

CHAPTER TWO

The storm front blew over as predicted, allowing the sunshine to break through partly cloudy skies by the time we arrived at Priestly Park. “God Bless the USA” blared over the public address system as we snaked through the growing crowd in search of our friends.

Bob “Bubba” Patterson and Cecil Chambers, owners of Bubba’s BBQ, along with Silas Thrope from the Butcher Shoppe, tended twin smokers that filled the air with the mouthwatering aroma of roasted pork. Beneath a red, white and blue canopy, Barbara Patterson, Cora Chambers, and Bernie Thrope readied themselves to sell their husbands’ highly anticipated, finger-licking fare.

I surveyed the sea of people until I locked onto Larry Scribner waving his arms. A minute later we set up our chairs between Larry, his wife Martha, and Sam and Susanna Simmons.

Martha snickered. “Would have thought Mary warned you to get here early. The whole town has been abuzz for weeks since the city formally announced the Jubilee’s new venue, especially after news got out about the park’s dedication ceremony.”

Liddy peered at me with a told-you-so sneer followed by a playful punch to my arm when I said to Martha, “Don’t blame her. I just didn’t expect this kind of turnout, but I’m glad to see it for Harold’s sake.”

Sam added, “Give poor Theo a break. This crowd is the biggest I recall ever attending a Jubilee. No doubt Harold’s vision for Priestly Park intended to give Shiloh’s annual Jubilee a shot in the arm.” He pointed at the building under construction with its steel skeleton cordoned off by yellow caution tape and bright orange plastic barrels. “Can’t wait to see the new community center when it finally opens.”

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Long after I confessed to eating way too much, I found myself surrounded by empty chairs. The grunts and moans of the more athletic, younger members of our group drew my attention to their heated volleyball game. Zeb and Sam refereed the match, standing on opposite ends of the net. Liddy and Marie had disappeared earlier to sign up for the annual egg toss, thanks in large part to the persistent goading of Megan and Jeannie. Although Judy, Martha, and Susanna urged me to watch, I opted to catch up with Arnie meandering toward the creek.

“You know we’re both missing out on the celebrated egg toss.” I leaned down and flung a couple of pebbles into Shiloh Creek. Arnie chuckled and skipped a stone across the surface.

“Hey Arnie, you’re closer to Harold. You’ve known him as his pastor for a long time. Is he going to be okay?”

Arnie reached for another stone and juggled the smooth tawny pebble between his fingers. “Not sure, Theo. Just because I’m his pastor doesn’t mean I’m privy to know everything. I know, like you, that second trip to the hospital in January sucked the wind right out of his sails.”

“But is it just physical? I’ve hardly seen him around town since.”

“I’m not a doctor, but I believe a broken spirit can be as lethal as any heart attack. And, in Harold’s case, he’s experienced both. Since his release from the hospital, he’s spent every day cooped up in his study. He hardly drives anywhere anymore. In fact, last month when I visited Hank at the county jail I learned Harold hadn’t visited him since Hank and Megan’s divorce finalized in May.” With an extended sigh, Arnie chucked the stone skyward and watched it disturb the water’s calm surface.

“He sure looked washed out as he shuffled on and off the stage. I know he’s holed himself up in recent months, but I had hoped he’d get better, not worse. I’ve not reached out to him as I probably should’ve, but I’m glad you’ve talked with him.”

Arnie gazed at the expanding ripples on the glistening creek's surface. "Theo, I fear Harold's never gonna get better. Even the doctors warned him that his tired ticker needs lots of rest and less stress. But what I am afraid of the most is that he's convinced he failed Hank when he needed him most."

The stone I fumbled with slid through my fingers and fell into the wet sand at my feet. "What can we do to help? He's not been to church since he got out of the hospital either. Maybe Liddy and I should've made a better effort to visit him."

"I'm not sure you and Liddy can do anything more except keep him in your prayers right now. Hal and Phillip keep a close eye on him and..." Arnie looked up with a partial smile. "You and I also know Maddie's using her, well, her mother hen instincts to indulge Harold's needs."

I chuckled as I pictured the look on Maddie's face sharing her hard-love quips meant to snap Harold out of his woebegone moods. "If Maddie's struggling to nurse Harold back to health, how much good can we offer?"

"Of course, Harold did agree to take part today. Maybe getting around the town's people and laughing again will help. I also think him seeing how Priestly Park turned out has helped too. Perhaps this Jubilee outing will galvanize his mental and physical recovery. If not..." Arnie went silent as he squatted at the water's edge and stared at the far side of the sun-drenched creek. I crouched down alongside and tossed another pebble to break his locked gaze.

Arnie flinched and looked at me. "I was thinking back on what you said about Harold's sluggish appearance today. It made me wonder about his state of mind. When Hal and I first persuaded him to come, he seemed chipper enough and much more upbeat than he appeared today."

"Do you think something happened in the last couple of days?"

"I don't know Theo, but it wouldn't hurt checking up on Harold before Hal or Phillip takes him home."

“Before who’s going home?” A familiar deep voice reverberated behind us. Arnie and I stood and stared at Harold’s weak smile directed at us.

Arnie stammered, “Didn’t hear you walk up, but we’re sure glad you decided to join us.”

Arnie picked up a stone and flipped it toward Harold who instinctively snatched it out of the air. I said as Harold matter-of-factly let the stone fall and brushed his hands off, “You sure must be proud of how the park turned out.”

Harold offered a tired grin. “Hal and Phillip made me feel very proud today. I just wish the community center could’ve been ready.” Harold paused. “So tell me, how have you been Theo? Haven’t seen hide nor hair of you lately.”

“Guess that’s my fault.” I concentrated on his face though his eyes focused on the ground. “I’ve not seen you around town either, but I should’ve visited you long ago.”

Harold mustered a forced grin, but his hesitant look revealed the truth. “Not a problem Theo. I haven’t felt too sociable lately either. How’s that book working out?”

“Mary’s delivering the manuscript to Cornerstone Monday. Barring any unforeseen issues, books should be off the presses and arrive well in advance of Larry’s advertised book launch shindig before Thanksgiving. I reckon you’d like to know how it turned out?”

Harold nodded with a curious shrug.

“I chose not to dodge the truth about Hank’s mistakes, but in the epilog, I added how our country has failed to adequately care for our veterans, especially those coping with underlying mental health symptoms of PTSD.”

Arnie added. “Theo’s done a masterful job based on what little he’s allowed me to read. He treated all the victims in *Jessie’s Story* with the greatest respect.”

Harold's dark eyes looked up. "I've got no doubt, Arnie." He rested his right hand on my shoulder but turned toward Arnie. "Preacher, do you know what a banshee is?"

Arnie stared back, speechless.

Harold squeezed my shoulder as he asked me, "Do you?"

"Some kinda witch, I think, or something ominous like that," I replied with one brow arched.

"I dreamt, or at least believe I dreamt, that a banshee visited me last night. She wore a dark, hooded cloak that covered her face and wailed three times from the foot of my bed, 'Death awaits. Get ready.'" Harold looked right through me as he spoke. "It brought back memories of my grandpa's tales about a banshee's visit days before his father passed. Though my father dispelled my grandpa's tale as hogwash, I can assure you that I awoke in a cold sweat this morning."

Arnie asked, "Could you make out the face beneath the hood of the cape?"

"Not really, but she, and it was a woman, seemed familiar, but she never answered when I asked."

"Did she say or do anything more in your dream?" I asked.

"No, but she pointed directly at me before she spoke her final warning and disappeared."

"Harold, this sounds like nothing more than a nightmare," I said as I patted his hand still clenching my shoulder moments before I sensed a slight wobble in his stance.

Harold wrinkled his face. "I just can't shake the chill it gave me."