

Excerpt: From Chapter 18

The mother of the girls had called late into the night. Clive didn't even flinch when the telephone rang. The poor man just kept sawing away at logs, as tuckered out as could be. I, on the other hand, hadn't gotten so much as a wink of sleep. Too much pulled at my mind for me to put two dozes together.

So, when she called, I didn't mind all that much. I got up and pulled on a pair of slacks and a blouse and opened the front door of the funeral home.

"Would you like a little tea?" I asked. "Maybe some coffee?"

Not answering, she followed me into the lobby.

"The chapel is right this way," I said.

"I'm sorry." She stopped behind me. Hands clasped under her chin, as if folded in prayer, she let her eyes close and drew in long breaths.

The sound in her voice, the way it quivered, resembled most every parent I'd ever met who lost a child. It was the worst thing I could imagine. And those parents I knew cried and screamed and suffered the complete terror of it.

"I can't sleep. I keep thinking of them. That if I could see them for a minute..." She cut herself off, wiping a tissue under her nose. "But I don't think I can look at them. I'm just too..."

Taking her hand, I gave it a tiny squeeze.

"But having them here, away from me, is too much." Covering her face with both hands, she let her eyes peek out between her fingers. And the way those eyes filled up with tears nearly broke me in two.

Reaching out my arms, I pulled her into a hug. I figured that's what neighbors would do. And she needed a good neighbor about then. It wasn't really the thing for a funeral director to do, but that didn't matter so much to me.

"I keep thinking they're at a sleepover or something, you know? Like they're at camp for a couple days." Her jolting breath hit against my neck. "But then I realize they're gone. They aren't coming back. Not ever."

"I'm sorry," I whispered. To tell the truth, I knew those words weren't enough. Like giving a stick of chewing gum to a starving man. "I want you to take all the time you need."

Straightening up, she stepped out of my hug, letting me look right into her eyes. That poor woman. So swollen and red around the hazel of irises. I doubted she'd stopped crying for all the hours since she'd heard the news. I knew I wouldn't have.

"You know what I used to say to people? When they lost someone?" For all the wiping of tears, her face still didn't get dried off. "I used to tell people that God needed another angel with Him. That's why He took them."

Not knowing what to say, I nodded.

"Isn't that awful? Today I realized what a terrible thing that is to say." She shook her head. "And I don't want to think about what that would mean about God. Because I think it would make me hate Him so much for it. He knows I need them more than He does."

I understood what she meant. But exactly.

"I wish I'd never said that to anybody." Her lips pulled right down into a frown. "It makes God seem so selfish."

"You must have thought it would comfort them," I said. "You didn't mean any harm by it. You were trying to help."

“I’m having the hardest time understanding why this happened, though. I can’t figure it out.”

She gasped for breath. “Why would God have let this happen?”

As she searched my face, I couldn’t find a single answer, either. As much as I wanted to say something wise to carry her through the grief, I couldn’t think of a blessed thing.

Aunt Gertie made it a habit to tell me that I must have an answer for the hope I had. But, looking at the suffering mama in front of me, I didn’t have a thing to say. I figured it would have been wrong of me to offer it then, even if I did know. Part of wisdom, I thought, was knowing when to keep the answers shut in your trap. And, while I wasn’t always so wise, the Holy Spirit took over in my distress.

So, instead of yapping my jaw, quoting Bible verses pulled thin as glass and handing out easy answers, I stood before her, letting the silence work as a salve between us. And without my own shaky voice pulling the attention from her, the loss got a moment to work inside her. As hard as grief hurt, it needed to run the long course through her.

After a minute or two, she dabbed at her sore eyes again.

“Have you seen them?” she asked.

I had and I told her so. As much as I wished I could have said “no.” Evelyn had needed my help getting the cloths pulled over their broken faces.

“Do they…” She stopped herself. “Are they bad?”

Closing my eyes, the image of the girls lingered. More in my heart than in my head. The only words I could think of to describe was “there’s nothing left to see.”

But “nothing left to see” means little to a grieving mama.

“Tell me.” Reaching to touch me, she stopped short and pulled her hand back. “Please.”

“We did the best we could.” I swallowed good and hard. “But we weren’t able to make their faces viewable.”

“So I can’t see them?” Weaker than before, her voice whimpered. “Even for a minute?”

“We put handkerchiefs over their faces. Like shrouds.”

“Can’t I see them?” she asked again.

“Would you like to hold their hands?” Touching the door, I readied myself to push it open.

“You could sit with them and hold their hands. As long as you want.”

“I never wanted to move out here.” She took one step toward the chapel but paused. “My husband said this would be a good place for the girls to grow up.”

She let the place between her eyes gather into folds. “They were in elementary school then. He wanted them to be safe. He told me they would be safe here.”

After all I’d seen in fifty-two years living above that funeral home, I knew no place was all the way safe. I didn’t tell her, though. She’d learned that for herself.

Breathing in and out a couple times, she made eye contact. The way she set her face, like a warrior stepping into battle, told me she was ready.

The chapel lights flickered when I flipped the switch. Two caskets, head-to-head, stood, open at the front of the chapel. We thought the family would have wanted it that way. Evelyn had done a good job covering the bruised and cut up arms with makeup. All the work of dressing the bodies for the parents and no one else. We’d close the caskets for the public viewing. But the parents needed to see them. Otherwise, they might wonder all their lives if their children really had died. They’d know in their minds. But somewhere, deep in their hearts, they’d wonder. And that would add torture to agony.

Eyes turned toward the caskets, she stood next to me, all folded up into herself.

“He picked the right ones,” she said. “My husband picked good caskets for the girls, didn’t he?”

“He did a fine job.”

The way she wrung her hands, I wondered how they didn’t get sore.

“Which do I go to first?” She turned toward me. “I can’t pick. I don’t love one more than the other. But I’m afraid they might not understand if I picked one first.”

The floor of the chapel had a few boards that groaned if I stepped on them. I tried to avoid them as I made my way to the caskets. I pulled on those caskets, thankful for the wheels on the bottom of the pedestals. Putting the girls side to side, I left enough room for the mother to stand between them.

“Thank you,” she said when I walked back to her. “Will you stay back here? I don’t want to be alone.”

“I’m not going anywhere, honey.”

Those old floorboards moaned along with her as she made her way to the girls. Somehow, even though she wept, she didn’t fall apart. As if she kept herself strong for their benefit. Her final act of courage on their behalf. She stood between them, touching their fingers, smoothing the hair she could see that spread out on the pillows.

I sat in one of the comfy chairs in the back. The warmth of the room and the dim lights made the exhaustion pull at me. I let my eyes close, partly because they weighed about two tons. But, also, I wanted to give the woman privacy. She’d be doing plenty of public mourning later on. She deserved the dignity of grief that flowed between her and God. I would have wanted that if it had been me.

My rump in the chair, though, I had to fight off snoozing. Sleep would lead to snoring and a body unwilling to get back up. So, I tried to remember all the thoughts which had kept me awake earlier in the night. Chief among those thoughts was Gretchen's appointment. I tried to pray it into being something minor.

Only a few minutes later, though, I heard humming. Some lullaby, it sounded like. Opening my eyes, I saw the mother sitting in a folding chair between her girls, holding their hands. She hummed to them. Then the hum grew to singing, her voice shaking. It dipped into a sob every now and again.

The only words I caught were "sleep" and "rest."

I prayed those words for her, too.

She sat between her girls until the sun rose. I kept vigil in the back, sharing in her pain from far off.