and then her mom.

Bambi put his arm around her shoulders and escorted her toward the tables. "Do you mind if we sit near you?"

"How about I sit with you?"

"We don't want to take you away from your teammates, but we want to be close enough to hear you laugh and talk."

"Dad, I'm not doing much laughing today. Yesterday was too painful."

"I hear you, but life goes on. What happened last night is ancient history. Gone, except in the memory banks. Today is a fresh start. Use what lessons yesterday can teach you to build a better tomorrow."

"Dad, you talk like some kind of commercial."

"Maybe so, kiddo, but what I'm selling is more important than any product those yahoos have for sale."

"Exactly what are you selling, Dad?"

"I'm actually giving it away. Attitude and optimism and hope."

"You're never beat till you quit mentality."

"I'm kind of partial to that phrase."

"I tried to live it out yesterday, but I guess I quit."

"You didn't quit, Maria. Your body just couldn't keep up with your spirit. Lactic acid has a way of bringing people down to earth. Mind over matter works to a certain point, but when the muscles can't get the nutrition and oxygen to do their work and can't get rid of the waste material, you're going to grind to a halt."

"So what good is attitude then?"

"Your attitude allows you to go out there and train your body so that it can be more efficient at processing. You raise the threshold where lactic acid kicks in. And also you overcome the mind which thinks the body has reached its limit long before it really has."

"No pain, no gain?"

"A lot of people don't like that expression, but it's true. If you don't push your body, and that involves pain, it will never improve. We're talking the good pain here though, the pain of effort. Not pain in a knee or something that is injured. That kind of pain does not lead to gain."

"Gotcha. Well, I'd better sit down and figure out what I'm going to eat to replenish all I spent yesterday."

Bambi grinned. "And the school is paying for this one, not me. I like it."

* * *

After breakfast, Bambi and Lisa escorted Maria back to the bus.

"Maybe the coach would let me ride back with you guys. And we could go see Mt. Rushmore before we head back and hit Wall Drug and stop at the river."

"Don't you want to be with your team?" Lisa asked.

"I'll have spent two full days with them as of this evening. I think that is plenty, and I'd like to spend some time with Dad."

Bambi nodded. "I like the plan. Let me talk to the coach."

When Bambi came back to the car, he was carrying a piece of paper.

"What's that?" Lisa asked.

"That's a release form saying that we are acquitting the school of all responsibility for Maria's safety, etcetera. We have to fill it out, sign it and give it to the coach before we can hijack our daughter."

"Sounds easy enough. Should be a fun trip home, especially if Maria can upset Angela this afternoon."

"And if Angela loses, she'll definitely be upset. She's bad enough to be around when she wins, I'd hate to see what she's like when she loses. Wait, check that. I'd love to see what she's like as a loser."

Lisa held up her hand in the shape of an 'L'.

Bambi laughed. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

* * *

The long wait was over. The participants for the class A 1600 meters were in place.

"Come on, Maria. You can do it!" Lisa yelled.

Maria wasn't paying any attention to the crowd. Her focus was on 400 meters of track and one girl from Aberdeen Roncalli in a green and gold uniform.

"I hope the coach has Maria try to take the lead on this one. Her hope is to make Angela have to work so hard in the beginning of the race that she doesn't have that lethal kick left at the end. The only way to do that is for Maria to set the pace."

"Did you tell her that?"

"I'm not her coach. I don't want to interfere."

"Even if it's for her benefit?"

"That's an arbitrary thing. I've been on the other end of the coaching spectrum. It's no fun having other cooks trying to get into your kitchen. I'm not sure it will help for her to set the pace, but I think it's her only shot."

The gun went off and a large group of brightly clad girls exploded from the starting line. Maria settled in right behind Angela once again and followed her for two laps. On the third she passed her and Angela played shadow. Maria couldn't ditch her. As they finished the final turn, Angela put on a burst. Maria tried to counter. The two brought the crowd to their feet again as they neared the finish line neck and neck. Unfortunately, Angela's neck was the first one that flashed by the finish line. For the third time in succession, Maria had tasted defeat at Angela's hands.

The disappointed Madison fans sat back down and grieved.

Bambi started to kick the bleacher and then thought better of it. Inflicting an injury on himself wasn't going to cure the hold in his heart that gripped him right now. The memory of kicking the bleachers in eighth grade floated back to him. That little tantrum had altered the course of his life. *What would my life have been like if I hadn't gotten fed up and decided to do something about it? In this case, there is nothing I can do. Or is there? Maybe I can research and find some way for Maria to enhance her performance through training or nutrition. Maybe I can help her get over the hump.*

"A penny for your thoughts," Lisa said.

"I'm not sure they're worth a penny."

"You're funny, and absolutely wrong. They're worth much more than a penny."

"To you, maybe."

"And to other people around us."

"Why is that, Lisa? Is that because our daughter is a track star? Ever notice how all of sudden, we were important people in town again. Sometimes athletics seem like the most important thing in the world to people."

"And?"

"And that's wrong. I wonder what God thinks about it all. Have we set up our little idols that we worship? Little trophies with engraved images that we bow down to. Homage that we pay to those who excel."

"My, I got much more than a penny's worth. I bet you have even more to say," Lisa said.

"You're right. I've lived this thing from not only both sides but from three. I was a star athlete, I coached, and now I'm the father of a celebrity. People treat you differently when you're involved in athletics. You gain some kind of hero status or something, but when the playing is over, that glory fades as new people take the stage."

"Are you bragging or complaining?"

"I think I'm whining. It was nice to be treated special, and a person can get used to that kind of treatment, but it's hard to cope without it later. The crazy thing is people go around treating athletes like they're better than other people. Athletic prowess should be way down on the totem pole of priority."

"That kind of talk sounds funny coming from a jock."

"Ex-jock. I suppose it does. In fact, it feels funny coming out of my mouth."

"So athletes shouldn't be treated special?"

"Let me rephrase that. Everyone should be treated special, as long as they live honorably. Some dirtbag can't live like scum and then expect to be treated special."

"Maybe that kind of person needs the love more than anyone else."

Bambi frowned. "Maybe. It's pretty hard to dish it out to them, though."

"Jesus said that even the heathens love those that love them."

"I think I've gotten myself into a thicket here. Maybe I better shut up before I get hung up on the thorns. Anyway, when Maria graduates in a couple of years, we'll just be regular people again. People that go out of their way to say hi to us because our daughter is a mini-celebrity will no longer bother."

"Do you like that attention?"

"Honey, we all want to be considered important in life. It's natural to want people to like us. I just wish people could go out of their way to treat people nice just because they live by the golden rule. They give what they want to get. If everybody is living that way, we have a happy community. But, for some reason, we dole out our love and praise as if they are money coming out of our wallet, and we only make so much."

"I get what you mean. And the ironic thing is, if we give out that love, it will produce more love, giving us even more to share with others, which then gives us even more love which—"

"The opposite of a vicious cycle. How would we phrase that?"

"I don't know. The ripple effect maybe. Oh. Look. Zeke's getting ready to run the boys 1600-meter race."

"What's up with Zeke anyway? I haven't seen him hanging out with Maria for a long time."

"He asked Maria to go steady with him. She told him she didn't have time for a boyfriend."

"Didn't have time! How much time does she need for that?"

"I don't know. She decided that any time it took away from her chance to be with you was too much."

Bambi's face scrunched up in pain. "Why does she do that? I keep telling her to quit sacrificing for me."

"Because she's a good kid. You don't like spending time with her?"

"Of course I love to spend time with her. It's just that I don't want her to miss out on life because of me."

"Listen, hubby, dear. She feels she'll miss out if she doesn't take this opportunity to be with her dad. She'll have lots of time later to develop relationships with other kids, including that special

boy she'll meet someday. I think she's right, so stick a cork in it, Lance."

"Ooh. Since you never call me Lance except when you're upset, I'd better get the cork ready."

"Darn right."

After Zeke finished fifth in the boy's race, Lisa looked over at Bambi. He had the pained expression on his face again. "Now what did I say to bug you?"

Bambi shook his head. "Lisa, I'm not feeling very good. I think I need to go back to the motel."

"That bad?"

Bambi nodded.

Lisa stood up and grabbed the camera and tripod. "Let's go then. Luckily Maria is all done running now."

On the way to the motel, Lisa glanced over at Bambi. His face was racked with pain and his arms were wrapped around his abdomen.

Through clenched teeth Bambi said, "I hate to do this to you, but I think a change of plans is in order. I think you need to take me to the hospital instead of the motel."

"I don't know where it is."

"Neither do I. We'll have to stop and ask for directions at a gas station or something."

It took them about fifteen minutes to arrive at their destination. "Do I have to go through ER or can we just go through the front desk?" Bambi asked.

"They're not going to admit you to the hospital unless a doctor recommends it and you won't see a doctor unless we do the ER thing."

Bambi nodded. "I was afraid of that. I hate making such a fuss over a little pain."

Lisa pulled the car up to the emergency room door. Bambi clutched his arms tightly as he tried to exit the car.

"You stay here, Bambi. I'll go get someone with a wheelchair."

He sank back into his seat and moaned.

* * *

The Madison team gathered around their coaches.

"We don't have anyone left to run. We can sit here and watch the rest of the meet or we can head back to Madison now. We're going to get home about three a.m. if we stick it out to the end. I'm going to put it to a vote. Majority rules here. All of you that want to take off now raise your hands."

The coach didn't even need to count. Only a few hands

stayed down.

"OK. Let's pack it up and get out of here."

Maria walked over to the coach. "My parents are going to take me home, right?"

"Maria, I haven't got the permission slip from your dad yet."

"They were probably going to give it to you at the end of the meet."

"You better hurry over and find them and get it, or you'll have to come with us."

Maria sprinted to the track. Luckily the next event hadn't started yet and she was able to cross the oval to reach the bleachers. She found the small contingent of Madison fans and climbed the bleachers to reach them. After scanning the group and not finding her parents, Maria tapped one of the other parents on the shoulder. "Have you seen my mom and dad?"

"Yeah. They were here earlier." The woman turned to a neighbor and posed the question. It was like a verbal bucket brigade. After several people fielded the question, the answer came back the same way the question had gone out. "Somebody on the other end said that your dad wasn't feeling well, so your mom took him back to the motel."

Maria looked up at the sky. She said "thanks" loud enough so that most of the human chain could hear her appreciation. Despite having raced three miles in the last two days, she had one more sprint in her to get back to her coach's side.

"My parents left. They went back to the motel."

The coach shook his head. "I'm sorry, Maria. We can't leave you behind."

Maria signed heavily. "I understand." She grabbed her duffle bag, entered the bus, and dropped into one of the seats. She immediately began to pray.

* * *

Lisa was furious. It took over an hour before Bambi actually got some attention. After a doctor had seen and admitted him, Lisa paced the room. "I don't know what to do. I think I need to get back to the track and get Maria."

Bambi nodded. "I'll be fine by myself. I left the permission slip on the back seat. Make sure you take that to her coach. I'll see you when you get back."

Lisa got lost on her way back to the stadium. After several futile efforts to find the place, she resorted to prayer and pulled the car up into a parking lot. When she finished praying, she noticed someone walking through the lot. She rolled down the

window. "Is there any chance you can tell me how to get to the stadium?"

When the person answered in the affirmative, Lisa wrote down the directions and offered her gratitude. A short while later she pulled into the parking lot at the track. "Lord, why do we always come to you after we fail in our own efforts?" She grabbed the permission slip and jogged to the stadium. After searching in vain for the team, she ended up in the bleachers where a few Madison fans still remained.

"The team left for home about twenty minutes ago."

Lisa looked at her watch. If she hadn't gotten lost, she might have made it on time. She fought back the urge to scream and returned to her car. "Oh, God, why didn't I write down the instructions on how to get back to the hospital? I don't have Bambi here to guide me. Can you show me the way back?"

She tried to clear her mind and remember the previous journey. Memories clicked in, and she found the hospital on the first try. She thought of Maria sitting on a school bus going down US-90 with no knowledge that her father was in the hospital. Luckily she had a key to the house, so she would be able to get in when she got home. They wouldn't arrive until after one in the morning. The urge to scream gripped her again.

Bambi was unconscious when she returned to the room. The nurse said he'd been given a painkiller and a sedative. There was no sense in her staying there. If she had to drive home in the morning, she needed to get some sleep. One more time she navigated her way around the streets of Rapid City until she found the motel. The first thing she did was call home and leave a message on the answering machine telling Maria what was going on. Then she put on her nightclothes and entered the lonely bed.

As she lay in bed, she cried out, "Lord, why can't things go according to plan?" Lisa wasn't sure, but she thought a silent voice in her head said, "Whose plan?" She fell asleep pondering that possibility and the prospect of sleeping alone in the future.

* * *

The next morning, Lisa faced a new dilemma. She couldn't decide whether to pack up everything and take it to the hospital or wait until she found out if Bambi would be able to travel. She finally decided that they could get the motel room back or get another one. After turning in the key, she drove back to the hospital.

Bambi was awake, but not totally alert. The drugs were interfering with his thought processes.

"Get me out of here. Let's go home."

"We need to have the doctor examine you first. You can't just check yourself out."

"I've seen them do it in the movies," he said.

"Yeah. It's like a jailbreak."

"But this is a free country. Why can't a man do what he wants to do?"

"I'm not going to argue with you. And also, I'm not going to bust you outta here."

"I shouldn't have married a nurse."

"You didn't. You married a schoolteacher."

"Who became a nurse," Bambi said.

"That's right, buddy. And now you're stuck with me."

"Actually, you're the one who's stuck, but probably not for very long."

"Bambi, please don't talk like that. Those aren't fighting words. Those are surrender terms."

"I know, honey. It's so easy to fight something like cancer in your mind when you're healthy. When you aren't feeling good and suddenly that theoretical illness is more real than anything you've ever known, you find the struggle mighty hard to maintain."

"I know, Bambi. This is the kind of thing nurses see every day. How are you feeling?"

"Much better, but still not good."

"Are you up for the long trip home?"

"I don't want Maria back there by herself. I'm going to be sick here even if I stay, so I might as well go home and be sick in the comfort of my own house."

The doctor walked in.

"Eh, what's up, Doc?"

The doctor chuckled. "Obviously your wife is."

"She probably showed up hoping to eat my delicious hospital breakfast that I won't want to eat."

"You're not hungry?"

"Not for food. I'm hungry to get back home."

"How's the pain today?"

"Just a fraction of what it was last night. Not bad at all and certainly not enough to keep me from making the trip."

"You need to get back to your doctor and have him perform the necessary tests to find out what's going on inside you."

"I know. The sooner I get on the road, the sooner I can see my doc."

"You're sure you don't want to stick around for breakfast?" the

doctor asked.

"It's really hard to pass up that offer, Doc, but I've got willpower."

"OK. I'll sign you out of here. In addition, I'll give you another shot of pain pills you can take if the trip back home proves to be too painful to bear."

"I appreciate that, Doc. Kind of hard to stop in Podunk City and pick up that kind of stuff along the way."

"You're right. And there is no hospital between Rapid City and Chamberlain. Good luck."

"Thanks, Doc."

After the required paperwork was signed and Bambi got dressed, a wheelchair arrived to carry him to the car.

The Mastersons were halfway back to Chamberlain when Lisa turned to Bambi and said, "This is the perfect case of why we need to have at least one cell phone. We could call Maria right now or vice versa if we had one."

"OK, I surrender. Just don't let me catch you driving with one of those things in your hand. Cars are dangerous enough without taking your mind off the road to carry on a conversation about fluff."

"Fluff? Who talks about fluff?"

"Most of the women and teenagers I know."

"Well, I'm not like most women."

"I know. Why do you think I married you?"

Before they reached the river, Bambi took the extra shot of painkiller. He, who had always felt guilty about taking aspirin, had fought it for a while but gave in to the desire to be free of the stabbing feeling in his gut. While he was doing that, Lisa made a collect call home and told Maria to expect them in a few hours.

Bambi wasn't awake when Lisa made the final turn into their driveway. She looked at him and tried to blot out the picture of cancer patients she had watched deteriorate through the procession of changes that took place in their body. Some were not even recognizable at the end. She shuddered. "Lord, give me strength!"

Lisa's voice caused Bambi to stir. "Were you talking to me?"

"I was going over your head this time. Wake up, sleepyhead. We're home."

Maria ran out and helped her father into the house while Lisa took care of the suitcases. The long trip had zapped both husband and wife. Maria ended up tucking both of them into bed.

Chapter 12

Bambi heard a voice off to his right. He looked over at the other bed in the room. Lisa hadn't been happy that no private rooms were available, but her unhappiness hadn't freed up any rooms. "What did you say?"

"I said, what you in here for?"

"Cancer."

"What a small world. Me too. The name's Doug Hardy."

"Bambi Masterson."

"Bambi? What kind of name is that for a man?"

"Call me Lance if you don't like Bambi."

"I will. Bambi sounds like a girl, one who wears skimpy clothing and poses in magazines."

Bambi shook his head. "I can just see the centerfold of *Cancer Today* with my photo. A hospital gown is pretty skimpy."

"So what do you do to pass the time?"

"What time?"

"Time in the hospital and waiting rooms and your own bed at home. I call it near-dead time."

"I haven't had that much. I was in remission until recently. I was feeling pretty good actually, able to work and even do some exercise," Bambi said.

"I'm jealous. My body hasn't been able to do squat. I'm not letting the mind degenerate though. I've been busy reading. Ever hear of Charles Darwin?"

"Well, of course."

"What do you think of his theory?"

Bambi shrugged. "I don't pay much attention to his theory. I was a history teacher, not a science teacher. Now I don't even bother thinking about history."

"Better be careful, young fella, or you'll stop thinking all together. You know the brain is like a muscle. If you don't exercise it, you'll atrophy."

"It's not that I don't think. My mind is on survival and my family right now. I don't have time to worry about science."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Of course."

"And his son, Jesus Christ too. Ex-governor Joe Foss once said that anyone that didn't have sawdust in his head knew that Jesus was the Son of God."

"I don't have sawdust."

"So you're a Christian then?"

"Yeah. But what does that have to do with Charles Darwin?"

"What if people used Charles Darwin's theory to prove there is no God?"

Bambi sat up in the bed. "That's crazy. You can't prove there is a God, and you can't prove there isn't one, at least not the kind of proof that a jury accepts."

"You know that, and I know that, but that doesn't stop some people from believing that science has studied all the evidence and ruled that there is no doubt that God was created in man's image."

"What? Do you have that backwards?"

"No. What I mean is that man invented God. Religion and the need for God is something evolved within us, just like sonic abilities evolved in some animals and birds, and the ability of newborn birds and butterflies to migrate thousands of miles to a place they've never been. It all started out with nothing, and now we have everything."

"That's loco."

"Which is crazy, that religion evolved or the idea that some men say that religion evolved."

"Frankly, both, though I shouldn't be surprised at anything humans say after being on this planet for over fifty years."

"I agree that to think God is a something man made up is wacky, but I can prove to you that men are teaching that religion evolved. Ever heard of Dr. Phillip Johnson?"

Bambi shook his head. "Does he work with cancer patients?"

Doug laughed, creating a vision in Bambi's memory of a starving pirate from a Swashbuckler movie. He was trying to remember which movie it was as Doug continued.

"Dr. Johnson has a PhD in law. He was an instructor at Cal Berkley."

"In evolutionary law?"

"Good one, sonny." He whistled the 's' like the cartoon beaver. "He taught lawyers how to think logically and how to argue and get criminals off the hook. Actually the evolutionists do believe that law evolved also. Everything evolved to help us survive."

Bambi lay back down and stared at the ceiling. *Why did I have to room with a psycho?*

"You're probably wondering what Philip Johnson and Darwin have in common with one another."

"Not very hard. There were some other things that I was wondering about though," Bambi said.

"Well, they both expressed their doubts about evolution."

Bambi sat back up. "Darwin expressed his doubt about it? I thought he wrote in favor of it."

"Oh, he did. But he also brought up a lot of things that were weaknesses in his arguments. Ever hear about the fossil gap?"

That must be the distance between two hospital beds containing two sick old men.

"Have you, sonny?"

"No, Doug. The only fossils I'm familiar with are the skeletons my family keeps in the closet. We don't let them out to play."

Doug cackled again. "Well, Darwin said himself that if his theory held any water, there would be transitional fossils. If a reptile became a bird, there must have been some half-reptile half-bird creatures leaving their carcasses behind as evidence."

"Are there?"

"Not even close. There are more gaps in the fossil record than wrinkles on the butt of an elephant."

"And now, what do wrinkles on an elephant have to do with God?"

"I'm talking about people who embrace the theory that man evolved from ape-like creatures, which evolved from dog-like creatures or something – which evolved from rat-like creatures or something – which evolved from reptiles – which evolved from amphibians – which evolved ultimately from a one-celled creature way back in the beginning. They can believe anything they want to, but they are forcing our schoolteachers to teach this junk-science not as a scientific theory but rather as a proven fact."

"What?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Duh."

A nurse walked into the room. "How are you gentlemen doing?"

"Just fine," Doug said. "What time do you get off work, sweetie?" The whistling 's' tortured Bambi's hearing again, reminding him of fingernails on a chalkboard.

"Sorry. My husband frowns upon me dating strange men, especially young and handsome ones."

"Rats. Say, nurse, could I get you to do me a favor?"

"If it's not immoral or illegal."

"Neither of those. Would you take this over to that young man in the other bed?" He held up a book.

"Not a problem." She grabbed the book and took it over to Bambi.

He was going to refuse to take it but decided perhaps he could pretend to read it and shut Doug up. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Welcome. You men call if you need anything. OK?"

"Will do, mildew," Doug said.

Bambi opened up the book.

"I guess that original cell that spawned all of life is the scientists' version of Adam."

Bambi put the book down and looked at his roommate. "Doug, if you want me to read the book, you need to quit interrupting."

"Sorry. I can take a subtle hint. I'll go back to my book. I've got some more when you finish that one."

"I'm not going to be here long enough to read even one, especially if you keep talking."

Doug zippered his lips shut and opened up his own book.

Bambi sighed. He couldn't turn the TV on now because Doug would be upset. *Might as well read the dang book. Anything's gotta beat staring at the ceiling all day.*

The reading flowed much easier than Bambi had imagined. He expected a dry documentary that would bore him to tears. This certainly wasn't doing that. He found himself racing along as if he was reading a spy thriller. When the nurse came in to serve lunch, he was hesitant to put the book down, so he didn't. He read and fed himself at the same time.

By the time Lisa and Maria arrived to visit him, he had reached the end of the book. He went back twice to read one passage that amazed and bothered him.

"Find something you like there, sonny?"

"Actually I found something I don't like. Listen to this quote from some guy named P. Z. Myers. 'I say, screw the polite words and careful rhetoric. It's time for scientists to break out the steel-toed boots and brass knuckles, and get out there and hammer on the lunatics and idiots. If you don't care enough for the truth to fight for it, then get out of the way.' I find it extremely objectionable to entertain the vision of some Nazi storm trooper breaking down my door to persuade me to believe that Darwin's view of the world was absolutely right on without any questions. This totally blows my mind."

"I told you, sonny. Makes me angry enough you could fry an egg on my bald skull. Are you familiar with the ACLU?"

"ACLU. Ah, is that the group that goes around forcing city governments to remove nativity scenes from public property?"

"Bingo. Funny thing is, way back in 1925 they fought for academic freedom so that evolution could be taught in the schools. Today they fight so that only evolution can be taught. Funny how their sense of freedom has changed over eighty years. Now we have the freedom to accept that we are descended from dumb animals and not made in the image of almighty God."

"How can they force us to think how they want us to?"

"They can't. But they can enforce what's taught. So college graduates are pouring out of the schools with the idea that science knows all. Because some scientists invented cell phones, and computers and airplanes, they are infallible. As Johnson so aptly puts it, they abandon scientific principles to embrace historical science which can't be tested in the lab and claim it adheres to the rules of scientific method because so many scientists believe the same thing. So we have science by consensus now, majority rules. And what is worse is that science is taught to kids all over the world, telling them in essence that Christianity can't be true."

"Johnson mentioned that some of the people arguing for evolution believe in God."

"Maybe so, sonny, but put this in your pipe and chew on it. If Homo sapiens evolved, the Bible story of God creating man from the dirt and breathing life into him is a crock. If that story is a crock, what does that say about the rest of the Bible?"

"I see your point. Not exactly a ringing endorsement for inerrancy."

"You're understating it, boy. That would lead one to believe that the whole thing's hogwash."

Bambi looked down at the book in his hands and shook his head. *How could I have been unaware of what is going on in the world?* He was consumed by his job and his family. And now by cancer. His residence was a small city isolated in the sticks, but that didn't give him an excuse to be ignorant of this situation. His mind raced. Was this not a threat to freedom of religion and speech? How far could things go in this direction?

"Doug, You say there are other books on this topic?"

"Lots of 'em. You've just seen the tip of the Titanic."

Maria and Lisa walked into the room, depriving Bambi of the opportunity to ask any more questions. After introducing them to Doug, Bambi had Lisa pull the curtain around his bed so they could have some privacy.

"What did the doctor say?" Maria asked.

"Just as we figured, the cancer went back on the warpath. I'm going to have to do some more radiation and chemo. I had the first dose already."

Maria bit her lip. "When can you come home?"

"That's the good news. I can go home with you this afternoon, as soon as the doctor comes back to official give me my walking papers. Or should I say wheelchair papers. Don't these people let anyone do anything on their own?"

After they chatted for a while and Bambi got caught up on what was happening at home, including a celebration for the girls' track team's third place plaque, the doctor interrupted them.

"Are you ready to take this young man home?"

Bambi looked all around him. "Who's he talking about?"

Maria rolled her eyes. "You, Dad."

"That's funny. I'm older than he is."

The doctor laughed. "He's right. I never heard anyone over twenty-one fight so hard to prove they're older than someone else."

"Dad likes to fight for truth."

Bambi's brow furrowed. *I used to. Do I still?*

After all the busywork was accomplished, Bambi prepared to make his getaway. He stopped over at Doug's bed and handed him the book. "Well, sonny, what did you think? Did you maybe decide Doug wasn't as crazy as you first thought?"

Bambi's mouth fell open. "Ahh. This was definitely some eye-opening material. I intend to follow up on it when I get home. Thanks for sharing that with me."

"Good for you, boy. We need more soldiers in the war."

"War?"

"You don't need a hearing aid. There may not be any uniforms and bloodshed, but there is lots of shooting going on and lots of smoke billowing though it's usually accompanied by mirrors."

Bambi sensed that his family was going to miss dinner if he didn't pull himself away from Doug's desire to share everything he knew. He reached out a hand and shook Doug's. "Take care of yourself, and God bless."

"You do the same, sonny. It was a pleasure to meet you. I'm sure it was part of God's plan."

On the way out the door, Maria asked, "What did he mean by God's plan?"

"I'm not sure, Maria, but I aim to find out."

* * *

A week later when Bambi was back in the doctor's office for his treatment, the doctor handed him a stack of books.

"What's this for? Do I have to study now to fight cancer?"

"Not a bad suggestion, Lance, but these aren't about cancer. This is a gift to you. Doug Hardy passed away a few days ago. He asked his family to make sure that if anything happened to him, these books passed on to you."

Bambi was stunned. He'd only been with the guy for a few hours. Bambi had spent most of that time reading. "He didn't look that bad. I thought he was hanging in there."

"In Doug's case the cancer didn't kill him directly, but I suspect the treatments took their toll. He actually died from a heart attack."

One soldier less to fight the war. You need to take his place. Since when do I think in second person? Bambi shook his head violently. *Lord, are you trying to send me a message?*

"Are you all right, Lance?"

"Fine. Just fine, Doc."

* * *

Bambi went into the convenience store and bought a pack of yellow highlighters. When he got home, he opened up the *Darwin On Trial* book again and began to read. Whenever he found a particularly key passage, he traced through the words with the highlighter. It took him a week to finish in that method as opposed to reading it in one day the first time. However, he only got to read in stolen moments because he was back at work. He didn't want to rob time from his family to do this reading, but he couldn't help but remember that thought in the second person telling him he was to be a replacement soldier for Doug. *Could that have been God speaking to me? Does he want me involved in this controversy?*

He hit the pastor up after church one day and asked about it.

"We try to stay focused on Jesus here, and try not to get sidetracked into issues which might alienate people."

"Don't make waves, is that it?"

"That's a crude way of explaining it. We just preach faith and grace and let those other churches worry about engaging the culture. We're not here to fight the unbelievers but to convert them."

"Is there any point where you draw the line in the sand?"

The pastor shrugged. "I don't know, Lance. We'd rather just look at the footprints in the sand laid down by Jesus carrying us through the tough times."

Bambi thanked him for his time and drove home to

contemplate the response. Maybe the pastor is right. Fighting will just widen the gap between believers and non-believers. There are people like Philip Johnson to carry the banner against evolution. Maybe the churches should stay out of it. On the other hand, if churches vacate the intellectual turf totally and freedom to preach salvation is taken away, who will there be to blame? God, help me here. I don't want to waste my time on something that isn't your will. If you want me to get involved in this fight, you need to show me somehow. I know it's an adulterous generation that seeks a sign, but I think in this case a sign is justified. Forgive me if I'm being presumptuous.

* * *

That Sunday after church, the pastor asked Bambi into his study. Bambi was anxious to find out why he was being summoned to the office. After having him sit down and offering coffee, which Bambi turned down, the pastor got to the point. "Remember the conversation we had the other day about evolution?"

"How could I forget? I've replayed it several times."

"Wipe it from your mind. I've changed my position."

"What? How can you make a 180-degree turn in four days?"

"Four days ago I didn't know that my favorite nephew had renounced Christ to embrace the enlightenment of atheism and evolution."

"Are you serious?"

"I wish I wasn't. That kid is like my own son. He was on fire for the Lord until he went to college. Now he's telling the rest of the family how foolish they are to follow myths."

Bambi ran his fingers through his hair. "So what do you want from me?"

"I want to help you fight it."

"What about making waves?"

"The more the merrier. I don't care how many feathers I ruffle as long as God's truth prevails."

"To tell you the truth, Pastor, I wasn't sure I was going to fight. I was waiting for a sign from God."

"I think you just got it."

Bambi nodded slowly. "It looks that way. To tell you the truth, I don't know enough to do much fighting yet. There are more gaps in my knowledge than wrinkles on an elephant's rear end."

The pastor laughed. "Where did you come up with that one?"

"Same place I found out that a lie is being sold as the truth, and everyone who won't accept the lie is considered crazy or

stupid.”

“Why don’t you study from your end, and I’ll study from mine and we’ll meet in the middle? Kind of like those two railroads in Utah. And then we’ll come together to put together a sermon and pound a giant golden spike into the ground.”

“Wow. That’s a lot of trust you’re putting in me to come through.”

“Yep. I have confidence that you’re the man.”

* * *

On the way home, Bambi explained to Lisa and Maria his new commission. “I’d like to bounce new findings off you guys to help me remember and see if you understand my explanation.”

“No problem, Dad. We’re here to support you.”

Lisa nodded. “Your fight is our fight.”

“Hold on. I don’t want you fighting. I think it will be wise for you guys to keep low. I’m not sure how much animosity I’m going to trigger by standing up for this belief. From what I read about, it could be considerable.” So I fight, and you help me load my gun.”

“Sounds like woman’s work,” Maria said scornfully.

“What are you, the Bionic Man?”

“OK, so I’m a woman, but that doesn’t mean I can’t fight.”

“If you want to fight, get yourself in shape to outspint a green and gold uniform to the finish line. You do that, and you’ll be giving me the energy to fight: both evolution and cancer.”

“That process is already underway. I just want you to remember that I’m here for you, whatever you need of me.”

“OK, Pumpkin. I’ll remember.”

* * *

Three months later, shortly before the start of Maria’s junior year in high school, the pastor and Bambi delivered a tag-team sermon. The pastor opened with a testimony of the creative genius of God and the majesty of his work that testified of him and his great love.

Bambi stood before the congregation. Normally in a situation like this, he was a bundle of nerves. Today, however, he was as calm as a lake at sunrise and feeling healthier than he had for a long time. He looked out on all the people expectantly waiting for him to open his mouth and say something inspiring.

“There is a segment of the population of Earth that not only doesn’t give honor and glory to God for his creation, but rather seeks to give credit for the work of God’s hands to Lady Luck. The crown of God’s handiwork, made in his image, we humans, are just distant ancestors of a bacteria or protozoa. Our entire life is

just a series of chemical reactions, and we are simply dust in the wind. The awe-inspiring universe, which we see part of from our vantage point on Earth, is simply the result of a giant explosion of a small amount of matter. The laws of gravity and thermodynamics, etcetera, which were involved in the creation of that universe just happened to somehow be in place at the time of the bang. Where did the small amount of matter come from, and how did the law of gravity come into existence? These questions can't be answered. Yet that fact poses no obstacle to those who wish to deny the authenticity of God's signature on his masterpiece.

"For thousands of years man has wondered if he was related to the rest of the living things around him. The Greek philosophers believed in what they called the 'Chain of Life'. Fast forward to 1859 when Charles Darwin published a book he had taken several years to write. Mr. Darwin had a new concept of a 'thing' called Natural Selection which somehow gives the power of non-directed mutations in an organism to jump the species barrier and create new forms of life. How? 'It's easy', say some proponents of evolution. You just need a tweak in one gene and a change takes place. Interesting stuff."

Bambi made a pregnant pause. "But where do genes come from? Where does DNA come from? How about RNA? DNA is the maker of protein, yet it is made out of protein itself. Which came first, the DNA or the protein? Where did that first cell come from in all its complexity and glory? For you see, a cell is not a hunk of protoplasm as was suspected back in the days of Darwin. If Sir Charles had been privy to the activity which goes on in cell, he probably wouldn't have had the audacity to suggest a cell could form from a bunch of molecules going bump in the night. He didn't have an opportunity to study how DNA folds up to fit into the tiny space it occupies. The double helix would have given Darwin double heartburn. The cell is a tiny factory which has the ability to produce a replica of itself. A factory to make factories you might say. It defies natural explanation. But you see, scientists are forced to only accept natural or materialistic evidence for the explanation of the origins of life because someone decided at some point that was 'the scientific way'. Things that cannot be tested, kicked, measured, probed, seen, tasted, heard, and smelled are outside the realm of science. If someone or something created the universe and life, then obviously that creator is outside of his creation. The only problem is that rule doesn't apply to the theory of evolution. In this situation, scientific

speculation is given the status of scientific fact because so many scientists accept it as true.

“Do we want science to be decided by opinion? Let’s look at some examples. Louis Pasteur was considered crazy by many of his contemporaries because he thought disease was caused by invisible organisms. One doctor was run out of the hospital because he tried to get the surgeons to wash their hands. I can cite other examples of people with truth being rejected by the scientific world. With their track record, why should people consider their opinions to be the gospel truth? This is especially dangerous because they use their clout to attack the veracity of the gospel. They make statements like we don’t need God because we figured out how the universe works. Man is not a special creature, and the Earth is not a special planet. It’s very ironic. Scientists will say we are egotistic and arrogant as a race to consider ourselves higher than the animals. Yet these people claim to understand the secrets of the universe, but they don’t consider that an egotistic notion.

“Many of you know I am suffering from cancer. This is a disease where a body’s own cells turn traitor and refuse to do their duty. It is an example of an unseen enemy attacking the body from within. Some other diseases deceive the body into attacking healthy and vital cells, bringing self-destruction. And when the effect of their work becomes evident, it is usually too late to defeat them. I bring you an analogy. Support for evolution is a cancer within the body of Christ. It is silently fooling the body and causing destructive behavior. It’s not readily visible yet, but I say to you that the day is coming when Christianity will discover the growth within it that would bring death. Will Christians recognize the danger in time and apply the necessary treatment? I don’t know. I am here to sound the alarm. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to do so, but I’ll continue as long as I have the strength. The huge question looms up in my mind: Will anyone pay attention to me and others who have seen the darkness and are pointing it out? Or will we be laughed at and called alarmists and Chicken Littles? Only God knows at this point.”

Bambi took his seat in the pew next to Maria and Lisa. He wasn’t sure how his presentation was received. *It doesn’t matter. I did what God called me to do. The results are in his hands.*

A few people came up to him after the service and congratulated him on a fine talk. Of course Maria and Lisa insisted he had done an awesome job, but he discounted their opinions due to bias.

* * *

A couple of weeks later, Maria ran in her first home cross-country meet of the year. She had no problem winning again. The notable thing for Bambi about that event was a discussion he had with the pastor, who had come to watch the kids from their church participate.

"Lance, I've gotten some grumbling about my involvement in preaching against evolution from the pastoral board. They've suggested very strongly that I curtail my activity in that arena."

Bambi felt his jaw tighten. "Are you serious?"

"Never so serious in my life."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I have two alternate paths. I can stifle the need I feel to shout from the rooftops that 'the atheists are coming the atheists are coming', or I can find a new job, whether as a pastor or in some other capacity."

"You'd actually give up your ministry?"

"No, I said I'd give up the job so I could keep the ministry. I never want to be in a position where I'm a hired puppet who only preaches the words that are comfortable to the congregation. God called us to a life of responsibility and character and not comfort."

"I hear you, Rev."

"I just wanted you to know that I might be departing in the near future. I know you could change churches and go somewhere more favorable to the cultural engagement worldview. It might be God's will that you stay and change the congregation instead of letting the congregation change you. As pastor, I wouldn't be in a position to try that."

Bambi nodded.

* * *

A bit later in the season, the biology teacher from the high school walked over to Bambi at a cross-country meet. "I understand you're crusading against evolution."

Bambi grinned. "I always did like that word 'crusader'. Makes me sound noble and brave, doesn't it?"

"If you're fighting for a worthy cause, yeah. If you're tilting at windmills, it makes you look idiotic as well as quixotic."

"So, evolution is just a windmill."

"That's about the size of it. And windmills were very important contrivances back in the old days. They were used to bring up water from the ground or to grind meal. Destroying a windmill would be an antisocial thing to do."

"Antisocial?"

The young biology teacher nodded.

"Let me get this straight. Charles Darwin and others have questioned the humanitarian practice of caring for the sick and weak. Sir Charles said it circumvents the work of natural selection. If people can't survive on their own, they should die. Now that's what I call antisocial. Look at where that idea was put into practice: Nazi Germany, Russia under Stalin. Need I go further?"

"There is absolutely no connection with Darwin and Hitler. That's just a scare tactic used by those who refuse to accept evolution. The word 'Hitler' throws fear into people."

"As well it should, but I stand by what I said. Study yourself and find out the types of quotes made by Hitler and his top aides concerning evolution and their implementation of it socially. Don't take my word for it."

The teacher snorted. "No worry about that. What about the work they're doing in the laboratory these days with evolving bacteria, and the gene studies they are doing to show the similarity between human and chimp DNA?"

"I only have one question concerning the bacteria. What did they evolve into?"

"Bacteria that can resist certain antibiotics."

"You didn't answer my question. What did they evolve into? Oh wait, you did say they are still bacteria, right? I'm not arguing that life forms don't change. I'm arguing against the idea that all life sprang up from those types of slight changes to a simple creature over 4.5 billion years. So your example of mutating bacteria which remain bacteria doesn't faze me."

"What about the DNA similarities?"

"Seems to me that every year a new story emerges on DNA. What about the so-called junk DNA, which all of sudden seems to be important? Where does RNA fit into the picture? How come if the chimp genome is so close to humans, why are there so many differences?"

"Scientists are even able to tell when the genome split occurred and man branched off," the teacher stated.

Bambi looked at the young man. "Isn't that amazing? And who is able to argue with such a farfetched notion? Is somebody going to borrow Marty McFly's time travel car and go back into the past to check on the accuracy of such dates?"

"You're a hard nut to crack."

"Thank you very much, though the use of the word 'nut' could be suspect here. Let me ask you a question."

"Shoot. I hope you don't take that literally."

Bambi smiled. "Touché. Look at those athletes over there. The purpose of biology is to study bodies such as those and figure out how they work. Through that examination, scientists have discovered muscles and tendons and ligaments and how they work together. Just for jollies, explain to me how muscles evolved, how they developed the oppositional nature required to compensate. And how did the brain get control of these muscles which seemed to find all the right places in the body for movement?"

"Mutations and natural selection."

Bambi laughed. "I thought so. It's very easy to quote that phrase. But it's very hard to go back in time and draw a sketch of how life got to where it is today."

"Well, we know where life is today. The only way life could have arrived at this state is by mutation acted upon by natural selection."

"That's what you say."

"Me and all the top scientists."

"Wrong. There are lots of scientists who don't buy the evolutionary theory at all, some of them Nobel Prize winners. One of those guys said that evolution was perhaps the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on mankind."

"Everybody has their own opinion."

"I'm still waiting for you to explain how the muscles and all their accompanying parts evolved. Did a creature have a mutation and a muscle fiber appeared floating free in its body? And then the offspring of that creature added another muscle fiber. And pretty soon there were a whole bunch of muscle fibers available for duty with the mechanical genius to lift many times their weight? And then there are the tendons and ligaments to explain. And how about the skeletal system they attach to that make the muscles meaningful? And then the brain and nerves had to get involved in the picture. Give me a step-by-step, play-by-play call of how such evolution could happen."

"Science doesn't know everything – yet," the teacher said.

Bambi rolled his eyes. "Scientists can't even agree on whether eating eggs is harmful to our health or not. And that's something taking place in the here and now. How can they explain something that took place billions of years ago? Actually, that's not my question. It's easy to see how they can explain it. What I meant is how do they explain it accurately?"

"Through study of the fossils."

"Do you mean Nebraska man? Or Piltdown man? Or

Bambiraptor? I like that name.”

“You creationists are all the same. You always bring up those same lame examples.”

“Hello-o! Of course we do. If AMC motors claimed they had invented the greatest car in the world, would you perhaps mention the words Pacer, Gremlin and Matador in questioning their hype?”

“I don’t know what those are.”

“Those are automobiles that made the Edsel look like a dream car.”

“I don’t get it. What’s your point?”

“My point is, when you’ve been sold clunkers in the past, you tend not to listen to advertising hype in the future. If some of the most influential fossil finds have proven to be hoaxes or fakes or just plain misinterpretations, why should the public accept other suspect fossils as proof that they aren’t created by a supernatural being of great intelligence? To put it bluntly, the witness of the scientific community in regard to origins is suspect due to past lies.”

“The scientific world has brought the standard of life to where it is by harnessing the world of physics around us such as sound and light.”

“No arguments there. I’m not trying to condemn science itself. I’m trying to expose a small piece of the scientific world which seems to be the tail wagging the dog. That little thing called evolution which is said to be the glue that holds all sciences together and yet is not used in the practical application of any of them. Isn’t that ironic?”

“You’ve been brainwashed,” the biology teacher said.

“Speaking of brains, let me shoot this one past you. I’m a computer programmer by trade. I write computer programs all the time. Scientists have discovered the makeup of life resembles computer code and the electric signals that pass the data through the circuits of the body, and the information storage capability. The brain is like a computer. So who wrote the first program to control the hardware at the low level? And then who wrote the software which allows a human embryo to develop from a single cell? I don’t understand how anyone in the line of computer work can accept that all of this code developed through mutations. In the first place, they don’t account for the information required to write the secondary programs and the operating system that causes the programs to function in the way they do.”

“Those code sequences have been tweaked by scientists to cause mutations.”

“So? I used to take assembler programs that *PC Magazine* provided free. I’d tweak them to change the color of the text on the screen or the wording or something like that, but I had no clue how to put the thing together from scratch. And sometimes when I tweaked the code, I locked up my machine and had to reboot. I was smart enough to figure out how some of the easy stuff worked, but the complex stuff was just plain over my head and required a superior intellect to create.”

“Maybe you just aren’t a very good programmer.”

“Perhaps. But let me point out this fact. Bill Gates said that DNA contains a program much more complex than Microsoft ever wrote. I’m sure there are some pretty proud programmers who think their code is a work of genius. How can they deal with the idea that nature through a combination of time and chance could write code that makes theirs pale in comparison to its brilliance? It’s so funny to think about it. Most programmers are loath to let another intelligent programmer tweak their code. To suggest that their code could be enhanced by mutations to the base language is absolutely ludicrous. I can’t understand how scientists can believe that something too complex for them to understand in totality came together through chance.”

“But you don’t understand. It has been said that nothing in biology makes sense except through evolution.”

Bambi reached into his pocket. “What a coincidence. I was just doing some research on that very quotation. There was a guy named Phillip Skell who asked seventy top researchers if they would have done their work differently if they thought Darwin was wrong. They all answered that they wouldn’t have. Another guy named A. S. Wilkins said that evolution would appear to be the indispensable unifying idea and at the same time, a highly superfluous one.”

A look of frustration came over the young man’s face. “So what do you want? Do you want to teach Biblical creation in science class?”

“No. I think the solution to this dilemma is very simple. When you teach biology, present material on what we can observe and test. Stay out of the speculative arena of origins, what I refer to as the religion of evolution.”

“I can see that this discussion is going nowhere. You seem to have your opinion carved in granite.”

“That’s not true. My opinion is open to change if you can provide me details of what the mutations were that allowed an amphibian to become a reptile and a reptile to become a mammal.

How do small mutations change a creature from a cold-blooded animal to a warm-blooded one? It's easy to say draw a tree of life and say that animal A begat animal B which begat animal C, D, and E, etcetera. Telling me how that could have happened, much less how it did happen, is a challenge that you can't meet."

The young teacher shook his head and walked away.

* * *

Maria won the race again that day, setting a record for the local course in the process. She continued to win every meet for the rest of the season as well. Angela Hawkins did the same in her part of the state. The two were set to clash once again as unbeaten runners at the state meet.

Chapter 13

"Are you sure you up to this?" Lisa asked. "You haven't been looking so good lately."

"Thanks a lot for making my day."

"You're still the hunk of my heart. I meant that you've been looking worn out, and your color isn't very good."

"I'm going to be fine. Believe me, I'd have to be almost dead to miss this rematch with Ms Hawkins."

"Yeah, I know. Let's get going then. Luckily, we only have to go to Brookings, a quick forty-minute trip."

The trip passed uneventfully. The weather was perfect for a cross-country meet, and Lisa didn't have to wait in the car until the last-minute this year. Ironically the Mastersons bumped into the Hawkins family almost immediately. They exchanged pleasantries. After a sufficient period of time, Bambi excused them, and they went and found a different vantage point to watch the race.

"You didn't want to watch with the Hawkins this year?" Lisa asked.

"Nope. The memory of their daughter's remarks to Maria are still burning me after a year."

"But that wasn't her parents' fault."

"You're right, Lisa, but do you remember them saying one thing to chastise Angela for her behavior?"

Lisa shook her head.

"I rest my case. She's been spoiled. You have to lay some of that blame at the parents' feet. Now, let's move on to a more pleasant conversation."

"Like what?"

"Almost anything will fit into that category. How about cold toilet seats?"

Lisa laughed. "Speaking of toilets, I'd better use one before the race starts."

"Sounds like a good plan. Let me walk you to the honey bucket, honey."

There were two available port-a-potties so they were able to both get in immediately. Bambi's heart fell when he saw that there

was blood in his urine. He hadn't mentioned to Lisa that his abdominal pain was back. He wasn't about to say anything about either of these problems today. This was going to be a special day and not one on which to share bad news.

When the girls started to get lined up for the start, Bambi couldn't help but notice the stares that flashed between Maria and her rival. He'd seen less intensity from two boxers about to pound on each other.

The gun went off and the large field of females took off. As usual, Maria and Angela led the pack. They were neck and neck when they passed by the spectators again. Bambi had the binoculars trained on them when suddenly Angela pulled up.

"Oh my gosh!"

"What happened?" Lisa asked.

"Angela just pulled up. Looked like she pulled a hamstring from the way she hopped on it. Maria is way out in front now and Angela is walking back toward us."

"That's good, isn't it? That means Maria should win."

"That's true. And she'll be the maddest winner of any race ever. She'll never know if she would have beaten Angela fair and square."

"Maria didn't cheat and cause her hamstring to pull."

"No. But Maria didn't actually beat Angela to the finish line either."

Maria held on to win. The look on her face told Bambi that he had correctly guessed her reaction. Instead of stopping, Maria continued jogging away from the finish line down the first part of the course.

"Whew. She has smoke coming out of her ears. She was really geared up to win this one today. This feels like she was robbed."

"I don't care. I'm going to celebrate that she's the state champion. There will be no asterisk on this title for me," Lisa said enthusiastically.

"Maria will eventually get over it too, and she'll relish the victory, but today it's going to feel hollow. In a way, I'm glad she'll be riding home with the team today. It might be hard for me to listen to her pout."

"You can hear a pout?"

"Lisa, that was an example of gross exaggeration, hyperbole I believe they call it."

Lisa tried to do her imitation of Number Five – the robot in Short Circuit. "Oh. humor. Joke. Comedy."

"Dad, are you OK?"

"I don't think so, Pumpkin. Looks like I might have to go to the doctor again."

"I'm so sorry."

"Why? It's not your fault."

"I know that. I'm just sorry that you have to go through all of this."

"You guys are going through it too. My journey is just a little bit more painful than yours."

"I'm not so sure that's the case. My path has been pretty painful just because I love you so much."

"I love you too, kiddo. I wish you hadn't missed out on a chance for a normal childhood because of me."

"For the last time, stop it! That doesn't matter. Besides, it gives me a head start on all the other kids at reaching maturity."

"I think you're already there. Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, Dad."

"When you run, how do you blot out the pain and the knowledge you still have miles to go and you're already tired?"

"That's easy. I have a little mantra. Or perhaps prayer is a more acceptable term. Depending on my cadence I repeat something like 'Love you, Jesus. Glory be to God.'"

"Ahh. I hope the other girls don't know you have help."

"Actually I hope the other girls understand where my help comes from."

"Good answer. I should be ashamed by my version."

"Quit beating yourself up, Dad."

"I'm not strong enough to beat myself up."

"Oh, please don't play that black humor card on me."

"Sorry. I'm always my funniest when it concerns medical worries. I crack up the staff at the hospital."

"They must have a low humor threshold."

"Ooh. Low blow. Quickly changing the subject, did you ever stop to think that life is like a long-distance race?"

"In what way?"

"It's often painful. We get tempted to quit a lot. The winners are the ones that keep on pushing through all the difficulty. Sometimes you reach a point when you're just putting one foot in front of the other. That kind of stuff."

Maria nodded. "Actually I've had some of those thoughts. I can relate to Paul in the Bible telling us to run the good race."

"One more thing, honey. We all get discouraged and need an

uplifting word from someone around us to help us continue running the good race. Always be ready to share that encouragement with those around you who need it."

"I will."

"I think my life might be coming down to the final kick, Maria. I might need to use that mantra of yours if you don't mind. I want to finish strong."

"Oh, Daddy!" She enveloped him in her arms and held him for several minutes. "I don't want to ever let you go."

"Not an option, dear. One day we are destined to be separated until we're reunited in God's kingdom."

Maria started to cry. "Daddy, what do people do when they don't believe in God and they have to face death?"

"I don't know, honey. I'm finding it hard to face, and I know it's just a temporal death. Unless an acorn seed falls into the earth, it can never become a great oak tree. I want to take the attitude of Paul when he said that to live is Christ and to die is Christ. Either way he was with the Lord. That's what I'm trying to reach, but I'm not doing so good. The flesh keeps getting in my way."

"What has the doctor been telling you about your chances?"

"Not very good, Maria. We knew the odds were against me. Right now I'm trying to hold on at least until the state track meet next year. I want to see you and Angela put it all on the line one more time. There's another thing I wanted to talk to you about."

Maria let go of her father so she could look him in the eyes. "What's that?"

"You know I've been on this anti-evolution kick lately. I really feel God has called me to this ministry. I don't want to see my work end when I leave here. I was hoping I could recruit you to take up the baton when my leg is finished."

"What do I have to do?"

"Study like I'm doing now. Pray. And when God is ready to use you, he'll let you know somehow."

"I can do that. I promise I won't let you down."

"Remember, you aren't really doing it for me. You're doing it for God. I won't be around to give you strength to get through the tough times. He will."

"Even when you're gone, you'll be with me, Dad."

"That's about the nicest thing that anyone ever said to me." Bambi had to wipe tears from his cheeks.

* * *

The long winter passed by and track began again. The

promise of spring and new life was absent with Bambi this year. His condition was deteriorating. Not only was he unable to attend several of Maria's meets, but also he was unable to function well enough to keep his job. He alternated between periods of lucidity and confusion, which made even his evolution research almost impossible. One day during one of his lucid moments, he called Lisa into his room.

"Lisa, there's something I need to talk to you about."

She pulled a chair up to the bed and sat as near to him as she could. "OK, Bambi. I'm ready."

"Believe me that this is not easy for me to say, and it probably won't be easy for you to hear, but it needs to be said. We both know it's just a matter of time before I'm gone. There's no sense playing Pollyannaish games anymore. I'm not going to win this fight."

Lisa started to cry. Bambi held his hand out for her to grasp.

"I had a fairly lonely childhood, Lisa, until you came along. I know what it's like to suffer the lack of someone in your life to share things with, whether they're good or bad. It's been such a blessing to have you in my life. Marrying you was the smartest thing I ever did."

"I feel the same way, Bambi."

"I figured you thought that was a smart move on my part."

"No, I mean, marrying you was my smartest decision."

"I'm too weak to argue with you. Anyway, the reason I wanted to talk to you is that I need to release you."

"Release me from what?" Lisa asked.

"From memories of me. If I'm not mistaken, you love me very much, and you might cling to my memory and consider it treasonous to your love if you found someone new to share your feelings and your physical love with."

"You're not mistaken."

"Then pay attention to the second part of what I just said. I don't want you trying to be faithful to me after I'm gone. Your vow was until death do us part. When that separation occurs, I want you to be open to marry another man that God will provide for you to cherish and to honor just like you have me. Are you tracking here?"

"Barely. I don't want to think about this right now."

"I'm glad you don't want to, but I insist that you do. I'd go find a replacement myself if I had the health. Frankly, I don't know anyone who's good enough for you and not already married, or I'd make some recommendations."

"So what do you want from me?"

"I want you to promise to consider yourself totally free and clear of our alliance when I've taken my last breath. Please cherish the time we had together, but be prepared to share the same joy with another man who needs you."

"Hold on one second." Lisa ran to a dresser and pulled out a handkerchief and returned to Bambi's side. After cleaning up her face with the hanky, Lisa turned back to her husband.

"I do promise Lance Masterson that I will obey your request. However, I also promise that I will give thanks to my God every day of my life for the thirty years that he gave us to be together."

"I like that thought, Lisa. However, I would make one suggestion."

"What's that?"

"Don't include that blurb in verbal prayer in your new husband's presence."

* * *

Bambi got out of the hospital just two days before the state track meet. As he was wheeled down to the car, he looked up at Lisa and said, "I'm going."

"Yes, you're going home, Bambi."

"No, that's not what I mean. I'm going to the track meet."

"Honey, you can't—"

"Don't make me get angry. I'm going if it kills me."

"But you can't stand or even sit in the bleachers for that long."

"Rent me a wheelchair."

Lisa looked back at the attendant who was pushing the wheelchair.

"There's a place on Minnesota Avenue that has chairs for rent."

Bambi tried to smile. "We can just take the middle seat out of the van and the chair will fit in there very nicely. Since the meet is in Sioux Falls, we can just drop by on the way to the meet and pick it up."

"You've got things all figured out, haven't you?"

"One of the benefits of not being able to do much else but think."

* * *

On Thursday night, the Masterson family gathered in the family room.

"Maria. I know you watched this movie a long time ago when you were a little girl, but I'd like you to watch it again with us. This

movie has been very special in my life.”

“OK, Daddy.”

“Actually, I think I need to see this one more time. I’ve been avoiding it because of the pain the movie would cause me, but I’m beyond that now. So, with no further ado, here’s our feature film for tonight.” He nodded at Lisa, who pressed the play button on the remote control.

All three were openly weeping when the movie finished. Lisa flicked the off button and they sat there on the couch, Lisa on one side of Bambi and Maria on the other, letting their emotions drain out.

When the tear ducts were empty, Bambi spoke. “I think now would be a good time to pray. Father in Heaven, I come to you and ask a special blessing on these two women you have enriched my life with. Please watch over them and take care of them in my absence. Please heal the wounds and hurts that my bout with cancer might have opened up. Restore to them the joy of life that we once all had. I don’t know why I had to walk through this, but I accept it as your will. Please impress upon Lisa and Maria that though life maybe get hard sometimes, you’re never beat till you quit. And I’m not quitting in this situation, Lord, I’m simply submitting myself to your will. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.”

* * *

On Friday Lisa loaded up the van and helped Bambi make the trek out to the driveway. With some difficulty she got him into the passenger seat and the journey began.

“This will be different. I’m spending the night in Sioux Falls, and I won’t be at the hospital. We can consider this a second honeymoon.”

Lisa smiled. “Seems like we just finished our first one.”

“Yes, it does. But on the other hand that seems like hundreds of years ago as well.”

They stopped, picked up the wheelchair and proceed to the stadium. With a little female persuasion, Lisa was allowed to put Bambi’s wheelchair in a prime location for watching the race. She set up the tripod next to his chair so she could film the action.

The runners had to pass right by Bambi’s chair to get to the starting line. Maria waved and then held out her hands to indicate she didn’t understand something.

“What did that gesture mean?” Bambi asked.

“I don’t know. She’s saying she doesn’t have a clue about something, but I don’t know what.”

"Oh, well. We can find out after the race. Today is the day she teaches Angela Hawkins a lesson."

The runners got positioned and the gun went off. Bambi could see that Maria reached the pole in first place, but Angela wasn't in sight. When the runners arrived on the straightaway leading to the finish line, Bambi scanned every runner in the field trying to find the familiar green and gold uniform. He found such a uniform, but the girl wearing it wasn't Angela.

"I think I know what Maria was trying to tell us."

"What's that?"

"Angela Hawkins isn't running today."

"You know, I didn't see her go by. Wait. There she is!"

"Where?"

"Out on the infield. She's practicing handing off the baton."

"Oh, brother. I know what happened. The coach is running her in the 3200-meter relay instead of the open. I bet that means she's running the open 800-meter race as well. She can run more than two races if she's not in the 3200 meters."

"They have a limit?"

"Yep. They're trying to protect the girls from running too much. At one point, they didn't even let the girls run the 3200 meters."

Without Angela there to push her, Maria didn't run her best race of the year, but she crossed the finish line with a comfortable margin between herself and the second place finisher. She had her first state meet gold medal.

Right after the award ceremony took place for the 3200 meters, Lisa took Bambi to the motel. Twice during the night, Bambi had to get out of bed to heave.

After the second time, which had wakened Lisa, he said, "I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"For waking you up, and for making your life so miserable. You work with sick people all day and then you come home to a sick man. I don't know how you do it."

"Bambi, you don't make my life miserable. I can see where a woman could get really depressed in a situation like this, but your love for me and my love for you transcends all of this. When I imagine you suffering through this alone, I give thanks to God that I could be the one here to comfort you."

"I've said it once and I've said it a million times, you are indeed the blessing of my life. Oh, my gosh. I totally spaced."

"About what?"

"I found out that Mike Bennett is in the Sioux Falls

penitentiary.”

“You mean the Mike Bennett that we went to high school with?”

“The big mouth. Yeah, that’s him. He and I had our moments, I wanna tell you.”

“What did he do to earn his free room and board?”

“Car theft.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“I want to ask another favor of you,” Bambi said.

“Anything, Bambi.”

“I want to go to the prison and visit Mike before we go to the track meet tomorrow.”

“I don’t think you’re strong enough.”

“We can go in the morning and then come back to the motel to rest. Maria doesn’t run until late afternoon, so we’ll have plenty of time.”

“I don’t know, Bambi.”

“You said you’d do anything. This is very important to me. I’ve had very few enemies in my life. Mike was one of them. I think it would be a fitting way for me to prepare to leave this world by reaching out to him in friendship and forgiveness.”

Lisa clapped her hand to her cheek and sighed. “When you put it that way, how can I refuse?”

Bambi squeezed her arm. “Remind me sometime to tell you how much I love you.”

“What’s the matter with now?”

Bambi launched into a five-minute list of reasons why he loved her. He fell asleep before he finished.

* * *

In the morning, Lisa said, “How do we get to the prison?”

“Try committing a felony.”

“Listen, smart aleck, I’m serious. How do we drive to the prison?”

“You’re looking at me? My most serious crime is stealing second base when I was in little league.”

“I guess that means I’ll have to ask directions one more time. Hang in here, and I’ll run down to the motel office to see if someone there can help.”

“I promise not to run away.”

Lisa rolled her eyes and exited. She returned two minutes later. “The guy is new in town. He had no clue.”

“Maybe we can call. In fact, before we waste a trip out there, we should make sure they allow visitors on Saturday morning.”

"Good idea. I would guess that Saturday and Sunday are their busiest days for visitors."

"Maybe."

Lisa rummaged in the drawer near the phone and pulled out a huge phonebook. A few minutes later she was chatting with someone at the prison. She got her directions and an appointment to talk to Mike. She hung up the phone and smiled. "That wasn't so hard. We're all set."

An hour later they pulled up to a depressing stone building.

"You want to go in *there*?" Lisa asked.

"Not really, but I feel I need to. I've read about where Christ talked about visiting in prison I've lived a good clean life, Lisa, but I'm afraid I haven't done enough to minister to people. I should have been involved in visiting the local jail or something; I was a bit judgmental I guess. It was always my goal to stay away from the bad guys. Maybe I should have been bringing God to them so they could throw off the shackles of being a bad guy."

"That's a heavy philosophical topic, Bambi. I don't know what to tell you. What am I going to do while you're in there? I'm not crazy about sitting in the parking lot at a prison, nor about sitting in the prison in a corner somewhere."

"Good point. Do you remember how we got here?"

"I still have the directions, you know."

"Duh. Maybe you could go to the mall for a little while."

"There's not enough time."

"Well, then why don't you go with me?"

Lisa scratched her head. "Yeah, I guess you're going to need a wheelchair driver, so yeah, why not?"

She pushed Bambi into the imposing structure and a receptionist told them where they needed to go.

They waited a few minutes for Mike to be brought in from his cell.

The two men eyeballed one another as Mike walked in. He sat on the other side of a window. Bambi hadn't seen Mike in several years. Time hadn't been good to him.

"Masterson. What's a nice guy like you doing in a place like this? You look like crap, and what's up with the wheelchair?"

"I have cancer."

"Oh, sorry."

"No problem."

"How bad is it?" Mike asked.

"Not much time left. That's why I needed to stop here today to see you."

"You blew me away, man. They said that Lance Masterson wanted to see me. It took me a minute to figure out who they were talking about. I always called you Tom Turkey."

"I remember, Mike. I remember a lot of things."

Mike looked up and saw Lisa standing over the wheelchair. "Oh, my. It's Lisa Nielson."

Bambi shook his head. "Lisa Masterson now. We were married right out of college. Anyway, Mike, I wanted to stop by and ask for your forgiveness."

"My forgiveness? What do I have to forgive you for?"

"My attitude toward you wasn't very good. Maybe we could have avoided some of the bad feelings that we went through if I hadn't been so self-righteous."

Mike scratched his head. "Water over the dam, man. We were just kids. The words dumb and kids usually go together very well in a sentence."

Bambi nodded.

The two talked for the next half-hour as Bambi explained how much Jesus had meant in his life.

Lisa wheeled Bambi back to the van. "That was a strange experience. Reminds me of when our college psychology class visited the state mental hospital in Yankton."

"Funny. When we were in high school I always wanted to see Bennett get what he deserved. Now he's gotten it, I'm sad it happened. I'd rather that he'd found the right path. Maybe if I'd been more into loving him than judging him, I could have witnessed to him of God's love."

"We'll never know, Bambi."

"One more favor."

"Is this going to require me to get more driving directions?"

"Nope. I just wanted to line up my casket bearers for my funeral."

Lisa's smile fell off her face.

"I want the original Dogs of Victory to carry my casket. That would be Troy, Corky, Donnie, Brad, and Denny."

"That's only five people. You need six."

"I know. That's my next favor. Can you talk to the officials in the prison and ask that Mike be granted temporary release to be the sixth?"

She blew out a big breath. "I'll see what I can do, Bambi. Let's get you back to the motel. I feel like I need a nap too."

* * *

That afternoon they returned to the stadium shortly before

Maria's last event was scheduled. Lisa wheeled the chair into the same location they had enjoyed the day before.

"I hate do to this to you," Bambi said.

"Do what to me? Do I have to push you to the bathroom?"

"No. I have another favor to ask."

"Now what?"

"I've asked Maria to take over my anti-evolution pursuit."

"She told me."

"I want you to take some of the money from my life insurance payment and put it aside for her to buy books and stuff."

"That's an easy one. That's all?"

"You might encourage her in the work as well."

"You got it. Here come the runners."

This time when the participants walked by on their way to the starting line, Angela was among the throng. Maria waved again and pumped her fist. Bambi returned the gesture.

When the gun went off, Maria took off like a rocket. She reached the pole easily in first with Angela several steps behind her.

"Bambi looked at the clock. "Oh, my gosh! She's going too fast. What is she doing?"

"She's way ahead of Angela."

"Yeah. Angela was smart enough not to try to match that start. She's biding her time. Our pumpkin can't keep up that pace for the whole race!"

Maria finished the first lap with a lead of twenty yards over Angela, who had the same size lead over the rest of the pack. Maria's blistering pace slowed down a little but Angela only picked up a short distance on her. During the third lap the lead decreased much more. Maria was showing signs of fatigue when the bell went off for the last lap.

"I don't know if she's got enough left in her tank, Lisa."

Angela made her move when she reached the end of her third lap. The crowd began to energize as they saw that the Aberdeen runner was closing the gap. When they reached the end of the straightaway on the far side, Angela caught up with Maria. The crowd noise intensified as they negotiated the curve.

"She's trying to pass her on the curve!" Bambi shouted. "Come on, Maria. Hold her off!"

Maria shifted into another gear and held off the challenge of Angela. They pulled into the last straightaway and finally Angela passed her. When they flashed by the spot where Bambi sat, Angela was ahead by one step. They were both struggling to keep

their sprint going.

The crowd noise reached a shrill pitch as total strangers tossed out their encouragement to the two runners.

It looked like Maria had put on a final burst, but Bambi and Lisa were too far from the finish line to determine who won. The crowd was going crazy, so they knew the finish was very close.

"Did she win?" Lisa asked.

"I don't know. Look at Maria. If she is excited, she won it."

"I think she's too exhausted to be excited either way. She ran her guts out."

"Really. I can't believe she ran that first lap so fast and yet had enough left to duke it out."

The Mastersons were still trying to figure out who won when a gentleman came up behind them.

"Lance Masterson?"

"Yes, sir."

"I need to take you for a little ride, if it's OK with your wife."

"A ride? Where to?"

"You'll find out in a minute. I guarantee you'll enjoy it."

Lisa nodded and the man started pushing the chair along the sidewalk. When they reached the gate, he pushed the chair onto the track into the staging area where the runners gathered for the ceremonial walk to the starting line. Bambi sat there among the Class AA girls waiting for their turn to push their bodies through four laps around the oval.

The last of the girls were straggling across the finish line as Maria jogged across the track and joined Bambi.

Maria took the place of the stranger behind the wheelchair and began to push it onto the track.

"Maria, what are you doing? You're holding up the track meet!"

She didn't answer.

The voice over the loudspeaker said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I now direct your attention to the head of the track where Maria Masterson, winner of the 3200-meter and the 1600-meter race in a state record of four minutes and fifty-nine seconds is taking her victory lap. Due to the number of events that we have to run through here in the state meet, we normally do not permit victory laps, but this is a special case. Maria's father, Lance Masterson, a former all-stater in basketball, an NAIA all-region team selection at Dakota State, and a former high school coach is engaged in a struggle with pancreatic cancer."

A hush fell over the crowd.

"Maria has the privilege of sharing this victory lap with her father, the man who taught her to run and taught her how to live life to its fullest. Would you please stand and give it up for this dynamic duo?"

The crowd stood and roared its approval as Maria pushed her father across the finish line, breaking the tape that the officials had ordered stretched across it. Bambi looked up and saw Angela Hawkins looking on with a scowl on her face. He winked at her. When Maria got past the finish line, she veered off to the right and pushed Bambi off the track and back onto the sidewalk.

"Hey, that was only a half a lap."

"Sorry, Daddy. That's all they gave me."

"That's OK. That means I can hug you sooner. Give me a big one, victory girl."

Maria gave him what he wanted. The smile on his face threatened to touch his ears.

Lisa ran over to them. She and Maria met in a bear hug on the sidewalk.

"Congratulations, honey. You finally beat that little snot!"

"Mom!"

"Sorry. I've wanted to say that word for a long time, and now that it's out I wonder why I waited so long."

They turned to return to the wheelchair. Bambi was still smiling away, but his eyes were closed.

"Dad?"

There was no response.

"Bambi?" Lisa walked over to the chair and put her hand on his wrist. Her shoulders slumped, and she turned to Maria with tears in her eyes. She simply shook her head.

Chapter 14

Wednesday morning dawned as a perfect spring day. Lisa couldn't help but think this was the kind of day that Bambi exulted in. In walking by the trophy case, her eyes fell upon the Bulldog Compact.

"Maria?" she yelled.

"Yeah, Mom,"

Maria walked into the room a few seconds later. "Did you want me?"

"Yeah. I need your advice."

"About what?"

"I was wondering if we should put the Bulldog Compact in your father's casket."

"Wow. That is kind of a cool idea. Hmm. I think we want to hang onto it for ourselves. Dad won't be using it. It will bring us memories and some inspiration maybe."

"You're absolutely right. Thanks for the sanity check." She gave her daughter a big hug, and they stood there for a moment holding each other tight.

"The house feels so empty without him," Maria wailed.

"I know. We've lived here for a long time. I see his memories in every corner of the house. They hurt."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I have another decision to make, one bigger than what we do with the Bulldog Compact. I'm not sure I can live with all the ghosts and the pain of this place. I'm thinking that we need to start a new life somewhere else."

"You mean move away from Madison?"

Lisa nodded.

"I've lived here my whole life!"

"I know. Most of mine took place here too."

"What would Dad think?"

"He asked me not to cling to his memory but to live my own life. It's his words that give me the courage to try something new."

"Where would we go? Sioux Falls?"

"I have a girlfriend who took a nursing job out in Washington State. She loves it out there. The town where she works is smaller

than Rapid City. She lives in a town about the size of Madison. It hardly ever snows out there and the summers are almost perfect.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t feel comfortable talking about this the day of Dad’s funeral.” Maria walked away and into her room.

Lisa followed her. Maria was looking over some books when Lisa entered. “What are you looking at there?”

“These are the books on evolution that Daddy wanted me to study. He also left a list of other books I should get.”

“He told me to set some money aside to buy materials for that. I’m giving you \$250 to pursue his dream.

“That should be plenty. Don’t you need to get ready for the funeral?”

Lisa looked at her watch. “Yes, I do. I mean, we do.”

* * *

The funeral director was a friend of Lisa and Bambi’s from high school. He met the grieving women at the church and explained the process for the arrival of the casket and the actual burial. Lisa thanked him and the two went to talk to the new pastor of the church about other details. Their former pastor had flown in from Phoenix, where his family had relocated, to perform the service. Maria sound tested the microphone and monitor level with the help of the church sound techie. An hour before the funeral, they had all the loose ends tied up, so they sat down in the front row to rest.

“Mom, you gotta be worn out? You’ve been on the go ever since....”

“I’m sure when this is over I’ll collapse. The adrenalin is keeping me going right now. And then the reality that he’s really gone will sink in.”

“I know what you mean. We knew it was coming; yet it still doesn’t seem real. What’s it like for someone who loses a loved one suddenly, like in an accident?”

“I don’t know, Maria, and I don’t want to find out. I guess we need to always be prepared for someone to leave us. We know that we’re all just temporarily here.”

“I still can’t believe Daddy could go to the track meet when he was so sick.”

“Your father was an extraordinary man. There was nothing more important in the world to him than being there for you.”

“I know. I’ll never forget that smile he wore. And I helped put it there. It’s so awesome that Daddy exited life as a winner.”

“Maria, your dad was a winner all the way.”

“Yeah, I know, Mom. Are you ready for this?”

"What do you mean by 'this'?"

"I mean the funeral and people coming up to us and offering condolences. That is such an awkward situation for me. I don't know what to say."

"Got you and know exactly what you mean. Imagine how awkward it is for them."

"That's true. I guess this is a lose-lose situation," Maria said.

"Interesting way of looking at it. I won't argue that one with you."

Maria looked back and saw someone had entered the church. "Mom, somebody's here. You suppose we should stand back there and greet people as they come in?"

"Good idea. I can't stand just sitting here doing nothing."

The two greeted everyone who came through the door for the next forty-five minutes. Former college classmates and teammates, high school classmates and teammates, members of the church, friends of Lisa from the hospital, some of Maria's classmates, and some people they didn't even know streamed through the door, filling the church to saturation point. Both sets of grandparents offered to take over greeting chores, but by that time, Maria and Lisa were beginning to enjoy their task and refused to give up their posts.

Finally, the hearse pulled up in front of the church and it was time for them to take their places in the front pew. As soon as they were seated, *His Eye is On the Sparrow* began to flow from the sound system. Right on cue, the casket bearers started their procession. Troy and Donny brought up the rear. Brad and Denny were in the middle. Corky and Mike Bennett, who had been granted special release for the funeral, led the group. Mike looked much better than the last time Lisa had seen him, with a shave, a haircut, and a black suit on.

The men placed the casket on the stage and took their reserved seats in the front. The pastor stood up and delivered his message.

"We have two special people in Lance's life to close out the service. Donnie Kern was one of Lance's closest friends and his high school and college teammate. Donnie, will you come and share with us?"

Donnie stood up and walked to the podium the pastor had vacated. "First of all, it's strange for me to talk about Lance. To us he was always 'Bambi', so I'm going to call him Bambi today as well in this tribute to his life. I suspect that people always say the nicest things at funerals about the departed. In Bambi's case, we

don't have to make anything up. He was a gem of a person who hardly ever said a bad word about anyone. His dedication is legendary. Bambi was a private person. Some mistook that trait in him as being stuck up. He didn't seek the limelight but sought to do the right thing. But I'm up here today to tell you about a fault he had. The shocked looks on some of your faces tell me I'd better explain myself. You see, Bambi asked me himself to rat on him and to expose the weakness he hated.

"Bambi was a disciple of Jesus Christ. However, he found it very hard to share his faith with others. He was convinced that living the right way was his witness to others. This follows the logic of a great man, St. Francis of Assisi, who said 'preach the Gospel and if necessary use words.' Bambi wishes he had used more words to go along with the exemplary life that he lived. I had a chance to chat with him in the hospital a couple of times and that's when he asked me to deliver this message to you. If there is one word that you remember from this funeral, Bambi wanted it to be...." He paused for dramatic effect.

"Jesus. And now I'm going to reveal something so personal to him that he never even told his wife. He never told me until he asked me to speak at this funeral." Donnie looked over at Lisa. Her eyes were as wide as fifty-cent pieces as she hung on his every word.

"Bambi was torn between two beliefs. He loved Jesus with his whole heart, but he could never comfortably decide what this doctrine was concerning salvation. He knew that his own leaning was looked upon unfavorably by the evangelical community as well as by the Catholic community in which he grew up. His position ended up being in the middle of them. So today I tell you why Bambi didn't try to convert people. And he is not going to try to convert you today either. He just wanted the air cleared now that he no longer faces this dilemma. Perhaps there is someone in the audience who has suffered from the same internal conflict. Bambi wasn't sure what impact this would have on people, but he felt led by the Lord to share it.

"The evangelistic Protestant community of which Bambi has communed for many years teaches that Jesus is the way to salvation and that eternal life is a gift of grace which can't be purchased by the acts of mankind. Bambi had no problem with the first part. Jesus came down to Earth, suffered on the cross, died, and returned to his Father in Heaven. However, Bambi, the man whose motto was 'set a goal and work to achieve that goal', had a problem with the concept that a person can do nothing to earn

that gift. We had a lively little discussion about his in the hospital. Bambi said if we don't and can't do a single thing to earn the gift of grace, then every person on Earth is saved because accepting a gift is doing something. I found that argument hard to overcome. As our discussion continued, and he revealed how he wanted me to share this with you, I got cold feet, or you might say I got smart. I told him to write down what he wanted me to say because I might have a hard time getting it right, and I might not agree with what he had to say, making it hard to put into my own words. So Bambi wrote this little blurb for you. Bambi had legal papers so that all of his property goes over to Lisa, but perhaps this was his final will and testament.

"My dear friends and family, if you are hearing this, I am no longer among the living. I might be looking down from above watching the proceedings (so, Donnie, make sure you follow instructions)."

A few smiles broke out in the congregation.

"You might resent my final words, I hope not, but here they go. You might walk around telling the world you're saved and eternal life with God is your destiny. I hope so, but I'm not sure you can make that statement. Jesus said he who endures to the end will be saved. That means that if you just run half the race and walk off the course, you don't get the trophy. If you decide to follow Jesus, it's just like a marriage, till death do you part. Every morning of my life I made a new decision to follow Christ. His mercies were new every morning, but my surrender to him was also. It has been said that you can't earn salvation because only Jesus could provide it. That is true. Only Jesus can reconcile us to the Father. Is there nothing we have to do to be given this gift? Consider this: Jesus said if we did not forgive others, neither would he forgive us. That sounds like something we have to do. We have to forgive others. In another place, in Matthew 25, just after the parable of the talents, Jesus said those who fed and clothed and gave drink to the least of those inhabitants of Earth were feeding, clothing, and giving drink to him. Those people were the sheep who he said will inherit his kingdom. Those who failed to provide food, clothing, and drink were numbered among the goats who were cast out. And then there's the parable of the talents. The master became angry at the man who didn't work to increase the talents which were a gift to him. Finally there is the passage in Matthew 7:21-23 that says not everyone that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will

say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

“Iniquity means sin. I suggest you read the entire chapter of First John chapter two, which states that if we keep not the commandments of God then we are liars if we say we know him. I think that’s enough – enough to make some of you angry, enough to bore some of you, and enough to make some of you think. And so I urge you to get as close to Jesus as you can. If you do that, I believe you’ll do the things he wants you to and won’t have any unpleasant surprises on judgment day. God bless you. I’d like to say I’ll miss you all, but I have no clue what I’ll be feeling as you hear this. There is one last piece to my farewell which will be delivered by my beloved Maria. I would have recorded myself singing this for you to lend a personal touch, but I really do want you to have fond memories of me, so I passed the responsibility on to my angel-voiced daughter.”

Donnie signaled to Maria and she stepped up to the microphone. Music came over the sound system and Maria began to sing along.

“I could wish you joy and peace
To last a whole life long,
I could wish you sunshine,
Or a cheerful little song,
Or wish you all the happiness
That this life could bring,
But I wish you Jesus,
But I wish you Jesus,
But I wish you Jesus,
More than anything.
I could wish you leaves of gold,
And may your path be smooth,
I could wish you treasures,
Or that all your dreams come true,
And I could wish you paradise
And every day be spring,
But I wish you Jesus,
But I wish you Jesus,
But I wish you Jesus,
Cause when I wish you Jesus
I’ve wished you everything.”

Maria was crying as she sat back down. Her mother hugged her and they both let their tears flow. The pastor of the church took the podium.

"Lance requested that his casket not be open for viewing. He'd prefer that you remember his spirit and not the body which he took such pains to take care of. In the end, he realized that what is really important is on the inside of a person and can't be captured with a camera. We will now retire the casket to the hearse and begin the processional to the cemetery. Please wait until the coffin has exited the room before leaving. And also please join the burial ceremony if you can. Thank you for helping us celebrate the life of Lance Masterson."

The casket bearers took up their position, hoisted the coffin, and began the slow walk to the waiting hearse. The grieving family walked right behind them.

When Lisa arrived outside, Mike Bennett was standing by the hearse with his guard from the prison. "Lisa, I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here today."

"It was Bambi's idea."

"I know, but you could have overruled his request. I'm not much of a friend, I know, but I do wish my life could have turned out differently. I caused Bambi a lot of grief in his youth and for that I'm heartily sorry."

"I appreciate that, Mike, and he'd have been the first one to tell you that it's never too late to turn over that new leaf. I think his message to us today can help point you in the right direction."

Mike nodded. "I won't be able to participate in the burial because I have to get back to where I belong. Bambi's college basketball coach will step in for me out at the cemetery."

"OK, Mike. Thanks for coming." She watched him walk down the sidewalk until they were a short distance from the church. They stopped so the officer could apply handcuffs. Lisa sighed.

"Are we going to get into the car, Mom?"

"Yes, dear. One more leg of the journey."

The long snake comprised of cars wound its way to the cemetery. Maria stepped out of the car and looked around her. She had been to this burial ground with her father more than a few times. They had walked across the grass and looked at names on the tombstones. Bambi had mentioned people he had known. She had tried to imagine herself lying under the winter snows and the spring flowers and the wind blowing almost incessantly over her head. That experience had been extremely strange. Now, here

they were on the verge of putting her beloved father into that same sod they had trodden together.

After a song and a prayer, the casket was lowered into the ground and the crowd began to disperse. A blonde woman who Maria didn't know but whom she had greeted at the funeral approached her mother.

"Hi, Lisa, you probably don't remember me."

Lisa looked her over. "I don't recognize you."

"We only met once down in Kansas City many years ago."

"Lulu?"

"That's me."

"What are you doing here?"

"I had a tremendous respect for your husband. It was the least I could do to be here."

"Where do you live now?"

"I'm still in Sioux Falls. Things haven't been going so well lately."

"Bambi said that you and Corky are divorced."

"Yeah. I made a big mistake. The funeral today made me see that I wandered off the path a bit. I'll probably never get back on track now."

Lisa gave her a big hug. "Lulu, it is never too late with God to get back on track. And by the look on that gentleman's face coming over here, it might not be too late to fix past mistakes."

Lulu turned and saw Corky.

"Corky!"

"Lulu. You're looking fine, as always."

"It doesn't matter," she answered.

"What do you mean?"

"Bambi said that what's on the inside is more important than the part people see. So really I'm not looking fine at all where it matters. Can we talk?"

Corky glanced over at Lisa. "Excuse us, please."

"Of course." Lisa gave Lulu a thumbs-up signal.

"Who was that, Mom?"

"That was a girl that tried to steal your dad from me a long time ago."

"And you gave her a hug."

"How can I fault her for falling in the love with the best man I ever met?"

"I think I could find a way."

"Honey, if you heed your father's dying words, I think you'll find he was telling us that we need to find a way to forgive people

and not find fault with them.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Let’s go home, honey. I’m exhausted. I might sleep for a week.”

“Don’t you have to work tomorrow?”

“You could have talked all day without reminding me of that.”

“It’s going to be hard, isn’t it?”

“What, going to work?”

“No, well, yeah, that and everything else. Just moving on without Daddy. I don’t have any excitement to run next year. He won’t be there to watch me. Finishing high school isn’t a big deal anymore. College is even less so. I just don’t care right now about anything.”

Lisa gently took Maria’s chin in her hand just like Bambi used to do. “Honey, I know exactly what you mean. I believe it’s even worse for me because of my age, but I’m going to go down fighting. What did your dad always preach to you?”

“Set a goal and then work to achieve that goal.”

“Exactly. Now I see that the goal your father decided was the only one that really mattered is following Jesus, wherever he might lead. We’ll take our time to recuperate from this trauma, wipe our tears, and then get back to work on that goal. Your enthusiasm will come back. Does that make sense?”

“I want Daddy to be proud of us. And I want our Heavenly father to say ‘well done, faithful servant.’ It does make sense. If we turn our eyes upon Jesus like the song says, we’ll have all the motivation we need to keep on keeping on.”

Lisa gave her daughter a big hug. “We’re on the same page, kiddo. And don’t forget, your dad has given you a commission to carry on his battle against evolution. You have a main goal and a secondary goal now. I think you’re going to find your life getting very interesting as you get closer to the battlefield. I think it’s going to be a big challenge. I’m not sure it’s a war you can win.”

“I know, Mom. I’ve thought about this some since he gave that sermon. There’s a lot of opposition out there in the church as well as out of it. It won’t be easy. Some of the people I’ll be fighting against will make Angela Hawkins look like a saint in comparison. But as Dad would have said: ‘You’re never beat till you quit.’ Dad didn’t quit, and I don’t plan to either.”

