

Return to Paradise

Tim Speer

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ISBN: 1508678649

ISBN 13: 9781508678649

To my beautiful wife, who has shown me what true love is and, through that love, brought me ever closer to God. Without her this book would not have been possible.

Chapter 1

It was noon on a Friday in mid-September. David Martin finished the report he was working on and then shut down his computer. The time for the vacation he had been looking forward to had finally arrived. He took a last look out the window of his seventh-floor office at the surrounding office complex and then got up and headed out the door. He was taking a week of vacation to drive up to St. Louis for homecoming weekend at his alma mater, Washington University, and wanted to take off early so that he could get there that night. That would allow him to sleep in a little and then spend the rest of the morning relaxing before going to the homecoming game that afternoon and the homecoming dance at his fraternity that evening. It would be the first time he had been back to his alma mater since he graduated. He looked forward to seeing some of his old fraternity brothers, as well as seeing the campus again. He planned to spend Sunday visiting some more at the fraternity and then drive down to his hometown of Farmington, Missouri on Monday to spend the rest of the week

visiting his parents. It was a warm, sunny day. The weather map showed that it should be fairly clear weather all the way to St. Louis, a perfect day to drive.

Appearance-wise, David was the type that could easily blend in with the crowd. He was about average height, standing at five feet eleven, and was a trim 175 pounds. His sandy-brown hair was well trimmed, and his face was always clean-shaven. David had been working in the venture-capital division of Polaris Capital Management, a midsized investment-banking firm located in Dallas, Texas, for just over five years. David had started work at Polaris Capital right after graduating from college. He was smart, a fast study, and was quickly moving up the company ladder.

As he walked down the hall toward the front door of the office, he ran into Ron Travis, a good friend of his who worked in the brokerage division. “Going out for lunch?” asked Ron.

“No, I’m taking off early to drive up to St. Louis for homecoming weekend. After that I’m going to see my parents for a week,” replied David.

Ron nodded in acknowledgment. “That’s right; I remember you saying that you were taking off next week. I still don’t understand why you don’t just fly up. You know it’s called fly-over country, not drive-over country.”

“Yep,” chuckled David, “but those who say that don’t know what they’re missing. I like getting out to see the countryside. There’s really a lot of nice country to drive through on the way. There’s the Oklahoma Lakes country, the Missouri Ozarks, and even all the farmland. Besides, I like driving. It’s a good way to relax. And it definitely beats all of the hassle of going through airport-security screenings, even if it does take a little longer to get there.”

“If you say so,” Ron replied. “I hope you have a good week of vacation, and don’t get a ticket in that speedster of yours.”

David chuckled again. “I’ll try not to.” He turned, headed on down the hall, and then went out the office door. In the parking lot, David opened the door of his Lunar Blue Mercedes CLS63 AMG. He had packed that morning before leaving for work. The dress code at Polaris Capital was business casual—generally slacks and a nice shirt. David was wearing a comfortable pair of navy nylon dress pants, a dressy but still comfortable white polo shirt, and a comfortable pair of black dress shoes. Thus he didn’t feel a need to change before hitting the open road. Once inside the car, he was all set and ready to go. He hit the push-button start and then pulled out of his parking space.

Although David made good money, he generally did not spend it lavishly. He lived in a nice but still fairly modest one-bedroom apartment, he was usually content to wear jeans and T-shirts when not at work, and he didn’t have more than the ordinary

amount of tech gear for someone his age. His one big splurge was his car. To him, the Mercedes CLS63S AMG was just about the perfect blend of car. It could comfortably seat three passengers in addition to the driver, and it had enough luxury and style to be suitable for driving around even the most scrupulous business associates. It was also loaded with all the modern gadgetry one could want, including Bluetooth connectivity for his smartphone, heated and ventilated seats, and an onboard GPS, as well as numerous other features. Yet its exceptional handling and its 550 horsepower engine that was capable of propelling it from zero to sixty in 3.6 seconds ensured that it could be a lot of fun to drive as well.

As he headed out of the parking lot, David loaded his “Classic Rock” playlist from the music he had downloaded to his car’s hard drive. His music taste had come largely from listening to the music his dad had listened to. He had a pretty extensive music collection; it was large enough that he should easily be able to make it to St. Louis without any repetition of songs. A couple of minutes later, he was accelerating down the entrance ramp of LBJ Freeway to the sound of Bob Seger singing “Old Time Rock and Roll.”

The offices for Polaris Capital were located just off of LBJ Freeway and Central Expressway. At rush hour, traffic along this corridor could get pretty heavy, but the noontime traffic this Friday wasn’t too bad. From LBJ Freeway he exited north onto Central Expressway, and soon he was headed out of

town. David pulled off in Plano, a suburb on the north side of Dallas. There he went through the drive-through of an Arby's, one of his favorite fast-food places. He ordered a roast-beef sandwich and Coke to eat on the road. He would stop for dinner, probably in Joplin, as his one rest break. Lunch in hand, David was soon cruising along the highway again.

About fifteen minutes later, David was leaving the urban sprawl of the metroplex and entering the farmland of north Texas. He drove on through the open farm country as Boston's "Peace of Mind" played on his car stereo. Soon he was going through Sherman and Denison and then across the Red River into Oklahoma. There US 75 turned into US 69.

North of the small town of Atoka, the farmland became more broken up, giving way to the hills and trees of the southeastern Oklahoma fold belt. A short time later, David was driving through McAlester and then along Lake Eufaula, a rather elongate lake that the highway followed for nearly twenty-five miles. David drove along the highway as it followed the lake, listening to songs such as CCR's "Up Around the Bend" and Christopher Cross's "Ride Like the Wind." The water glistened in the afternoon sun. It was a beautiful day, and David was enjoying the relaxing drive.

Past Lake Eufaula the highway went back into farmland. David drove on up through Muskogee and on to Big Cabin, where he was greeted by the

large Indian statue that stood outside the truck stop there. He took the turn to go onto I-44 East, got his entrance ticket at the tollbooth, and accelerated onto the freeway. It was shortly after five in the evening.

As David started along I-44, he looked down at his GPS and noticed it was showing a traffic alert indicating that there was an accident on eastbound I-44 just past Joplin. He was already approaching the tollbooth that was located a short three miles from where he had entered at Big Cabin. He pulled off into the lanes for the toll plaza and pulled up to the tollbooth. There he handed the clerk his entrance ticket and the two-dollar toll. "Have you heard anything about an accident east of Joplin?" he asked.

"Yeah," replied the clerk, "just came over the radio. Sounds like a pretty bad one. Said it was a couple of tractor-trailers and at least five cars. They have the eastbound lanes closed and are saying it's already backing up to this side of Joplin. If it works for you, I'd exit at Afton and take US 60. It's likely to be at least a couple of hours before they have that mess cleaned up."

"That does sound bad. I hope not too many people were hurt," said David.

"From the reports I've gotten, they said there were only a couple of people with minor injuries. No one serious. Pretty amazing if you ask me."

"That is pretty amazing. Well, thanks for the information," said David.

“Any time,” replied the clerk.

Great, David thought. So much for making good time to St. Louis. Also, so much for eating in Joplin. There were alternatives. In just a couple of minutes, David would be passing under the world’s largest McDonald’s, which stretched over the highway. This time of day though, it would be swarming with people and would cause David even more of a delay. He decided it would be better to wait until he got to Springfield and have a late dinner there.

David checked the routing on his GPS. It wasn’t as bad as he had thought it might be. He could exit at Afton and then take US 60 east as the tollbooth clerk had suggested. That should get him to Springfield shortly after seven. There he could grab a late dinner and then be back on the interstate. He shouldn’t even lose too much time. He also didn’t mind that it meant taking back highways as opposed to the interstate. The mix of rural farm country and the more hilly country of far northeastern Oklahoma and southwestern Missouri would make for a scenic drive. Hearing that no one had been seriously injured in the wreck also made David feel better.

Less than fifteen minutes later, David was taking the exit for US 60 East. He went through the tollbooth, getting a partial refund of his toll. Then, within seconds, his Mercedes was accelerating back up past seventy miles per hour and on to eighty. The Doobie Brothers song “Rockin’ Down the Highway” began to play. Even with the detour, he

was still in a good mood. To him the drive was relaxing.

A short time later, David was crossing the Neosho River and entering the Wyandotte Indian territory. There the terrain became hillier and more tree covered. David's thoughts turned toward the upcoming weekend. In the five years since graduation, he had only seen a few of his old fraternity brothers, and it had been a couple of years since he had seen them. There were several that he had kept up with on Facebook, but it wasn't the same as getting together in person. It would be great to get back together with the gang and reminisce about old times.

Then, as they often do with single men, David's thoughts turned to girls. David had dated off and on over the years but had never had a long-term relationship. And while he had plenty of friends and was never really lonely, he did long for the type of close relationship that his parents had. He then thought about some of the girls he had dated. His thoughts turned back to homecoming, and he thought about some of the girls he had dated during college. David wondered if any would be around that weekend.

David had crossed the state line entering Missouri. Just past the town of Neosho, the terrain returned to predominantly farmland. The Eagles song "Take It Easy" played on his stereo.

Chapter 2

There was a good attendance for the five o'clock daily Mass at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Spring River, Missouri. Many of those attending were there not just for Mass but also to participate in the special Rosary that was to follow. Father Pasco proceeded to the front of the chapel, bowed, and then kissed the altar.

Father Pasco then turned to face the congregation. "Good evening!"

"Good evening!" replied the congregation.

Then, making the sign of the cross, Father Pasco said, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

The congregation made the sign of the cross with him and replied, "Amen."

Father Pasco extended his open hands toward the congregation. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

“And with your spirit,” came the reply.

Father Pasco began, “This Mass is being offered for the intentions of all those facing foreclosure, for those facing financial hardship, and for the well-being of this town. As we have had after all the Masses this week, there will be a special Rosary immediately following Mass for the same intentions. With this in mind, let us begin our Mass today with a special prayer seeking the prayer and the intercession of St. Jude. All together we pray:

“Most holy apostle, St. Jude, faithful servant and friend of Jesus, the Church honors and invokes you universally, as the patron of hopeless cases, of things almost despaired of. Pray for us; we are so helpless and alone. Make use, we implore you, of that particular privilege given to you, to bring visible and speedy help where help is almost despaired of. Come to our assistance in this great need that we may receive the consolation and help of heaven in all our necessities, tribulations, and sufferings, particularly for our town, that we may praise God with you and all the elect forever. We promise, O blessed St. Jude, to be ever mindful of this great favor, to always honor you as our special and powerful patron, and to gratefully encourage devotion to you. Amen.”

As Reverend Dan Smith walked up to the front of St. Paul's Baptist Church in Spring River, he stopped to look down the block toward St. Mary's Catholic Church. It was about five thirty in the evening. By the number of cars parked over there, it looked like the five o'clock Mass was well attended. Reverend Smith wasn't the type of fundamentalist Baptist that was certain that their way was the only way to heaven and that the Catholic Church was the "spawn of the devil." But at the same time, he was firm in his faith and was still somewhat distrustful of Catholics. That said, he and Father Pasco were on cordial terms and often would have coffee or lunch together at the Spring Café.

Reverend Smith was forty-seven. He had been the pastor of the St. Paul's Baptist Church for just over fifteen years. And, although somewhat distrustful of Catholics, he couldn't help but be a little envious of the dedication many of them showed. Most of the parishioners at St. Mary's made it a point to attend Mass every week. And even their daily Masses had fairly good attendance. He wished that more of his parishioners showed the same dedication.

Spring River had a population of about three thousand and was located in southwest Missouri, about sixty miles west of Springfield. It was located well south of I-44. Thus, it didn't see a lot of traffic. Spring River was surrounded by farmland, lying just to the west of the hilly Ozark country that covered much of southern Missouri. Most of those not involved directly in farming were involved in businesses that catered to farming, such as Nate's

Tractor and Farm Supply, Miller Brother's Feed and Supply, and the Carlisle Lumber Yard. These three businesses represented the largest businesses in the town. Most of the people living in Spring River had lived in or around there for their entire lives. The area farms were predominantly small and family owned. Most of these families made enough to live on, but not much else.

Reverend Smith went inside the church and headed back toward his office to prepare his sermon for Sunday. He also wanted time to pray. He wanted to give a reassuring sermon, but that would be a difficult task this week. Most of the surrounding farms were going to be sold at a foreclosure sale on that coming Tuesday, and a number of those farmers were among his parishioners.

Several years earlier the local bank, the Community Bank of Spring River, had come under the control of Don Ashton, an outsider from the Chicago area. Although historically, Don Ashton had always been unscrupulous and heavy-handed in his business dealings, in Chicago he had been a fairly small fish in a big pond. Here he had become a big fish in a small pond.

Chapter 3

It was shortly after six in the evening. Father Pasco and his congregation were nearing the end of the fifth decade of the Rosary:

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee. Blessed art Thou among women, and Blessed is the fruit of Thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee. Blessed art Thou among women, and Blessed is the fruit of Thy womb, Jesus. Holy...”

...Cow, thought David. He had been cruising along between seventy-five and eighty miles per hour, enjoying the open countryside, when he rounded a corner, and there in the middle of the road was, in fact, a cow. David swerved to the right, going all the

way onto the narrow shoulder in order to avoid the cow. As he did, his right front tire went off the edge of the shoulder, grabbing into the loose dirt and pulling the Mercedes off of the road. David steered to counter as the Mercedes started to go into a full spin. He pulled the Mercedes back straight but was now heading right at a metal fence post. David steered to the right to avoid the fence post and then hit the brakes as the Mercedes broke through a section of barbed-wire fence. The Mercedes came to a skidding stop, kicking up a cloud of dust.

David heard a series of loud bangs as the car came to a rest. He looked around. He was unharmed, and the car seemed OK, although he feared the barbed wire may have left some scratches. From the loud bangs, he guessed that he had blown one or more tires. He got out of the car and walked around it. He had four completely destroyed Pirelli tires. The barbed wire from the fence had wrapped around all four tires. As it did, it had punctured them, causing them to blow out. It was going to be a mess just getting the barbed wire cut away, not that David had anything in the car to cut it with. And then there was still the issue of the tires being flat.

David got back in the car to check the GPS to see exactly where he was. There was a small town named Spring River about a mile down the road. Springfield was still about sixty miles away. Spring River was not likely to have any place with tires for the Mercedes. Springfield held out better hope, but it was unlikely he'd be able to get any tonight.

David heard a vehicle coming down the road. It was a late '90s model Chevy pickup, and to David's relief it pulled over and stopped. David got back out of his car and started walking over toward the pickup. A tall, lanky man who looked to be about forty got out. "Doesn't look like that fancy Mercedes of yours is cut out for four-wheeling!"

David, always fairly quick-witted himself, replied, "There was a cow in the middle of the road. I figured I'd try to herd it back into the pasture. You're right about the Mercedes. It's just not the same as my pickup back home when it comes to herding cattle."

The man chuckled, "Well, at any rate it looks like you need a new set of tires, and I don't think you're going to get any for that fancy thing around here tonight. You'll be doing well if you get a set tomorrow. Judging from your license plates, I'm takin' it you don't live around here."

"No," replied David, "I'm driving up from Dallas on my way to St. Louis."

The man nodded. "I live just down the road in Spring River. I can give you a lift into town if you'd like. There's a motel there called the Show Me Inn that can put you up for the night. There's a café just across the street if you get hungry. As for your car, Danny Thompson is about the only one who can help you with that. His garage closes at five on Fridays, but I can give him a call, and he'll probably be willing to tow it into town tonight so it won't be

sitting here by the highway. He'll want overtime, of course." Then, with a slight grin on his face, the man added, "That usually amounts to a six-pack. Get your bags if you have any, and hop on in; my name is Larry."

David went to his car, grabbed his suitcase, and headed over to the pickup where Larry was waiting. "I'm David. I really appreciate you stopping to help me out like this."

"'Tis no trouble at all," replied Larry as the two men climbed into the pickup.

Larry pulled out his cell phone and began to dial with one hand as he started the pickup and put it in gear with the other. "Hey, Danny, I got a guy here from Dallas that has a Mercedes with four flat tires about a mile west of town; think you can tow him in tonight?" After a short pause, he said, "Great, see you there."

Larry turned to look at David. "He said he'd meet us at his garage."

Chapter 4

It was six thirty on Friday evening. Sarah Nichols set the coffeepot she was carrying back down on the counter by the coffeemaker. She had just finished making a round refilling coffee cups for the customers at the Spring Café. She took a quick look over the café to see who might want further service. The main part of the dinner rush, if you could call it that, was past. There were now only four occupied tables. Most of the café's customers were regular customers, and as was usually the case, Sarah knew all the current customers by name. Danny Thompson was sitting over at a table by himself. His plate was empty, but he had just taken a call on his cell phone, so Sarah decided to wait and check on him later rather than interrupting him. Everyone else seemed to be busy eating. Sarah straightened some items along the counter, when she saw Danny put his phone down. She went over to his table. "Can I get you any dessert tonight?" she asked.

"I better pass tonight," replied Danny. "I just got a call from ole Larry Buchwald. He said some guy

from Texas managed to get four flat tires on his Mercedes. I don't know how the heck he managed that, but I told Larry I'd meet them over at my garage to get the full scoop and then give the guy a tow into town."

"I can't even imagine what someone from Texas would be doing driving through this area to begin with. It's not like there isn't a faster way to get anywhere they would be going," said Sarah. "Anyways, I can go ahead and get your check for you at the counter if you're in a hurry."

"Thanks," replied Larry. He pulled out his wallet, put a dollar tip down on the table, and then accompanied Sarah over to the counter.

"Have a nice night," Sarah said as Larry headed off.

Sarah was twenty-six. She worked at the café mainly during dinner hours, along with an occasional lunch shift, and spent most of the remainder of her time working at the family farm where she lived with her parents. She was the younger of two children, having an older brother who was twenty-nine. Sarah was a petite five feet six with a slender but still healthy build. Her normally shoulder-length brown hair was tied up in a bun. She was wearing her typical attire for working at the café, which consisted of blue jeans and a white button-up blouse.

After graduating from high school, Sarah had attended college for two years at Southwest Missouri

State in Springfield. However, although she always had decent grades, she never found anything she really wanted to pursue. So after two years, she had returned home to live full-time with her parents on their farm. She was content with that, as she liked the small town. Even Springfield seemed too big for her. For their part, her parents were happy with the arrangement. They enjoyed having their daughter around and were glad to have the extra help around the farm. They did, however, hope that someday she would find a decent man whom she could settle down with and marry, and of course, give them some grandchildren. Her brother, Tom, on the other hand, could never wait to go off and find bigger and better things. He had moved up to Kansas City right after graduating from high school. He was currently working as a baggage handler at Kansas City International Airport.

Sarah had dated some over the years but had never really been serious with anyone. Most of the local boys, like her brother, were anxious to get away to a bigger city and thus didn't hang around very long. Of the ones that did stay around, she still had never found anyone whom she really felt compatible with or that measured up to her ideals. Maybe it was just the town, or maybe she was just being too picky. Even when she was in college, she had never met anyone whom she really clicked with. Most of the boys there were chasing various dreams, and none of them seemed to be dreams that Sarah wanted to follow. To be certain, none had dreams of settling down in a small town on a farm. Sarah always felt that when she did meet the man she was supposed

to marry, she would feel it in her heart and know that he was the one.

Chapter 5

Larry turned in to a parking space in front of a small, metal building near the edge of town. The building was unpainted, with two large side-by-side garage doors. Over the garage doors was a large piece of plywood painted white with the words “Danny’s Garage.” Parked over to the side of the garage was a red tow truck, or at least what used to be a red tow truck. All the paint on it was faded, and in places it had worn or chipped off, allowing the primer to show through. At the moment they were the only ones around.

“Danny should be here in just a couple of minutes,” said Larry. “We’re early enough that he’s probably over at the café getting some dinner. Any later and he might have been hitting the bar.” Then, he added, “Don’t get me wrong; Danny’s a good guy and a good mechanic. He’s been single all of his life though, so he likes to get out and have some fun. On Friday evenings he usually goes out to shoot some pool, as well as have a couple of beers.”

A few minutes later, another Chevy pickup pulled up in front of the garage. This one was a little older and looked like it had quite a bit more wear on it. The driver opened the door and got out. He was about six feet tall and heavysset, with brown hair that seemed to go in just about every direction. Larry and David got out to greet him, with Larry going up to him first. They shook hands; then Larry motioned over to David. "This is David. He's the one with the flat tires."

"So how did you manage to get four flat tires?" asked Danny as he looked over at David.

"I was dodging a cow that was in the middle of the road and ended up going through a barbed-wire fence."

"What type of tires do you have on it?" asked Danny.

"Pirelli's," replied David.

Danny let out a long whistle. "That's a lot of money to blow up all at once. I can go ahead and get you towed in tonight. Given that it will take me a little bit of work to cut the barbed wire off, that and the tow will be one hundred fifty dollars. I won't know what the tires will run until I can make some calls in the morning. If I can find some in Springfield, we should be able to have you out of here by early tomorrow afternoon. You can settle up all the costs with me then."

Larry chimed in jokingly, “I told him that he would probably have to throw in a six-pack given that it was after closing.”

“Always be appreciated,” chuckled Danny.

“That should be the easy part,” said David. “Can you take a credit card on the rest?”

“Not a problem.”

“I’ll check with you in the morning to see what you find and how much it’ll cost me. What time do you open?” asked David.

“At nine,” replied Danny, “so I guess I’ll see you then.”

“Larry, you mentioned a motel and a café. How do I get to them from here?” asked David.

“They’re just about four blocks up that way. It’s pretty much on my way so I can drop you off at the motel if you’d like,” said Larry.

“That would be great.”

Larry drove David to the motel.

“I really appreciate this,” David said as he got out.

“Any time,” replied Larry.

David went into the office. The manager was a gray-haired lady in her mid-sixties. She looked over and smiled as David walked in the door of the office. “Good evening, may I help you?”

“I’d like a room for the night.”

“We can certainly take care of that. Would you like a room with two queens or a king-sized bed? They’re both eighty-five per night.”

“The king would be good.”

“Very good. If you could get me your credit card, I’ll get you all set up.”

David handed the manager a credit card out of his wallet, which she ran. Then she scanned an electronic key card and handed the key card and the credit card back to David.

“You’ll be in room one fourteen; it’s right around the corner that way,” she said. “My name is Mrs. Seaver. I’ll be here all night. If you need anything, just let me know.”

“Will do.”

The motel was a one-story strip-type motel, with the rooms forming a rectangle and all opening to the outside. It was a short walk to his room. Inside, the room contained a king-sized bed, a small dresser with a thirty-inch flat-panel TV on top, and a small desk and chair. The room was fairly plain but

seemed clean. David put his suitcase down on the floor and looked at his watch. It was almost seven thirty, and he was getting pretty hungry. He decided he'd go across the street to the café to get something to eat before doing anything else.

Chapter 6

Sarah was in the process of clearing a table. The café now had just two occupied tables. Bob Carlisle, owner of the Carlisle Lumber Yard, was there with his wife, Lisa. Sarah had just taken them their dinner before starting to work on the table she was now clearing. Jack and Donna McMichael and their two sons were sitting a couple of tables away from the Carlises. They lived on a small farm just outside of town. They were in the middle of their meal. As Sarah went near their table on her rounds, she could hear that most of their talk focused on the upcoming foreclosure of their farm.

Sarah heard the door of the café open, and she turned and looked over to see a young, well-dressed man walking in. “Take a seat anywhere; I’ll be right with you,” she said.

He was wearing navy dress slacks, a dressy white polo shirt, and black leather shoes. *Definitely not from around here—must be the guy from Texas that Danny went to get*, Sarah thought. Funny though, he didn’t

look like someone she pictured as being from Texas. She had imagined someone wearing Wrangler jeans with cowboy boots and a cowboy hat. However, he did look like someone who would drive a Mercedes. *Probably just one of those rich business types*, she thought. But what was he doing around here?

“Thank you,” replied David as he took a seat at a small table near the window.

Sarah finished clearing the table she was working on. She then went over to the table where David was sitting. “So, you must be the tycoon from Texas. Can I get you something to drink?”

David’s face showed a slight blush. “I wouldn’t exactly consider myself a tycoon. In fact, I’m far from it. But yes, ma’am, I am from Texas, and I’ll take some iced tea, unsweetened, please.” Then David added, “News must travel fast around here.”

“It’s a small town, so not too much happens without everyone knowing about it. I’ll have your tea right out.”

His demeanor seemed unobtrusive and polite, and he didn’t even seem to take offense from her slight jab at him. In fact, he almost seemed a little embarrassed by it. He still was dressed high class for around here, though. Besides, anyone driving a Mercedes must be pretty wealthy, which to Sarah meant stuck-up.

Sarah went to get the iced tea and took it out to David. “So what brings you around here?”

“I was heading to the homecoming at Washington University, where I went to school. I detoured down this way because they had a bad wreck on I-44.”

“Oh,” said Sarah, a little surprised that he had gone to school in Missouri. “Are you ready to order yet?”

David was browsing through the plastic four-page menu he had found tucked between the napkin holder and the salt and pepper shakers. “I’m still looking a little—maybe in a minute or two,” he said politely.

“Sure,” said Sarah. She went to check on the other two tables. *So he went to school up here in Missouri*, she thought. That softened her impression of him a little. Just the same, Washington University was nearly Ivy League. He still wasn’t off the hook. One thing Sarah noticed about him, almost subconsciously, was that he didn’t have anything close to what she would expect for a Texas accent.

Sarah grabbed her order pad and pen and then returned to David’s table. “Washington University has a pretty elite reputation. I guess it would have to in order to draw you all the way up from Texas to go to school.”

“Actually, I grew up in Farmington, so it was pretty close to home. In fact, I’m planning to go there after homecoming to visit my parents.”

This almost totally disarmed Sarah. She took a look over at the other two tables to see if anyone needed anything. They all looked like they were content eating their dinners and embroiled in their own conversations. “So you’re Missouri born and raised?”

“Yes, ma’am,” replied David. “And you?”

“Lived here all my life,” said Sarah softly. “Are you ready to order yet?”

“Yes, please, I’ll take a hamburger and some fries.”

“What would you like on your hamburger?”

“Just ketchup, pickle, and onion would be fine.”

“I’ll have it out to you in just a little bit,” said Sarah as she jotted the order down on her order pad. She then left to turn the order in to Sam, who owned the Spring Café and also served as its cook.

Sarah then turned to look over the dining area again. She saw that the McMichaels appeared to be finishing up. She went over to their table. “Can I get you anything else tonight?”

“Not tonight, Sarah. I think we’re ready to cash out, if you want to ring us up,” replied Jack McMichael.

“Sure, I have your check right here. I’ll take care of you over at the cash register whenever you’re ready.”

A minute later, they paid and then left the café. There were now just the Carlisles and the visitor from Texas.

Sarah normally didn’t pay too much attention to the infrequent out-of-town customers other than maybe the curiosity of asking them where they were from. The one tonight was different though. She wasn’t sure why, but she found herself wanting to know more about him. Maybe it was because of the way he kept contradicting the stereotypes she wanted to have of him. At first she had figured that anyone from Texas must be somewhat of a cowboy, yet he held absolutely no resemblance to one. She had heard from Danny that he was driving a Mercedes, and he was well dressed, at least by Spring River standards. So she had then tried to stereotype him as some kind of rich businessman. But it turned out he had grown up in Missouri, in a town not a whole lot bigger than Spring River. Still, he had gone to Washington University, which meant he likely had a law degree or some type of business degree. The fact that he drove a Mercedes meant he must at least make pretty good money. Yet his attitude was completely unpretentious. He had even seemed embarrassed at her suggestion that he was some kind of tycoon.

She heard Sam call, “Order up.” She went to get the order and take it out to David.

As she sat the plate with the hamburger and fries down in front of him, she took one last shot at rebuilding her stereotype. “So let me guess—you wanted to get away from small-town life, so you went to Washington University to get a law degree and then got some big job in the big city?” Her voice was soft, as it always was, so she didn’t come off as overly harsh and sarcastic. However, she didn’t come off as overly merciful either.

“Actually, I liked living in Farmington, and I liked growing up on my parents’ farm. It’s just that I always did really well in school. I got straight A’s all the way through high school, so my parents and all my teachers pushed me to pursue college. Washington University was just one of the colleges I applied to. When they offered me a scholarship, that pretty much sealed the decision. I studied business, one thing led to another, and I ended up getting a job at an investment-banking firm in Dallas. Don’t get me wrong. I like my job, and I like Dallas. But I miss Missouri as well. I’ve really been looking forward to coming back to visit some of my old friends, as well as seeing my parents and spending some time on the farm again.”

“Oh” was about all Sarah could muster, having again had her stereotype of the man completely destroyed. His voice had continued to remain soft and polite, and if he had taken any offense to her

comment, he showed no sign of it. “Well, I guess I better get back to work and let you eat.”

Sarah went back behind the counter. As she did so, she noticed that David stopped to bow his head for a couple of minutes before eating, in an action that could only be interpreted as saying a prayer. He was not overly obvious about it. But it was done with deliberation just the same.

Sam, not having much to do at the moment, stepped out of the kitchen. “So, you find out much about the hotshot from Texas?” Apparently Sam had a similar stereotype of him as she had originally.

“Just that he’s living in Dallas but grew up in Farmington. Went to Washington University, so he probably has a good job. He actually seems pretty nice,” replied Sarah.

“Well, don’t get too cozy with him. Once he’s back at his cushy job in Dallas, he won’t be giving Spring River another thought.”

Sam was in his early sixties, and had always taken a fatherly attitude toward Sarah. She took his comment as fatherly advice. “Don’t worry; I don’t intend to go chasing after some rich guy from Texas,” she replied with a smile.

Sarah glanced back over the dining area of the café. She noticed that Bob and Lisa Carlisle looked like they were getting ready to go. She went over to cash them out and then went over to David’s table

to check on him. “Can I get you a refill on tea or anything?”

“Not right now, thank you.” Then, just as Sarah was about to turn to leave, David added, “I guess I owe you an apology.”

Sarah was taken aback. “What for?”

“I must have come off as being a little arrogant before. Everyone around here has been really nice to me. The last thing I wanted to do was offend anyone.”

Sarah thought back to the remarks she had made and now felt guilty for having said them. “You didn’t; I’m the one who should probably apologize. I guess I assumed some things about you that I shouldn’t have.”

“Well, I guess I do look a little out of place around here,” replied David. “At any rate there’s nothing for you to apologize for.”

“Thanks, you either. I’ll be back to check on you again in a little bit. Just holler at me if you need anything.”

Sarah went to clear off the table where the Carlises had been sitting.

A short time later, David had finished eating his hamburger and fries. Sarah went over. “Can I get you anything else?”

“I think I’m through, thanks,” said David.

“Well, thanks for coming in. I guess Danny will have you fixed up and ready to go in the morning.”

“Actually, he’s going to have to get the tires delivered from Springfield—said it would probably be some time after noon before he was able to get them and put them on.”

“Oh.” Sarah handed David the check. “Here’s your check. I can take care of you at the cash register whenever you’re ready.”

Sarah started to turn toward the cash register but then stopped, and after a moment’s thought, she said, “You know, tomorrow the city is having its fall festival. If you’d like something to do in the morning, I’d be glad to show you around. They’ll have plenty of food there, so you could get some lunch before you go.”

“I’d like that; what time?”

“It opens at nine, but a lot of times it’s closer to ten before all the booths are up and running.”

“I was planning on going over to check on my car around nine or nine thirty, so maybe if we went over about ten?” David suggested.

“Then it’s settled; I’ll come by to pick you up at the motel at ten. I assume you’re staying at the Show Me Inn?”

“Yes, I’m in room one fourteen. You live close by, I assume.”

“Not too far. I live with my parents on a farm just outside of town. By the way, I never got your name.”

“David, David Martin. I see by your name tag that yours is Sarah.”

“Sarah Nichols,” she said.

David left a tip on the table. He then followed Sarah over to the cash register, where he paid his bill. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow morning then,” said Sarah.

“I look forward to it,” said David.

Chapter 7

At seven in the morning, David's phone alarm went off. He rolled over to turn it off. He had already been lying in bed awake for some time, trying to sort out his thoughts. He never slept very well when he was at motels, and last night had been worse than normal. First, there was the issue of the car and when he might be able to get the tires. More likely than not, he would miss most if not all of the homecoming football game, which started at one in the afternoon. Hopefully, he would make it there for the dance at the fraternity house that night.

Then, there were the bits and pieces of conversation he had picked up while eating dinner at the café. He hadn't heard enough to know all of the details, but apparently a lot of the local farms were going to be foreclosed on. The family that had been eating there lived on one of them, but from what he gathered, they were just one of many. The other couple that was there apparently owned a business. The looming foreclosures were big enough that the man seemed worried about the impact on his business and on the

town as a whole. He couldn't help wanting to do something for them, but he had no idea what. Besides, he was leaving this afternoon. What was there that he, or any other person for that matter, could do?

And then, there was the waitress, Sarah. There was something about her that attracted him to her. Sure, she seemed attractive, but it was more than that. In spite of her early jabs, he sensed that she had a great degree of tenderness and caring within her. She seemed sincere in a very simple way. He looked forward to seeing her at the fall festival. But that was likely the end of it. He would be leaving this afternoon and would probably never see or hear from her again. They lived too far apart and in two very different worlds.

David got up, went into the bathroom, took a shower, got dressed in a pair of jeans and a plain blue T-shirt, and was ready to go by seven thirty. Danny Thompson's garage didn't open until nine, so David figured he might as well go over to the Spring Café for breakfast. He left his motel room and walked across the street to the café.

The waitress this morning was named Nina. She was in her mid to late fifties, about five feet three, and had a medium build and graying dark hair. She seemed quick and efficient and was over at his table soon after he sat down. "You must be the Texan who had the run-in with the cow last night!"

“That would be me,” replied David, not bothering to ask how she knew, because he now realized that probably just about everyone in town knew.

“Would you like some coffee this morning, hon?”

“Yes, please, I’ll take it black.”

“I’ll be right back with your coffee.”

Nina then quickly headed off toward the counter. A minute later she returned with the coffeepot and poured a cup for David. “There you go, hon. I’ll be back in a few minutes to get your order.”

David grabbed the menu that was braced against the napkin holder and began looking it over. A couple of minutes later, Nina was back, pen and order pad in hand. “So what can we get you this morning?”

“The french toast sounds good; I’ll have it with the bacon.”

As David drank his coffee and waited for his breakfast, he looked around the café. There were only three other occupied tables in the café that morning. One of the larger tables had a group of five men sitting around it. They were close enough to David’s table that he couldn’t help but to hear a lot of their conversation. All the men appeared to be in their upper fifties to early sixties. As often exists in rural towns such as Spring River, this appeared to be a frequent, if not daily, gathering of men who had lived in the town all their lives and had probably

known each other since childhood. Much of the talk was normal chitchat—the weather, politics, this week’s football games. However, as David waited for his order, and then as he ate after Nina had brought it out to him with a “Here you go, hon,” the men’s talk repeatedly came back to the foreclosure sale he had heard about the night before. From what he heard, David surmised it was to take place early the next week. There was repeated mention of the local bank and a man named Ashton, generally in derogatory terms. They would talk about it for a few minutes, move on to the weather or football, and then ultimately come back to the foreclosures. It was as if the subject were the proverbial three-hundred-pound gorilla in the room that they wanted to ignore—in this case, more accurately, to avoid—but that was too big to either ignore or avoid.

Again David had a feeling of wanting to know more, of wanting to be able to help. But how could he possibly do anything? After thinking about it for a minute or so, he decided there was no point in agonizing over the matter. It really wasn’t his business. His concern for now was getting his car back, so that he could make it to what was left of the homecoming weekend at Washington University.

About midway through his breakfast, David realized that he had been so caught up in catching bits and pieces of the men’s conversation that he had forgotten to say grace before starting to eat. This was something he almost always did. He stopped to say a

quick, quiet prayer. He prayed both for the blessing of his meal and for those who were facing this foreclosure. Then it hit him—a feeling that he should be staying here and not leaving today. It wasn't some type of thought that merely came to his head. It was much deeper and much more acute than that. It was something that seemed to well up in him from the deepest depths of his soul. It was not a feeling or thought that he welcomed. To start with, he really did want to leave today. He wanted to make it to his homecoming to see his old college friends. In addition, he had experienced this type of feeling before—three times, to be exact. Each time he had found that it had been greatly to his advantage to act in accordance with those feelings. On two of those occasions, he had acted in accordance with the feeling and had been well rewarded in ways he could not have anticipated. On the third occasion, he had chosen to ignore it and had experienced nothing but disappointment. He tried to push the feeling away. It was still his intention to leave today.

Nina came by and asked, “More coffee?”

David looked at his watch. It was almost eight thirty. “No, thanks, I think I'll just take the check now.”

“Sure thing, hon, I'll have it right out to you.”

A few minutes later, Nina returned with the check. David left a tip on the table and then went to the counter to pay his bill. Nina took his payment and

thanked him. “Be sure to come see us if you’re ever back this way again.”

“Will do,” said David as he turned to leave. He figured it would take Danny a little while to find the tires for him, so he decided to stop back by his motel room to brush his teeth and use the restroom before going to the garage to check on his car.

After stopping by his room, David headed down toward the garage. He would have to walk, but it was a warm fall morning, and David didn’t mind getting out in the fresh air. It was about nine fifteen when David got to Danny’s Garage. His Mercedes was parked inside the garage over one of the lifts, although the lift was down. The Mercedes was resting on four flat tires; the barbed wire that had been wrapped around them had been cut away.

As David walked into the office of the garage, Danny was just getting off the phone. “So what’s the word?” asked David.

Danny looked up. “I’ve checked just about everywhere in Springfield and Joplin as well. There’s one place in Springfield that has two of the tires you need, but that’s all I could find. I can get some out of Kansas City, but they won’t ship them down here until Monday. They did say they had a truck they could put them on Monday morning and probably have them here by noon. Right now that’s about the best I can do for you.”

David started to protest, “Surely there’s some place in Springfield that would have those.” But even as he spoke, he remembered the feeling that had come over him during breakfast, and as he did so, that feeling started to return. Again he tried to push it away. He wanted to be on his way to St. Louis. Whatever was happening here was not his concern he told himself. But the feeling would not go away.

“I’ll keep trying, but I’ve already called just about every place I know,” replied Danny.

David let out a somewhat disgusted sigh. He thought about it a minute. He’d miss homecoming, but he could swing up to St. Louis for a couple of days at the end of the week before heading back to Dallas. Several of his college friends lived in the St. Louis area, so he would probably still be able to get together with them. And that would still give him several days to spend with his parents in Farmington. “Well, I guess I’ll let Mrs. Seaver over at the motel know that I’ll be staying another couple of nights. I appreciate your help.”

“Sorry I couldn’t find any for you quicker than that. If you write your cell number down for me, I’ll give you a call if I find out anything different.”

“OK, thanks.”

David wrote his cell phone number down for Danny and then turned to leave.

When David got back to the motel, he stopped at the office. Mrs. Seaver was busy at the front desk with some paperwork. She looked up when he came in. “Good morning, Mr. Martin; are you ready to check out?”

“I’m afraid not. The man at the garage said it will probably be Monday before he can get my tires, so it looks like I’m going to have to stay here with you a couple more nights.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Then Mrs. Seaver quickly added, “Of course we’re happy to have you with us. I’ll just mark it down that you won’t be leaving until Monday, and everything’s all taken care of.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.” Then David turned to leave the office and return to his room.

Chapter 8

A couple of minutes after ten, David heard a car pulling up in front of his room. He opened the door and saw Sarah in a white Ford Escape. David walked over to the passenger side. “Good morning,” he said as he got in.

Sarah was wearing jeans with a short-sleeved, purple blouse. Her hair was down. It was shoulder length with just a slight waviness to it. The bottom was slightly curled under, with the curls just touching her shoulders. She had a slender face accented by brown eyes. Her only jewelry consisted of a small pair of simple loop earrings and a necklace with a small, silver cross.

Sarah looked over at David with a warm smile. “Good morning, looks like a beautiful day for the fall festival.” She pulled out of the parking lot and turned onto the main road. “So what’s the word on your car?”

“Not good. The guy at the garage said the closest he could find a set of tires for it was in Kansas City and that it will probably be around noon on Monday before he can have them here.”

“Sorry about that,” said Sarah. “I guess that puts a crimp in your travel plans.”

“That it does; I had been looking forward to seeing some of my old friends. But if I rearrange my plans, it may work to go up to St. Louis at the end of next week to see some of them then.”

“I suppose then that when you leave here Monday, you’ll be heading straight to your parents in Farmington. I’m guessing that means more back highways. You’ll have to keep an eye out for those cows,” Sarah said jokingly.

“Yep, that’s my plan as of now. And I’ll definitely try to keep my car on the road.”

Sarah was silent for a minute and then said, “Well, at least you won’t be as rushed today, so we can take our time enjoying the festival. It’s a beautiful day, so maybe it will help to take your mind off of your spoiled plans. I’m sure we could all use getting our mind off of things.” Sarah’s voice trailed off.

It was a short drive to the city park, which was near the edge of town. The parking was mainly along the street, although there was an adjacent field that was also used for parking during larger events such as this. Part of the food-vending section for the festival

also spilled onto this field. There were walks both going around the perimeter and cutting through the center of the park. Several oak trees provided shade. In the center of the park was a gazebo where a band had just finished setting up and was starting to play. They led off with some bluegrass music, striking up the John Prine song “Paradise.” By the time Sarah and David arrived, most of the street parking had already filled up. Sarah turned in to the empty field area, where she found a parking place not far from where some of the food vendors had set up. Many were already cooking for lunch, and the smell of hot dogs, hamburgers, sausage, and popcorn filled the air.

David could detect a certain sadness in Sarah’s last remark. They got out of the car, and David walked around to Sarah’s side.

“About that last remark, I take it things aren’t going good around here. Last night at the café, and again this morning when I was eating breakfast, I kept hearing people talking about foreclosures. It sounded like quite a few are going to be taking place.”

Sarah took a hard swallow. “Most all of the farms around here are going to be foreclosed on.”

“I knew there were a lot of places around the country being affected by droughts; we’ve had our share around Texas. I guess I didn’t realize it was that bad though.”

They began walking, passing a couple of the food stands and heading in the direction of the gazebo. “That’s a part of it, but it’s also the bank; it’s the one forcing this,” Sarah said.

“But why, how?” asked David.

Sarah, now choking back emotion, began to explain. “I don’t know enough about banking to know all the details, but most people here have dealt only with the local bank for all their lives. And the bank always dealt fairly with them. Then a few years ago, it was taken over by a new group. They began forcing people to restructure their loans and making the terms worse, not better. Anytime anyone needed an additional loan, for seed, for a new tractor, or for anything, the bank forced them to restructure any outstanding loan. They would say they just wanted to combine all the loans to make it simpler and cheaper for everyone. But it was neither. The new loans were way too complex for most of the people around here to understand. And although the initial interest rates were lower for most, the loans had escalation clauses that quickly raised them. People around here don’t stop to think that you might need a lawyer when you get a loan. It never occurred to them. As I said, most had been dealing with the bank all their lives; they just assumed the new owners would be the same as the old. They were our neighbors, our friends. Only they weren’t. They were sharks in a fish tank.”

David and Sarah were now just outside the perimeter of where a group of people were standing around the gazebo listening to the band play.

“But I don’t get why everyone would be getting foreclosed on at the same time,” said David.

“Because the worst part of the loans is they have a clause where the bank can demand full payment at any time with only thirty days’ notice, and that’s just what they did. They sent out notices in the middle of July calling for full payment by August fifteenth. The foreclosure sale is this coming Tuesday for all those who couldn’t pay.”

Sarah, now visibly shaken, continued, “The farmers don’t have their crops harvested by the middle of August. Without money from the harvest, there’s no money to pay the loans. Even if they had the harvest in, people around here don’t have that kind of money that they can pay all their loans off at once.”

“And your parents?” asked David, afraid he knew the answer.

“They’re going to lose it, just like everyone else,” replied Sarah, with a couple of tears showing in her eyes.

A part of David felt like he should hold her and comfort her. However, they had just met, so he wasn’t sure how she would take it. Instead, a soft “I’m sorry” was all he could muster.

Sarah wiped her eyes and then recomposed herself as best she could. “Could we not talk about this anymore? I really just want to try to enjoy the day and not think about it for a little while.”

“Sure,” said David. “How about we try our hand at a couple of games over there?”

They went over and tried their luck at throwing darts at balloons, tossing plastic rings over bottles, and throwing footballs through rather small hoops, all without much success. They talked mostly small talk, commenting about the different games and laughing at each other’s misses. Soon Sarah’s mood seemed to be brightening.

After spending about an hour walking around and trying their hand at the various games, they went to check out some of the arts-and-crafts tables. They stopped frequently for Sarah to say hi to people she knew. As they did, she would introduce him simply as “David, the guy from Texas.” After spending a while looking at various homemade wreaths, quilts, tabletop decorations, and paintings, Sarah said, “I’m getting hungry; would you like to get some lunch?”

“Sure,” replied David, “those bratwursts they were cooking near the end over there looked pretty good to me; how about you?”

“That sounds good to me as well,”

They walked over to a concession stand set up near the end. After waiting in a short line, David ordered

two bratwursts and a couple of bags of chips and then turned to Sarah and asked, “What do you want to drink?”

“Diet Coke.”

David, turning back to the man taking his order, said, “And we’ll take a Diet Coke and a regular Coke.”

David got his wallet out to pay. Noticing that Sarah was starting to reach into her purse as well, he said, “Let me get it. It’s the least I can do since you’re being so nice in showing me around.”

“Thanks,” said Sarah.

They went over to a nearby condiment table to get ketchup, mustard, and relish for their bratwursts, and then they found a park bench not too far from the gazebo area.

David sat still for a moment with his head slightly bowed in order to say a quick prayer before eating. Although David tried to do this as subtly as possible whenever he was with others, and usually managed to do so without anyone noticing, Sarah apparently noticed it.

“Praying?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s a habit I developed a long time ago.”

“Not a bad habit to have—do you mind if I join you?”

“Not at all; I can say one out loud for both of us if you’d like.”

“That would be nice.”

They spent one awkward moment with both wondering if they should hold hands, but they ended up each with their hands in their lap and bowing their heads.

David prayed, “Dear Lord, thank you for this food, for this day, for the beautiful sunshine, and for all you have provided us with. Amen.”

“Amen,” added Sarah softly. “That was nice.”

They then began to eat. The band had switched over to country music and was now playing the Faith Hill song “Sunshine and Summertime.” The music, the food, and the sunshine seemed infectious. David felt relaxed again; he had stopped worrying about his car and the homecoming. He glanced over at Sarah. She was eating her bratwurst and swaying along with the music. She too seemed to have forgotten her troubles, at least for the moment.

Sarah caught his glance. “So what types of music do you like?” she asked.

“I listen to classic rock most of the time, but I like listening to music like this as well.”

“You mean classic rock like music from the nineties?”

“No, more like the seventies—the Doobie Brothers, Three Dog Night, the Eagles, and the like.”

“You’re not near that old. Whatever got you into that kind of music?”

“My dad, mostly; he listened to it all the time.”

“Like father like son?”

“Pretty much.”

“You said last night you worked at an investment-banking firm; I’m not really sure what that means.”

“We basically provide all types of financial services, such as brokerage services, management of mutual funds, and the like. Most of my work involves providing capital for start-up companies.”

“Sounds interesting; do you like it?”

“For the most part, it’s usually pretty interesting, and it keeps me busy.”

“I guess it pays pretty well too.”

“It’s pretty good money, and I’m single, so my expenses are low,” said David, sensing that she still looked at him as some rich guy from Texas.

David and Sarah had finished their lunch and were taking their trash over to a nearby trash can. The band was just breaking into the Dwight Yoakum classic “Guitars and Cadillacs.”

David pointed over to the end of the park where they were having a small car show. “Speaking of Cadillacs, it looks like they have a pretty old one over there. Why don’t we go look at some of the cars?”

“Sure, but I doubt they have any Mercedes,” Sarah joked.

David joked back, “Well, if they did, and they had tires my size, I might have to steal them.” They both laughed.

As they walked over toward the cars, they passed a short distance from where Father John Pasco and Reverend Dan Smith stood talking.

Father Pasco nodded over in their direction. “Looks like Sarah is getting along well with our visitor from Texas.”

Reverend Smith replied, “I hope she doesn’t get too close to him. I don’t trust him a bit!”

Father Pasco looked a little surprised. “Why not? He seems like a nice enough lad to me. And you haven’t even met him, have you?”

“Don’t have to. All I know is it seems like a pretty big coincidence that someone from as far away as Texas comes driving through here in a Mercedes right before the foreclosure sales.” Then, with emphasis, Reverend Smith added, “And I don’t believe in coincidences.”

Father Pasco thought a moment and then replied, “Perhaps, but then perhaps if he’s here for a reason, he’s here for a good reason.”

Reverend Smith’s face drew into a slight scowl. “And on what basis would you think that?”

“Nothing in particular; I just sense good in him,” said Father Pasco.

The two men watched David and Sarah quietly for a minute or so before Father Pasco, sensing the topic was going nowhere, decided to move on to a new subject.

Sarah and David stopped to look at a shiny, red, fully restored 1961 Cadillac convertible. They admired it for a couple of minutes and then moved on to look at the remaining cars. Most of the cars were mid-sixties to early-seventies muscle cars, such as Mustangs, Corvettes, Firebirds, and Camaros.

From there they went to browse a few more of the arts-and-crafts booths and then strolled around the park, talking mostly about the things at the festival.

Shortly after three, Sarah looked at her watch. “I hate to cut the afternoon short, but I have to work again tonight.”

“I understand,” said David. “I probably should be getting back to the motel anyways. I need to make a few calls to let my old college buddies know I won’t be making it.”

They walked back to Sarah’s car, and she drove him back to the motel.

“Thanks for a fun day; I really enjoyed it,” David said as he opened the car door.

“I enjoyed it too. If you get hungry tonight, just stop on by; I work until nine.”

“I’ll do that,” replied David. He got out of the car and went into his room as Sarah drove off.