

CHAPTER 1

PARTY'S OVER

It was the sounds, I remember now, that first caught my attention and started pulling me out of the black void. The rattling wheels of the medical carts passing in the hallway, the muted beeps from monitors and other medical equipment, the hushed voices uttering words I couldn't quite understand; bit by bit, the random pieces of information sifted their way into my consciousness.

I tried opening my eyes.

Bad move. It took every bit of strength in me to pry my eyelids apart. The resulting blast of light burned through my eyes and deep into my brain. All I could make out was a blur of colour and movement. There was no definition whatsoever in what I could see.

I rested again after the exertion. The void didn't seem so bad after all, and at least there was peace in the silence.

The sounds came again, but this time one of the voices seemed familiar. And because the person speaking was nearer to me, I understood his words.

"John, can you hear me? John, it's Jack."

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Jack Klemke, a good friend. I knew that voice. I started to surface again.

“John, can you hear me? John, there’s been a really bad car wreck. You’ve been in a bad car crash.”

A car wreck? How could that be? I didn’t remember anything like that.

“John, can you hear me?”

Through the fog, I thought I could feel Jack’s hand holding mine. I focused and squeezed my fingers around his.

“John! Hey, my friend, it’s good to have you back!” There was a distinct tone of relief in Jack’s voice.

I tried clearing my head. What had happened to me? Where was Lorraine? Where were the boys? My eyes were still not cooperating and any movement I tried didn’t feel very good. There seemed to be things sticking to every part of my body.

I settled back and tried to make sense of everything that was going on.

New Year’s Day, 1981. That much I could remember.

After a fantastic Alberta-style family Christmas the week before, we took a seven-hour road trip to be with friends for New Year’s Eve. We stopped along the way in Edmonton, about five hours from home, and bought each of our sons a new vest. Just a fun family outing over the Christmas break.

At our friends’ home, my wife Lorraine and I spent many enjoyable hours catching up with them and simply hanging out. Our nine-year-old son, Byron, and his six-year-old brother, Brent, relished the chance to play with other children and to have fun with their still-new Christmas toys.

We rang in the New Year together and then tumbled off to bed. Morning would come early, and we were heading home the next day to get a jump on the week.

January 1 dawned a clear and fairly warm day for the middle of winter. When it came time to leave, we piled into the car for the seven-hour trip home. I remember the open sky lighting up the colourful scenery around us as we drove along the Alberta highway. The road was mostly bare and wet,

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due to the warmth of the sun in the clear sky. As we drove, the car was full of satisfaction and peace.

Around dinnertime, we passed through Whitecourt, a small town about halfway between Edmonton and our hometown, and hunted for a restaurant where we could take a break from the road and enjoy a nice meal. But because it was New Year's Day, all the eateries along the highway were closed. We settled for a full tank of gas and a few snacks from the gas station.

Evening had set in when we left Whitecourt and got back on the road. Brent and Byron giggled in the back seat, tugging back and forth at Byron's new electronic game and chatting about the things six- and nine-year-old brothers talk about. Brent always saw his big brother Byron as his larger-than-life hero, and the two of them loved spending time together—it certainly didn't matter to them that they'd been cooped up in the back seat of a car all day.

"Hey Dad," called Byron. "Tell us the bull story! Remember that time when you were a kid and the bull crashed through the corral gate? Tell us the story again—please!"

"Okay, Byron, I will!"

I remember glancing up at his happy face in the rear-view mirror.

Brent piped up, "Yeah, tell us again, Dad!"

And that's all I remembered. Just a typical family heading home from a good time with friends—enjoying each other's company and sharing stories about life growing up on a dairy farm.

And now I was here, trying desperately to emerge from the fog that enveloped me, trying to make sense of what my friend Jack had just told me.

There's no night-and-day cycle in a hospital's intensive care unit. The hustle and bustle is constant, a steady backdrop of sound and activity.

My reconnection to the world of the living took place gradually that first week. Initially, I didn't have times of sleeping and then being awake. Instead, I slipped in and out of the haze that constantly shrouded me. There were times I was more awake and lucid, and then times when the world again faded into nothingness.

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And there were times when I was aware of my surroundings, but those around me must not have known I was “present,” because I’d occasionally overhear healthcare workers talking about my condition—conversations they might not have had so close to my bed if they’d known I could hear them.

“Mr. and Mrs. Heidebrecht? I’m Dr. Swanson from Intensive Care.” The doctor was speaking to Lorraine’s parents. It sounded as though they were just outside the door. “Uhh, if you’re wanting to see John alive, you’ll need to go in really soon...” I remember feeling sorry for my in-laws, realizing they must be dealing with a lot.

Although I’d heard that same prognosis spoken other times in those first few days of awareness, it took me a while to realize that the doctors were actually referring to me. Obviously, they were not expecting me to live long. But despite the discouraging atmosphere around me, I felt a strong sense of peace and comfort developing inside; it felt like I was being held by a strength outside myself. I recognized that presence to be Jesus. I began to know at a deep level that the One to whom I had entrusted my life was now holding me. Peace, comfort, the feeling of being carried along almost like a child... that was the sustenance that enabled me to remain in this world, and to move forward in my quest to make sense of what was happening in those early days.

At that point, of course, I had no idea how radically my life had changed. I was coming to grips with the fact that something catastrophic had happened, but the sense of being held in the arms of Jesus kept me in a place of profound peace as parts of the puzzle began drifting into place.

That peace was there for me when I overheard doctors and nurses discussing things they probably didn’t want me to know. The peace was also when I heard people saying things they definitely did want me to hear, like from one man who was part of our church back home. To this day I cannot figure out how he got into my room. Immediate family members had access, as well as our pastor and my friend Jack, but everyone else was barred because of my fragile condition. To slip in, this man would have had to evade

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the workers at the front desk, the nurses at the intensive care nursing station, and the doctors and nurses roaming the hallways.

I awoke to find him standing at the foot of my bed. While I knew who he was, we weren't friends. And although I couldn't see clearly, there seemed to be something strange about the way he was watching me.

"Hey, Baergen, I've just been in to see your son. He's not doing very well. In fact, I'd say he's not going to make it."

The man continued with what I remember as smugness and satisfaction.

"Baergen, your son looks bad. Really bad. I think he's going to die."

There was definitely spite and malevolence in his voice. It looked as though he was grinning at me, but it was definitely not out of compassion. He leaned in closer, staring me right in the eye.

"Baergen, you're not going to make it, either. You won't get out of here!"

With that final taunt, the man straightened up, turned, and strode out of the room.

I was stunned. I had no idea he hated me so much. I knew he was from my hometown, so when I realized he was standing at the foot of my bed I thought he was there to see how I was doing, or to bring messages of hope and support from friends. But this was no encouragement.

Our town was not that big, situated about five hours from the nearest big city. The discovery of oil and natural gas in the region in the late 1970s had increased the size of the city steadily, but with a population of just over 24,000 in 1981, it didn't take much to stand out in a crowd.

As established business people during the region's economic boom, Lorraine and I enjoyed a somewhat public profile due to our growing development company and mortgage brokerage firm. There were other reasons we were well known, but most of the recognition resulted from our business activities. At times we were called upon for media quotes when reporters were looking for a local comment on a business or economic story. We were happy with life as it was.

The news of our accident had caused quite a stir in the community when it broke in the local media on the morning of January 2—all unbeknownst

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to me, of course. One local radio announcer even stated on air that I'd been killed in the crash. But to paraphrase Mark Twain, "The news of my death had been greatly exaggerated."

Yet with the spotlight over the years came the occasional jealous swipe from others who perhaps felt we were getting too big for our britches. While it's not something you expect, it's still not surprising when it happens. It's the kind of thing you learn to live with.

But this, a person coming all the way to the city hospital to stand at the foot of my bed and deliver his brand of "encouragement"—this was something I'd never experienced before. I was floored by the intensity of his dislike for me and my family, and his almost gleeful reaction to our situation.

Still, the comfort of being held in the arms of Jesus carried me forward.

By the end of the week, I was pretty much back to full awareness—at least as much as I could be with all the medication being pumped into me. Everything was still blurry, but I could keep my eyes open and was able to acknowledge people when they spoke to me. The world around me started to make more sense, although I still struggled to understand exactly what had happened.

My friend Jack had been back in to see me several times, and he'd explained a few more details of the crash.

"You probably didn't even see it coming," Jack said. "From what the police can determine to this point, the other driver—in a three-quarter ton pick-up and pulling a trailer—lost control on the gradual corner you were just coming to. His trailer started swinging out, which pulled the back of his truck along with it, and the whole thing came down the road sideways right toward your vehicle as you drove over the crest of the rise."

I wasn't able to speak, but I sure had questions. I'm sure Jack could see them in my eyes.

"Yes, John, he was going too fast. The road was icing over, but even if he'd been on dry pavement the other driver was going far too fast."

I kept looking at Jack.

"Yes, John, the man had been drinking. It was New Year's Day, remember?"

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It was amazing the way Jack anticipated my silent queries.

“No, he’s not in the hospital here. From my understanding, he was hardly injured and went home after being treated in the emergency room.”

Even in my medicated state I could feel a few things floating to the surface, one of which was relief that the crash had not been my fault. The other was a definite need to understand how something like this could happen—weren’t we under God’s protection?

It was a lot to absorb and process. Yet I still felt I was being held by Jesus, and I allowed myself to rest back into that place of comfort.

From my bed I could hear a man’s voice repeatedly saying “No, no, no, no!” from somewhere across the room. I couldn’t see who he was or what was happening, but even in my altered state I understood he was dealing with things too traumatic for him to handle.

“No, no, no, no, no!” As the voice continued, everything within me wanted to find out what was troubling him. I was still very much aware of being held in the arms of Jesus, and I knew this gentleman needed the peace I had.

“No, no, no, no, no!” Again the voice called. How I wished I could connect with him somehow, that I could share the restfulness and hope I had!

But it was not to be. His constant calling grew in intensity over the hours, and then, all of a sudden, faded. The silence afterward was sombre, and the atmosphere in the ward, which was far from encouraging to begin with, became very subdued for a while.

Days later, when I could speak a little, I motioned a nurse over to my bedside and asked about the man who’d been in the bed across from mine. She told me he’d actually been a doctor at the hospital, someone they’d all known and worked with. During my time across from him he was in the final stages of a terminal illness, and what I’d heard was his fear of dying, which was so strong that it had cracked sharply through his normal veneer of control and semi-arrogance.

I didn’t know the full story at that time, of course. All I knew then was that this man was afraid and had no way of dealing with his fear.

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A few days later, as I was resting, one of the nurses came into the room, checked my vital signs and the IV drip, and asked if I was comfortable. My jaw and facial bones were wired together, and because I couldn't express myself well if I needed anything, the staff constantly checked to make sure I was okay.

Just as she was about to leave my bedside, the nurse stopped and turned back to the head of my bed. Leaning over toward me, she looked me straight in the eyes.

"Are you a Christian?" she asked quietly but intently. I lifted my finger and beckoned her closer to me, because all I could do was whisper. She leaned in right close.

"Yes," I whispered through my wired-shut mouth. "Are you, too?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not."

I beckoned her close again, and dug deep for enough strength to speak. "Why would you ask me that if you're not a Christian?"

She stepped back a bit, but still looked right at me. Her gaze was steady.

"I've worked on this ward for more than two years," she said quietly. "I've seen many people admitted during that time, and I've seen many pass away. You are the first person I've ever seen who is not afraid of death."

I didn't know what to say. Death certainly did seem like a possibility in those early days after the crash. The pain was intense—my facial bones were crushed, my skull and collarbone were fractured, cranial fluid was leaking from my nose, and my pelvis and hip were shattered. Given that I'd been hovering on the edge of death, her question intrigued me.

She looked at me again, patted my hand softly, then left the room to continue her duties.

I'd known all week the sense of being held in the arms of Jesus, but I hadn't realized until that moment how His peace, so active in me, was also apparent to others observing me. I closed my eyes and rested in that reality.

Looking back, I have no doubt that His love, that sense of being held by Jesus, is what carried me through.

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What I didn't know back then—and it was good that I didn't know—was that the week I'd just lived through would be the easiest week I'd face for a long, long time.

* * * *

I had a very different experience from John in that first week after the crash.

The first thing I remember is regaining consciousness while sitting on the highway. The pavement under me was icy cold, but I wasn't aware enough to grasp that something was wrong. I must have kept drifting back into unconsciousness, because I recall there being several times when I sort of woke up and wondered again what was going on.

Everything was quiet.

When you're driving, the constant low hum of the engine and the gentle moan of tires on pavement become part of the soundscape; they're always there, and the sounds all blend together to form the road trip soundtrack. They fade into the background.

But when the sounds stop, the silence becomes very loud.

I drifted back again. This time I noticed tiny shards of smashed windshield all around me on the pavement. I had no idea what these sparkling little pieces of glass were, nor did I understand what the implications of their presence were for me or my family.

Again, I drifted back, still on the highway. It seemed there were some sounds, after all, which stood out in the stillness. I could hear a faint metallic ticking from behind me somewhere, caused by the hot engine block from our car cooling rapidly in the winter air. Again, I had no idea what the sound was or what it meant out here in the middle of nowhere.

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The next time I drifted awake, I heard approaching sirens, which after a period of getting louder suddenly stopped. Then there were slamming vehicle doors and the approaching footsteps and efficient voices of a crew of paramedics.

Someone came up to me, shone a flashlight in my face, and started talking. I had no idea what he was saying or what he was asking. Strong hands helped me up off the ground and led me to an ambulance, where I was directed to sit in the front passenger seat.

I still had no idea what had happened, or what was going on around me, and I made no effort to figure it out. I just sat there, drifting in and out, while this blur of activity continued.

Had I been conscious, I would have heard a loud noise like a chainsaw. We didn't know it until much later, but this was the inaugural run for the town of Whitecourt's new "Jaws of Life," a device built to extricate people trapped in wrecked cars. Just before Christmas, about a week before we arrived, the town had purchased the unit—and now already there was a desperate need for it to be put to use. I wasn't even aware of the noise, but the Jaws of Life were ripping into our Cadillac to free John and Byron, who were trapped in the wreckage. I'm glad that at the time I didn't realize what was happening.

Then we were moving. As my ambulance raced down the highway back toward the town of Whitecourt, I found myself thinking, *Wow, this guy needs to slow down. If he keeps going this fast we could have an accident!* I was in such a state of shock that I had no comprehension of what was happening.

I must have drifted off again, because when I awoke I found myself lying on a stretcher in what appeared to be a gleaming white hallway. When I turned my head to one side, I saw another stretcher beside mine—and there was someone on it. I tried hard to see who it was, and then realized it was my son Brent.

I slowly turned my head to the other side, and recognized Byron lying on his own stretcher. By this time I knew something terrible had happened, but was reassured to see both my sons were still alive and with me.

John!

Adrenaline shot through me as I realized I couldn't see my husband.

"Please, someone," I called out. "Can anyone tell me where my husband is?"

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Someone in a white lab coat approached. “Hello, Mrs. Baergen. Your husband is here, too. He’s in a room down the hallway.”

I remember being reassured by that; my sons were beside me where I could see them, and John was with us here, too, although in another room.

I remained awake, although groggily so, and was eventually wheeled into my own room. I’d closed my eyes to rest when I heard a quiet conversation just beyond my bed.

“We’re going to have to put her out for that, of course,” said one voice. Another voice replied, but I wasn’t able to hear the answer.

Put her out? Was that me they were talking about? What did they mean by that?

Later I learned that the conversation was about my face, which had suffered severe lacerations in the crash. They did put me out, like they’d said, and the only doctor available that night—a young intern serving on-call in the emergency room at this tiny little rural hospital—sewed my face back together, using eighty-four stitches in the process. What damage a forceful exit through the windshield can cause!

More than my appearance was going to change, of course, in the coming days, weeks, and months. Like John, I was completely unaware of how significantly everything I knew had been shattered and uprooted forever because of that swift and devastating moment on an icy highway.

When I awoke the next morning, I was told that John and Byron had been airlifted to a larger hospital in Edmonton where they’d each receive better care for their extensive, life-threatening injuries.

Brent had also been transported to the same larger hospital. He’d suffered an extremely long laceration, one that ran from his forehead all the way back across his head. His leg was also badly broken just below the hip, so he’d been put in traction. But even with these injuries, I was told Brent was in the best shape of the three of them.

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John was critically injured—there really was no hope for his survival in those early days. All I could do was pray for him as the reports came back to me day by day.

When hospital staff finally felt they could tell me about Byron, I learned that he was in a coma. The doctors told me that Byron was almost certainly brain-injured and that his condition would have long-term implications for our family.

Brain-injured.

I'd trained as a registered nurse and could usually understand medical terms and treatments, but I had no real comprehension of what the term "brain-injured" meant. For someone else, I could have seen the fuller context and understood—but when it was my own son in question, I simply could not fathom all that was meant by this traumatic and rather terrifying report.

My own injuries—the facial lacerations and four broken ribs—now seemed fairly minor, at least compared to the rest of my family. I was told I'd remain in the little town hospital to begin my healing process.

Thankfully, my sister Carol came to be with me in Whitecourt. Steady, strong, and focused, Carol had always been able to grasp situations quickly and respond appropriately. She came with other family members the day after the crash, and when John and the boys were sent off to Edmonton to get the help they needed Carol stayed with me and took charge of my recovery.

Other family members and friends started popping by, too. Most of them visited with me briefly on their way to the city to visit John and the boys. Some, however, made time to sit and talk. Often our conversations focused on what God might be up to in the whole situation—I had an unshakeable belief that Jesus would heal Byron, and I had a very strong sense that He could use everything we were dealing with for the greater good.

"Do you think God was trying to get your attention?" our pastor asked. We'd been talking about some of the events in our lives as a couple in the months leading up to the crash.

I'd never thought about that. When I pondered our lives to that point, being as objective as possible, I saw we'd always genuinely tried to live out our

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faith in the community, working in ways that could truly help others on their own spiritual journeys. We were committed and intentional about pursuing the deeper things in life.

“No,” I mused, “I don’t think He was trying to get our attention; I think He’s had our attention for some time. But I do think He’s been taking us deeper, shaping and moulding our character even more.”

And He really *had* been shaping us, both spiritually and in other ways. That was going to become a lot clearer to both of us in the months ahead.

At that moment, though, there in that little hospital in Whitecourt, my focus was narrowing toward an immediate goal: I really wanted to get to the city to be with my family.

“Mrs. Baergen, you have a phone call,” said a nurse coming in from the hallway.

Phone calls had been a regular staple for me, sometimes up to three a day, as doctors from the metropolitan hospital called with updates about John and our two sons. Edmonton was only a two-hour drive away, but my desire to be with my family was so strong that it seemed like they were on another continent.

There was no phone in my room, so Carol usually took my calls at the nurses’ station.

“It was Jack Klemke,” Carol said on her return to the room. “He wanted to know how you’re doing.” Jack and his wife—her name was also Carol—were good friends of ours, yet I was surprised it was Jack on the phone and not the doctor whose call I had expected.

“What did you tell him?” I asked, wincing a bit as I spoke. The stitches on my face were swelling and starting to leak. I wasn’t much in the mood for looking in the mirror that week.

“I told him you’re on the mend, at least as far as your ribs are concerned. I didn’t mention your face; it hasn’t changed in the last couple of days.”

“Did he see John today?” I asked. Jack lived in the city, and he had been visiting John regularly.

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“That’s mainly why he called. He knows you want to get there quickly, and he has a proposal for us to consider. When the doctors here discharge you, Jack wants you to call him immediately. He’ll send his private plane to get us, and then we’ll both fly to Edmonton so you can be with John as soon as possible.”

I was thrilled! All I wanted was to be with my family, and the wait was unbearable. Here, though, was a workable solution. Jack’s plane would make short work of the distance, and at that point I much preferred the thought of a quick, smooth flight to a long, bumpy car ride.

Carol left to discuss details with Jack, and I settled down in my bed, feeling a little more hopeful. It was very touching to have other people look out for me. Jack and his wife were friends, and I could tell this was one of the ways they felt they could best help us.

My sister had been a lifesaver, too. We’d trained together as nurses, and while I’d changed course to become John’s wife and business partner, she’d left nursing to join a world mission agency. Carol had accepted an agency posting in Vienna, Austria, and had actually been scheduled to fly there during the first weeks of January. When she received news of our crash, she called Vienna and postponed her move for at least a month. That demonstration of her commitment to us was amazing and deeply valued.

Finally, near the end of the week, I was told I was well enough to travel. Carol phoned Jack with the news, and Jack, in turn, sent his crew to prepare for the short flight.

But the plane trip was not to be. A blizzard rolled in that morning, and after three attempts to land, the pilot aborted his flight plan and headed back with an empty plane.

And I was left feeling empty, too. All I wanted was to reunite with my family.

Again, my competent and determined sister came to the rescue. She collected me and my stuff and gallantly rode with me on the Greyhound bus from small-town Whitecourt all the way to Edmonton.

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I wanted to go to my family, yes, but I hadn't planned on going by bus. I longed to talk with John again as quickly as possible, but I dreaded the two-hour bus trip. The last thing I wanted was to be seen in public—the swelling around the stitches was worse than ever, and had reached the point where my face was literally leaking.

But since the bus was my only option, I pulled myself together, sat myself as far away from everyone else as possible, and kept my face turned toward the window. As the miles passed, I became preoccupied with preparing myself for what I would see when I finally arrived in Edmonton.

I couldn't help but notice familiar scenery as the bus pulled out of Whitecourt and headed down the highway toward the city. Seven days earlier my family and I had been on this same road, laughing together and enjoying family stories. One week ago it was a new year, life was good, and we were happy.

How drastically everything had changed in those seven days.

There wasn't much I could do to hide the tears slipping down my face. I stared out the window and found myself wondering if this was what people meant by "hitting bottom." Was this what the bottom looked like for us?

Looking back, I can say that the trip to the city hospital was the lowest point of my life. Technically, I was no longer in shock, but I was still reeling from the impact of all that had happened. I mean, who among us ever plans for these sudden turns in the journey of life? Certainly, we'd purchased car insurance and life insurance, but we'd bought those policies because it was the right thing to do, not because we were planning for bad things to happen to us. Insurance policies can offer financial, economic "protection"—after all, a car can be replaced—but they offer absolutely no protection from the real-life results of a split-second event on an icy highway.

At Christmas and on New Year's Eve, life had been wonderful. Now, a week later, it was like the pause button had been pushed on all our plans and dreams. Life had been pulled in around us, from the big picture down to an intense focus on the here and now. I was scrambling to find something—anything—I could cling to for hope.

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I'd never been in this place before. I'd never even *thought* about being in this place before. The life experience I'd gained and the work God had done in grooming my character now converged with great intensity in my present experience. I couldn't see the way forward, but I had no choice except to keep going, even if it was inch by inch.

If I knew anything for certain, it was that what I had considered “normal” was over. Now, a New Normal had to be created.

I was discovering some fundamental truths about myself. Preparation for this unwritten portion of my life—whether I was aware of it or not—was finished. Whatever foundations had been built into my life were now all I had to stand on. There was no opportunity to go back and rewrite my life experiences; whatever I'd allowed God to do in me up to that point was all I had to build on as I moved forward.

I couldn't articulate it clearly at the time, though. Sitting on that bus, heading to Edmonton, all I knew was that a door had closed on the first part of our lives. I knew a new door was opening, but I had absolutely no idea what lay across the threshold.

Staring out the window of that cranky old Greyhound, it seemed to me that I was in way over my head. What awaited me at the city hospital? It was one thing to get updates over the phone—but what would it be like when I actually saw John, Byron, and Brent? I was relieved to finally be on my way to be with John and the boys, but I had to admit there was a bit of fear still tugging at my heart.

Everything was different now.

This was absolutely the lowest point in my life—of that much, I was sure. But certainly things would start to improve now, right? That was the fear I hesitated to voice, “Things couldn't actually get worse, could they?”

That's what I was about to discover.

Musings

