

## CHAPTER ONE

### (I)

The last things Seth Jameson could remember, before waking up in the back of the ambulance, were dropping his coffee cup and falling into the puddle. One moment, he was walking back from the vending machine toward his office. He had his PDA in his right hand and a fresh cup of coffee in his left. The next moment, he was lying in a puddle of hot coffee. His right hand was clutching his chest. His left hand clenched into a fist tight enough to carve little half-moons into his palm where his fingernails dug in. The next time his eyes opened, he was strapped to a gurney in the back of an ambulance. He could vaguely recall a voice coming from far away, like a play announcer at a ballpark halfway across town.

“...and we’re BACK, Ladies and Gentlemen!”

### (II)

He’d had a heart attack. Well chalk one up for Ol’ Doc Charlie. The old grouch had finally been right. All his years of preaching to him finally paid off. Give him a hand, ladies and gentlemen. Twelve years of college actually came through for him. He is now smart enough to predict that old men die of heart attacks. Well, he’d been half right. It hadn’t *killed* him. He wasn’t dead. He hurt too freakin’ bad to be dead.

Unless...

His last thought floated through his mind in a lazy spiral, keeping just out of reach. He couldn’t quite make it out, but it was something of a bad feeling that he actually *was* dead, and Hell was an eternity with that incredible pain throughout his entire body.

(III)

Curtains; or robes from three really fat angels. He couldn't tell which and, truthfully, couldn't care less. His pain was gone either way. He could hear his breath in his head like his ears were plugged. It was slow and shallow, but it was still there. He was still alive. Dead men don't breathe. He tried to look around the little room, but his eyelids weighed in at just under a ton each, and he could barely manage the tiny slits he was peeking through.

A woman sat next to him on his left. Chances were it was his wife, but the way the rest of the world appeared at the moment, one really couldn't trust Mr. Chances R. Good. Still, he thought it must be her. He tried to call her name but the croaking sound that came from his throat sounded like a dehydrated bullfrog in a sand pit. He felt his parched lips crack as his mouth worked around the doomed bullfrog's voice. He flicked his tongue out to wet them and it felt like sandpaper.

He felt a hand, warm and familiar, close around his own semi-frozen left hand. Velvet fingers caressed his skin and he fought to bring the face into focus. It was Sarah. It had to be. After thirty-two years, he knew her touch from any other woman in the world. Everything was going to be fine now. He was going to be all right. Things were always all right when Sarah was there.

He felt a firm but gentle tug coming from deep inside his body. It pulled from just behind his eyes, dragging him backward into nothing. He closed his eyes (or simply let the lids fall, he couldn't tell) and let the tugging sensation pull him deeper into the darkness as the touch of Sarah's fingers faded to nothing.

(IV)

"Oh crap", he groaned. "I didn't make it after all." His voice was a little better, but hardly enough to notice.

"What's that?" asked the man in the white smock, standing over him.

"Oh. It's just you, Doc", he said, pausing to lick his lips. They were still parched and a

little tender, but his tongue no longer felt like 80 grit paper against them. “I saw the white and thought I was in Heaven.”

He had to pause again, this time to regain his breath. Even the rough whisper he managed seemed to drain the energy from him.

“Then I saw the face and knew I was in Hell.”

Doc threw him his most disapproving frown. “Save your breath, you old Coot. You don’t have that many left. Besides…” he leaned closer in as if telling him a secret. “You and I both know that Heaven wouldn’t *have* you.”

With that, he picked up his clipboard and left the little cubicle, pulling the curtain smartly behind him.

To hear the two speak to each other, you’d think them mortal enemies. Nothing could be further from the truth. They had known each other since the third grade when Seth had given Charlie the broken nose that “swelled to a turnip and never went down”. After the fight (which neither man could recall the reason for) the two had become inseparable. It was a friendship that had survived through two wars, eleven Presidents, and enough beer to buy each of Anheuser-Busch’s top executives a new Mercedes (and that was just during college).

Every memory they shared seemed to pour through him, as Charlie made his way down the winding corridors to his office. He sent Sarah there for coffee and a little rest while he examined Seth. The thought of her sitting in there alone during this was bad enough, but the thought of her sitting in a waiting room full of strangers, like just another patient’s relative, somehow seemed worse.

He opened the door and saw her sitting in a chair in the corner. Her shoes were tucked neatly beneath the end table and her bare feet were drawn up beneath her. Her chin rested on her knees. A mangled tissue was clenched in her left hand and a barely touched cup of coffee sat next to the lamp on her right. Her vacant eyes were red and swollen. The tight lips and worry lines made her look at least fifteen years older than she really was.

His heart went out to her. He knew just what she felt like. It had been six years since he sat in a hospital wondering if his own wife would live or die, but the pain still made it feel like yesterday. Sarah and Seth had been there for him through it all. From the day the test results came back “malignant” until the day he laid her to rest; one or both of them had been right beside him. No, it was no longer a cliché for him. He knew *exactly* how Sarah felt.

She looked up at him, her face a mixture of hope and fear. He smiled at her faintly. Unlike the worst day of *his* life, hers would turn out for the better. Seth was going to be fine. It would take time, and a major change in their lifestyle, but he would be fine.

(V)

All roads to “recovery” are long, but Seth’s was also full of potholes. If there were ever any doubts as to how stubborn the old fart could be, they were long gone by now. Since his first attack, nearly six years before, he’d undergone several stent implants, and a by-pass surgery. The by-pass, according to Doc Turnip Nose, was about as good as running half of New York on a cheap extension cord. Eventually something was going to burn out, and he was fresh out of spare veins to work with. A new heart was now his only hope.

*They* called it a new heart, but as far as Seth was concerned, it was *used*, and he had fought it as long as he could. He’d been afraid of accepting a heart from someone else. The thought of someone else’s spare parts inside of him gave him the Willies, but a heart somehow seemed the worst. What if he got the heart of a serial killer, or a rapist...or a Democrat?

In the end, Sarah and Turnip Nose won, and he had the transplant. A few short weeks later, and here he was sitting on a glider smack-dab in the middle of B.F.E. (or the “Big Freakin’ Empty”, as he called it) watching two squirrels playing tag between the oak trees in his front yard. Just another of the “little concessions” he’d been forced to endure for Sarah. First...take this heart we yanked outta some poor shmuck we found at the bottom of the ski slope, or wherever they found Mr. Unfortunate. Then you gotta quit your “high pressure” job. Then that home in the suburbs you busted your butt for thirty years to get? Forget about it. Between the traffic, the noise, and the rising taxes...it’s just too much stress, Seth-old-boy. What you need is a place in the country. Yeah, that’s the ticket. All that fresh air will do you a world of good. Forget the fact that the nearest hospital is forty miles away. Shoot, it’s twelve miles just to the nearest *grocery store*. But who cares, right? I mean, look around, Pops. You got all the meat you need playing right there in your own front yard! Potatoes? Learn to grow’em! A little gardening will give you something to do on those long days you *won’t* be spending at the office anymore.

Well, then. That’s about it. Life, as you know it, is never quite the same after your first heart attack. Oh, there are other firsts, and they’re *all* life-changing events in one manner or another. They run easily alongside the developmental stages. Boys never forget their first dog, their first bike, and their first kiss. Teenagers have their first smoke, first beer, first car, and (if you’re daring enough) first tumble in the back seat. Men seem to get all the “firsts” that lead to the “lasts”. There’s your first job, first wife, first kid, first house, and (oh, by the way) first

freakin' heart attack! All of these are life changing events, to be sure, but none so “life affirming” as the heart attack. Nothing quite tells you you’re alive like the moment you truly recognize death.

On the other hand, nothing quite says you’ve died and gone to Hell like greeting your new neighbors, Farmer John and Farmer Jane. Jane seems to be missing a tooth or two and John seems to have absorbed them into his own crowded collection. They’ve caught you on the front porch with nowhere to hide and appointed themselves to the local “Welcome Wagon”. Well Hallelujah! Would we like to come to dinner? Well, that depends. Did you actually peel off the cellophane, or did you skin this one yourself? Never mind. Perhaps it’s best not to ask. Why yes, we would certainly love it. What’s that? 7:00 p.m.? Perfect. I’ll have to postpone that lobotomy I had been so looking forward to, but what’s that compared to good old-fashioned mystery meat and food poisoning?

He probably could have begged off easily enough, but they caught him a little off-guard. Besides...what else were they going to do? The movers hadn’t found them yet. They couldn’t exactly un-pack or settle in. Truth was they didn’t even have dishes, cookware, or *food* for that matter. If they couldn’t cook, they might as well take their chances with the neighbors. The nearest town was twelve miles away, and they’d tried the only restaurant there (some place called the Cast Iron Skillet) earlier that morning.

He’d walked the property line when he woke up that morning (the only part of Doc Charlie’s wonderful advice he actually agreed with). When he returned, they went into town for breakfast. Sarah had complained about his side order of bacon, but he ate it anyway. Let his arteries clog. The faster he had another heart attack and got out of this Godforsaken hole, the better. If death was his only escape, so be it.

After breakfast, they’d taken a brief tour of Dalton. What a miserable place, he thought. The shops they use to frequent along 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue were replaced by a Wal-Mart. Broadway would now be an ancient theatre on the town square with absolutely nothing he’d heard of, or cared to watch. Wall Street? Nothing doing, my friend. One bank with two tellers and a single drive-thru lane was the closest thing to a financial institution this miserable place had to offer.

What the heck were they doing here? There was absolutely not one thing about this place that would draw even a mildly civilized human being to it, as far as Seth was concerned. So what made them pack up everything they owned and move to such a depressingly backward part of the world?

“Heck if I know”, he muttered as he got up and headed inside toward the kitchen. Sarah threw him another black look. She didn’t approve of “gutter language” as she called it. He usually tried to avoid it around her as much as possible, but lately he’d been too pre-occupied with the sudden turn his life had taken to worry about it. Lately he’d been in too much of a mood to worry about much of *anything*.

He stopped in the middle of the living room and stared at the bare floor and blank walls. The smell of fresh paint lingered in the room although Sarah insisted that she had aired the whole house out thoroughly before she went back to New York to get him. He didn't care what she had to say about it. It still stank to high heaven, to him.

A molecule of guilt tugged briefly at the bottom of his heart, or whoever's heart he was borrowing. He supposed he wasn't being very fair about the whole mess. She did it all for *him*, after all. She'd taken care of it all while he was still in the hospital recuperating from the transplant. She'd made the trip, found the place, bought it and had it renovated. She even hired the movers to come and pack all their belongings and move them all the way out here for them. He had done *nothing* except sit on his backside watching strangers come in and out of his home with box after box, and disappear with them into that enormous trailer with the covered wagon painted on the side.

Frontier Movers. How appropriate, he thought. Perhaps that's why they hadn't found them yet. Perhaps Grand Pappy's old map from under the wagon's buckboard just wasn't quite up to date. Maybe there have been a few changes since the 1800's. *Not many, mind you*, he thought as he looked out the window at the woods surrounding their new home, *but a few*.

*Gees! How did we end up way out here?*

The answer to that question was a riddle in itself. He knew why; but he didn't know why. He knew why, because he'd picked the area himself. It was one of the few clear memories he had of his stay in the hospital. After the transplant, when he and Sarah had made the decision (mostly Sarah) to move, she had asked him where he would like to live. What came out of his mouth was every bit as much of a shock to him as it was to her.

Dalton, Arkansas.

Why here? He had no idea (at least he didn't *think* he did). Why would he? Neither of them had any ties to this area. He had no relatives here. Sarah didn't either, as far as he knew. (She certainly never mentioned them, if she did.) They'd never vacationed here. As far as he could remember, they'd never even driven *through* here on any vacation. In fact, he was pretty sure he'd never even heard of Dalton, Arkansas before. He was certain of it. If you'd given him a test the week before his heart attack, he couldn't have named any place in Arkansas, other than the capitol, and probably wouldn't have given a flip. Yet there it was (Dalton, Arkansas) coming out of his mouth every bit as familiar to him as a memory from his childhood in up-state New York.

He walked into the kitchen still puzzling over it. He set his coffee cup in the sink and stared at it. It seemed so out of place, small and desperate, sitting by itself in a kitchen void of any other dishes other than the thermos they'd bought in town that morning to bring back coffee in. Yesterday it had been just one cup among many on a Wal-Mart shelf. Now it was alone in a

strange house sitting in an otherwise empty sink. He knew exactly how it felt, and it depressed him even more.

The sound of a large truck coming off the main road pulled him away from his thoughts. He walked back through the hollow house and watched the truck pull up the drive. It had to be the movers. His last chance had run out. There was no going back now.