

When You Call My Name

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Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Chapter 1

It's all your fault. You let me down...let me down.

Wyatt Hatfield shifted in his seat and gripped the steering wheel a little tighter, trying to see through the falling snow to the road ahead, doing everything he could to ignore the memories of his ex-wife's accusations. Shirley and his years with the military were things of the past.

This soul-searching journey he'd embarked upon months earlier was for the sole purpose of finding a new direction for himself. He'd fixed what was wrong with Antonette's life with little more than a phone call. Why, he wondered, couldn't he find a way to fix his own? And then he grinned, remembering how mad his sister had been when he'd interfered.

"At least I'm in her good graces now," he muttered, then cursed beneath his breath when his car suddenly fishtailed.

His heartbeat was still on high as he reminded himself to concentrate on the more pressing issue at hand, namely, the blizzard into which he'd driven. The windshield wipers scratched across the icy film covering the glass, scattering the snow in their paths like a dry, whirling flurry, while the heater and defroster did what they could to keep the interior of his car warm.

But as hard as he tried to concentrate on driving, her voice kept ringing in his ear, complaining that when she'd needed him, he was never there.

"Damn it, Shirley, give me a break," Wyatt muttered. "I was wrong. You were right. That should be enough satisfaction for you to let go of my mind."

The car skidded sideways on a patch of ice and Wyatt eased off on the gas, riding with the skid and sighing in relief as the car finally righted itself.

He'd made the wrong decision when he hadn't stopped back in the last town, and he knew it. Then the weather hadn't been this bad, and getting to Lexington, Kentucky, tonight had seemed more important than it did now. To make things worse, because of the severity of the snowstorm, he wasn't even sure he was on the right road anymore. The weak yellow beam of the headlights did little to illuminate what was left of the road, leaving Wyatt with nothing more than instinct to keep him from driving off the side of the mountain.

And then out of nowhere, the dark, hulking shape of a truck came barreling around a curve and into the beam of light, slipping and sliding as Wyatt had done only moments before, and there was no more time to dwell upon past mistakes. It was too late to do anything but react.

Wyatt gripped the steering wheel, trying desperately to turn away from the truck gone out of control, but he knew before impact that they were going to crash.

"God help us all," Wyatt murmured, knowing there was no earthly way to prevent what was about

to happen.

And then the truck's bumper and fender connected with the side of Wyatt's car. Bulk and weight superseded driving skill. Impact sent Wyatt and his car careening across the road and then down the side of the snowpacked mountain.

The last thing he saw was the picture-perfect beauty of lofty pines, heavy with snow and glistening in the headlights of his car. Blessedly, he never felt the car's impact into the first stand of trees...or the next...or the next, or knew when it rolled sideways, then end over end, coming to a steaming, hissing halt against a fifty-foot pine.

He didn't hear the frantic cries of the truck driver, standing at the edge of the road, calling down the mountain and praying for an answer that never came.

The wind from the blizzard whistled beneath the crack in the windowsill across the room. Even in her sleep, Glory heard the high-pitched moan and unconsciously pulled the covers a little higher around her neck. She could hear the warm, familiar grumble of her father, Rafe, snoring. It signified home, protection and family. Directly across from Glory's room, her brother, J.C., slept to the accompaniment of an all-night music station. Mixing with the wail of the wind and the low rumble of an old man's sleep, the melodies seemed somehow appropriate. Glory's long flannel gown added to the cocoon of warmth beneath the mound of covers under which she slept. She shifted, then sighed, and just as her subconscious slipped into dream sleep, she jerked. There was no escape for what came next, even in sleep.

Eyes! Wide, dark, shocked! Red shirt! No...white shirt covered in blood! Blood was everywhere. Pain sifted, filtering through unconsciousness, too terrible to be borne!

Glory's eyelids fluttered and then flew open as suddenly as if someone had thrown open shutters to the world. She sat straight up in bed, unaware of the familiarity of her room, or the snow splattering against the windowpanes. Her gaze was wide, fixed, frozen to the picture inside her mind, seeing...but not seeing...someone else's horror.

White. Cold, so cold! Snow everywhere...in everything. Can't breathe! Can't see! Can't feel! Oh God, don't let me die!

Glory shuddered as her body went limp. She leaned forward and, covering her face with her hands, she began to sob. Suddenly the warmth of her room and the comfort of knowing she was safe seemed obscene in the face of what she'd just witnessed. And then as suddenly as the vision had come upon her, the knowledge followed of what she must do next.

She threw back the covers, stumbling on the tail of her nightgown as she crawled out of bed. As she flipped the switch, her bedroom was instantly bathed in the glow of a pale yellow light that gave off a false warmth.

The floor was cold beneath her bare feet as she ran down the hall to the room where her father lay sleeping. For a moment, she stood in his doorway in the dark, listening to the soft, even sound of his snore, and regretted what she was about to do. Yet ignoring her instinct was as impossible for Glory to

do as denying the fact that she was a woman.

“Daddy...”

Rafe Dixon woke with a start. He'd heard that sound in his daughter's voice a thousand times before. He rolled over in bed like a hibernating bear coming out of a sleep, and dug at his eyes with the heels of his hands.

“Glory girl, what's wrong?”

“We've got to go, Daddy. He's dying...and I've got to help.”

Rafe groaned. He knew better than to deny what Glory was telling him, but he also knew that there was a near blizzard in force, and getting down off this mountain and into Larner's Mill might prove deadly for them all.

“But honey...the storm.”

“We'll make it, Daddy, but he won't.”

The certainty in her voice was all Rafe Dixon needed to hear. He rolled out of bed with a thump and started reaching for his clothes.

“Go wake your brother,” he said.

“I'm here, Daddy. I heard.”

J.C. slipped a comforting arm across his baby sister's shoulders and hugged her. “Was it bad, Sis?”

The look on her face was all he needed to know. He headed back down the hall to his room, calling over his shoulder as he went. “I'll go start the truck.”

“Dress warm, girl,” Rafe growled. “It's a bitch outside.”

Glory nodded, and flew back to her room, pulling on clothes with wild abandon. The urgency within her made her shake, but her resolve was firm.

Minutes later, they walked out of the house into a blast of snow that stung their faces, but Glory didn't falter. As she was about to step off the porch, J.C. appeared out of nowhere and lifted her off her feet, carrying her through the snow to the waiting vehicle. She shuddered as she clung to his broad shoulders, still locked into the vision before her. And as she saw...she prayed.

“We're not gonna make it,” the ambulance driver groaned, as he fought the steering wheel and the vehicle's urge to slide.

“Damn it, Farley, just quit talking and drive. We have to make it! If we don't, this fellow sure won't.”

Luke Dennis, the emergency medical technician whose fortune it had been to be on duty this night, was up to his elbows in blood. His clothes were soaking wet, and his boots were filled to the tops with melting snow. The last thing he wanted to hear was another negative. They'd worked too long and too hard just getting this victim out of his car and up the side of the mountain to give up now.

"Come on, buddy, hang with me," Dennis muttered, as he traded a fresh container of D5W for the one going empty on the other end of the IV.

An unceasing flow of blood ran out of the victim's dark hair and across his face, mapping his once-handsome features with a crazy quilt of red. It was impossible to guess how many bones this man had broken, and to be honest, those were the least of Dennis's worries. If they couldn't get him back to the hospital in time, it was the internal injuries that would kill him.

"I see lights!" Farley shouted.

Thank God, Dennis thought, and then grabbed his patient and the stretcher, holding on to it, and to him, as the ambulance took the street corner sideways. Moments later they were at the hospital, unloading a man whose chance of a future depended upon the skills of the people awaiting him inside.

Before he was a doctor, Amos Steading had been a medic in Vietnam. When he saw Wyatt Hatfield being wheeled into his E.R., he realized he might have been practicing medicine longer than this patient had been alive. It hurt to lose a patient, but the younger ones were much harder to accept.

"What have we got?" Amos growled, lowering his bushy eyebrows as his attention instantly focused upon the injuries.

"Trouble, Doc," Dennis said. "Thirty-four-year-old male. Recently discharged from the Marines. He's still wearing his ID tags. He got sideswiped by a truck and went over the side of Tulley's Mountain. Didn't think we'd ever get him up and out. He's got head injuries, and from the feel of his belly, internal bleeding as well. From external exam, I'd guess at least four broken ribs, and, his right leg has quite a bit of damage, although it's hard to tell what, if anything, is broken. We had to saw a tree and move it off him to get him out of the car." He took a deep breath as the stretcher slid to a halt. As they transferred the victim to the gurney, he added, "This is his third bag of D5W."

Steading's eyebrows arched as he yanked his stethoscope from around his neck and slipped it in place. This man was bleeding to death before their eyes. Moments later, he began firing orders to the nurse and the other doctor on call.

"Get me a blood type," Steading shouted, and a nurse ran to do his bidding.

It was then that EMT Luke Dennis added the last bit of information about the victim, which made them all pause.

"According to his dog tags, he's AB negative," Dennis said.

A low curse slid out of Amos's mouth as he continued to work. Rare blood types didn't belong in this backwater town of eighteen hundred people. There was no way their blood bank was going to have anything like that, and the plasma they had on hand was sparse.

“Type it anyway,” Steading ordered. “And get me some plasma, goddamn it! This man’s going to die before I can get him stable enough for surgery.”

The once quiet hospital instantly became a flurry of shouts, curses and noise. Luke Dennis stepped out of the way, aware that he’d done his job. The rest was up to the doc and his staff...and God.

He started back toward the door to restock the ambulance, aware that the night was far from over. It was entirely possible that more than one fool might decide to venture out in a storm like this. He just hoped that if they plowed themselves into the snow—or into someone else—they were nowhere near a mountain when it happened. But before he could leave, the outside door burst open right before him, and three people blew in, along with a blinding gust of snow.

Glory breathed a shaky sigh of relief. One hurdle crossed. Another yet to come. She burst free of her father’s grasp and ran toward the EMT who’d stepped aside to let them pass.

“Mister! Please! Take me to the soldier’s doctor.”

Dennis couldn’t quit staring at the young woman clutching his coat. Her voice was frantic, her behavior strange, but it was her request that startled him. How could she know that the man they’d just brought in was—or at least had been—a soldier?

“Are you a relative?” Dennis asked.

“No! Who I am doesn’t matter, but he does,” Glory cried, gripping his coat a little tighter. And then she felt her father’s hand move across her shoulder.

“Ease up, Glory. You got to explain yourself a little, honey.”

She blinked, and Dennis watched focus returning to her expression, thinking as he did that he’d never seen eyes quite that shade of blue. In a certain light, they almost looked silver...as silver as her hair, which clung to her face and coat like strands of wet taffy.

She took a deep breath and started over.

“Please,” she said softly. “I came to give blood.”

Dennis shook his head. “I don’t know how you heard about the accident, but I’m afraid coming out in this storm was a waste of time for you. He’s got a rare—”

Glory dug through her purse, her fingers shaking as she searched the contents of her wallet.

“Here,” she said, thrusting a card into the man’s hands. “Show the doctor. Tell him I can help—that it’s urgent that he wait no longer. The man won’t live through the night without me.”

As Dennis looked down at the card, the hair crawled on the back of his neck. He glanced back up at the woman, then at the card again, and suddenly grabbed her by the arm, pulling her down the hall

toward the room where Steading was working.

“Doc, we just got ourselves a miracle,” Dennis shouted as he ran into the room.

Amos Steading frowned at the woman Dennis was dragging into their midst.

“Get her out of here, Dennis! You know better than to bring—”

“She’s AB negative, Doc, and she’s come to give blood.”

Steading’s hands froze above the tear in the flesh on Wyatt Hatfield’s leg.

“You’re full of bull,” he growled.

Dennis shook his head. “No, I swear to God, Doc. Here’s her donor card.”

Steading’s eyes narrowed and then he barked at a nurse on the other side of the room. “Get her typed and cross-matched. Now!”

She flew to do his bidding.

“And get me some more saline, damn it! This man’s losing more fluids than I can pump in him. He cursed softly, then added beneath his breath, fully expecting someone to hear and obey, “And call down to X-ray and find out why his films aren’t back!” As he leaned back over the patient, he began to mumble again, more to himself than to anyone else. “Now where the hell is that bleeder?”

There was a moment, in the midst of all the doctor’s orders, when Glory looked upon the injured man’s face. It wasn’t often that she had a physical connection to the people in her mind.

“What’s his name?” she whispered, as a nurse grabbed her by the arm and all but dragged her down the hall to the lab.

“Who, Dr. Steading?”

“No,” Glory said. “The man who was hurt.”

“Oh...uh...Hatfield. William...no, uh...Wyatt. Yes, that’s right. Wyatt Hatfield. It’s a shame, too,” the nurse muttered, more to herself than to Glory. “He looks like he was real handsome...and so young. Just got out of the service. From his identification, some sort of special forces. It’s sort of ironic, isn’t it?”

“What’s ironic?” Glory asked, and then they entered the lab, and the scents that assailed her threatened to overwhelm. She swayed on her feet, and the nurse quickly seated her in a chair.

The nurse grimaced. “Why, the fact that he could survive God knows what during his stint in the military, and then come to this, and all because of a snowstorm on a mountain road.” Suddenly she was all business. “Stuart, type and cross-match this woman’s blood, stat! If she comes up AB negative, and a match to the man in E.R., then draw blood. She’s a donor.”

As the lab tech began, Glory relaxed. At least they were on the right track.

Three o'clock in the morning had come and gone, and the waiting room in E.R. was quiet. Rafe Dixon glanced at his son, then at his daughter, who seemed to be dozing beside him. How he'd fathered two such different children was beyond him, but his pride in each was unbounded. It just took more effort to keep up with Glory than it did J.C.

He understood his son and his love for their land. He didn't understand one thing about his daughter's gift, but he believed in it, and he believed in her. What worried him most was, who would take care of Glory when he was gone? J.C. was nearly thirty and he couldn't be expected to watch over his sister for the rest of his life. Besides, if he were to marry, a wife might resent the attention J.C. unstintingly gave his baby sister. Although Glory was twenty-five, she looked little more than eighteen. Her delicate features and her fragile build often gave her the appearance of a child...until one looked into her eyes and saw the ancient soul looking back.

Glory child...who will take care of you when I am gone?

Suddenly Glory stood and looked down the hall. Rafe stirred, expecting to see someone open an door and walk through the doors at the far end. But nothing happened, and no one came.

She slipped her fingers in the palm of her brother's hand and then stood. "We can go home now."

J.C. yawned, and looked up at his father. Their eyes met in a moment of instant understanding. For whatever her reasons, Glory seemed satisfied within herself, and for them, that was all that mattered.

"Are you sure, girl?" Rafe asked, as he helped Glory on with her coat.

She nodded, her head bobbing wearily upon her shoulders. "I'm sure, Daddy."

"You don't want to wait and talk to the doctor?"

She smiled. "There's no need."

As suddenly as they'd arrived, they were gone.

Within the hour, Amos Steading came out of surgery, tossing surgical gloves and blood-splattered clothing in their respective hampers. Later, when he went to look for the unexpected blood donor, to his surprise, she was nowhere to be found. And while he thought it strange that she'd not stayed to hear the results of the surgery, he was too tired and too elated to worry about her odd exodus. Tonight he'd fought the Grim Reaper and won. And while he knew his skill as a surgeon was nothing at which to scoff, his patient still lived because of a girl who'd come out of the storm.

Steading dropped into a chair at his desk and began working up Hatfield's chart, adding notes of the surgery to what had been done in E.R. A nurse entered, then gave him a cup of hot coffee and an understanding smile. As the heat from the cup warmed his hand, he sighed in satisfaction.

“Did you locate his next of kin?” Steading asked.

The nurse nodded. “Yes, sir, a sister. Her name is Antonette Monday. She said that she and her husband will come as soon as weather permits.”

Steading nodded, and sipped the steaming brew. “It’s good to have family.”

High up on the mountain above Larner’s Mill, Glory Dixon would have agreed with him. When they finally pulled into the yard of their home, it was only a few hours before daybreak, and yet she knew a sense of satisfaction for a job well done. It wasn’t always that good came of what she saw, but tonight, she’d been able to make a difference.

She reached over and patted her father’s knee. “Thank you, Daddy,” she said quietly.

“For what?” he asked.

“For believing me.”

He slid a long arm across her shoulder, giving her a hug. There was nothing more that needed to be said.

“Looks like the snow’s about stopped,” he said, gauging the sparse spit of snowflakes dancing before the headlights of their truck.

“Who’s hungry?” Glory asked.

J.C. grinned. “Wanna guess?”

She laughed. It was a perfect ending to a very bad beginning.

Back in recovery, Wyatt Hatfield wasn’t laughing, but if he’d been conscious, he would have been counting his blessings. He had a cut on his cheek that would probably scar, and had survived a lung that had collapsed, a concussion that should have put him into a coma and hadn’t, five broken ribs and two cracked ones, more stitches in his left leg than he would be able to count and, had he been able to feel them, bruises in every joint.

He could thank a seat belt, a trucker who hadn’t kept going after causing the wreck, a rescue crew that went above and beyond the call of duty to get him off of the mountain and an EMT who didn’t know the meaning of the word *quit*. And it was extremely good luck on Wyatt’s part that, after all that, he wound up in the skilled hands of Amos Steading.

Yet it was fate that had delivered him to Glory Dixon. And had she not given of the blood from her body, the cold and simple fact was that he would have died. But Wyatt didn’t know his good fortune. It would be days before he would know his own name.

All day long, the sun kept trying to shine. Wyatt paced the floor of his hospital room, ignoring the muscle twinges in his injured leg, and the pull of sore muscles across his belly.

He didn't give a damn about pain. Today he was going home, or a reasonable facsimile thereof. While he didn't have a home of his own, he still had roots in the land on which he'd been raised. If he had refused to accompany his sister, Toni, back to Tennessee, he suspected that her husband, Lane Monday, would have slung him over his shoulder and taken him anyway. Few but Toni dared argue with Lane Monday. At six feet, seven inches, he was a powerful, imposing man. As a United States marshal, he was formidable. In Wyatt's eyes, he'd come through for Toni like a real man should. There was little else to be said.

Outside his door, he could hear his sister's voice at the nurses' station while she signed the papers that would check him out. He leaned his forehead against the window, surprised that in spite of the sun's rays it felt cold, and then remembered that winter sun, at its best, was rarely warm.

"Are you ready, Wyatt?"

Wyatt turned. Lane filled the doorway with his size and his presence.

He shrugged. "I guess." He turned back to the window as Lane crossed the room.

For a while, both men were silent, and then Lane gave Wyatt a quick pat on the back before he spoke. "I think maybe I know how you feel," Lane said.

Wyatt shrugged. "Then I wish to hell you'd tell me, because I don't understand. Don't get me wrong. I'm happy to be alive." He tried to grin. "Hell, and if truth be told, a little surprised. When I went over the mountain, in the space of time it took to hit the first stand of trees, I more or less made my peace with God. I never expected to wake up."

Lane listened without commenting, knowing that something was bothering Wyatt that he needed to get said.

"As for my family, I consider myself lucky to have people who are willing to take me in, but I feel so...so..."

"Rootless?"

For a moment Wyatt was silent, and then he nodded.

"Exactly. I feel rootless. And...I feel like leaving here will be taking a step backward in what I was searching for. I know it's weird, but I keep thinking that I was *this* close to the end of a journey, and now—"

Toni broke the moment of confiding as she came into the room.

"You're all checked out!" When Wyatt started toward the door, she held up her hand. "Don't get in too big a hurry. They're bringing a wheelchair. Lane, honey, why don't you pull the car up to the curb? Wyatt, are you all packed?"

Both men looked at each other and then grinned. "She was your sister before she was my wife," Lane warned him. "So you can't be surprised by all this."

Toni ignored them. It was her nature to organize. She'd spent too long on her own, running a farm and caring for aging parents, to wait for someone else to make a decision.

"Why don't I go get the car?" Lane said, and stole a kiss from his Toni as he passed.

"I'm packed," Wyatt said.

"I brought one of Justin's coats for you to wear. The clothes you had on were ruined," Toni said, her eyes tearing as she remembered his condition upon their arrival right after the accident. She held out the coat for him to put on. Wyatt slipped one arm in his brother's coat, and then the other, then turned and hugged her, letting himself absorb the care...and the love.

"Now all I need is my ride," Wyatt teased, and pulled at a loose curl hanging across Toni's forehead.

On cue, a nurse came in pushing a wheelchair, and within minutes, Wyatt was on his way.

The air outside was a welcome respite from the recirculated air inside his room. And the cold, fresh scent of snow was infinitely better than the aroma of antiseptic. Wyatt gripped the arms of the wheelchair in anticipation of going home.

Just outside the doors, Toni turned away to speak to the nurse, and Lane had yet to arrive. For a brief moment, Wyatt was left to his own devices. He braced himself, angling his sore leg until he was able to stand, and then lifted his face and inhaled, letting the brisk draft of air circling the corner of the hospital have its way with the cobwebs in his mind. He'd been inside far too long.

A pharmacy across the street was doing a booming business, and Wyatt watched absently as customers came and went. As a van loaded with senior citizens backed up and drove away, a dark blue pickup truck pulled into the recently vacated parking space. He tried not to stare at the three people who got out, but they were such a range of sizes, he couldn't quit looking.

The older man was tall and broad beneath the heavy winter coat he wore. A red sock cap covered a thatch of thick graying hair, and a brush of mustache across his upper lip was several shades darker than the gray. The younger man was just as tall, and in spite of his own heavy clothing, obviously fit. His face was creased with laugh lines, and he moved with the grace and assurance of youth and good health.

It was the girl between them who caught Wyatt's eye. At first he thought she was little more than a child, and then the wind caught the front of her unbuttoned coat, and he got a glimpse of womanly breast and shapely hips before she pulled it together.

Her hair was the color of spun honey. Almost gold. Not quite white. Her lips were full and tilted in a grin at something one of the men just said, and Wyatt had a sudden wish that he'd been the one to make her smile.

No sooner had he thought it than she paused at the door, then stopped completely. He held his breath as she began to turn. When she caught his gaze, he imagined he felt her gasp, although he knew it was a foolish thing to consider. His mind wandered as he let himself feast upon her face.

So beautiful, Wyatt thought.

Why, thank you.

Wyatt was so locked into her gaze that he felt no surprise at the thoughts that suddenly drifted through his mind, or that he was answering them back in an unusual fashion.

You are welcome.

So, Wyatt Hatfield, you're going home?

Yes.

God be with you, soldier.

I'm no longer a soldier.

You will always fight for those you love.

“Here comes Lane!”

At the sound of Toni's voice, Wyatt blinked, then turned and stepped back as Lane pulled up to the curb. When he remembered to look up, the trio had disappeared into the store. He felt an odd sense of loss, as if he'd been disconnected from something he needed to know.

Bowing to the demands of his family's concerns, he let himself be plied with pillows and blankets. By the time they had him comfortable in the roomy backseat of their car, he was more than ready for the long journey home to begin.

They were past the boundary of Larner's Mill, heading out of Kentucky and toward Tennessee, when Wyatt's thoughts wandered back to the girl he'd seen on the street. And as suddenly as he remembered her, he froze. His heart began to hammer inside his chest as he slowly sat up and stared out the back window at the small mountain town that was swiftly disappearing from sight.

“Dear God,” he whispered, and wiped a shaky hand across his face.

“Wyatt, darling, are you all right?”

His sister's tone of voice was worried, the touch of her hand upon his shoulder gentle and concerned. Lane began to ease off the accelerator, thinking that Wyatt might be getting sick.

“I'm fine. I'm fine,” he muttered, and dropped back onto the bed they'd made for him in the backseat.

There was no way he could tell them what he'd suddenly realized. There wasn't even any way he could explain it to himself. But he knew, as well as he knew his own name, that the conversation he'd had with that girl had been real. And yet understanding how it had happened was another thing altogether. He'd heard of silent communication, but this...this...thing that just happened...it was impossible.

“Then how did she know my name?” he murmured.

“What did you say?” Toni asked.

Wyatt turned his head into the pillow and closed his eyes.

“Nothing, Sis. Nothing at all.”

Chapter 2

Clouds moved in wild, scattered patterns above the Hatfield homestead, giving way to the swift air current blasting through the upper atmosphere. The clouds looked as unsettled as Wyatt felt. In his mind, it had taken forever to get back his health, and then even longer to gain strength. But now, except for a scar on his cheek and a leg that would probably ache for the rest of his life every time it rained, he was fine.

Problem was, he'd been here too long. He leaned forward, bracing his hands upon the windowsill and gazing out at the yard that spilled toward the banks of Chaney Creek, while his blood stirred to be on the move.

"The grass is beginning to green."

The longing in Wyatt's voice was obvious, but for what, Toni didn't know. Was he missing the companionship of his ex-wife, or was there something missing from his own inner self that he didn't know how to find?

"I know," Toni said, and shifted Joy to her other hip, trying not to mind that Wyatt was restless. He was her brother, and this *was* his home, but he was no longer the boy who'd chased her through the woods. He'd been a man alone for a long, long time.

She could hear the longing in his voice, and sensed his need to be on the move, but she feared that once gone, he would fall back into the depression in which they'd brought him home. Her mind whirled as she tried to think of something to cheer him up. Her daughter fidgeted in her arms, reaching for anything she could lay her hands on. Toni smiled, and kissed Joy on her cheek, thinking what they'd been doing this time last year, and the telegram that Wyatt had sent.

"Remember last year...when you sent the telegram? It came on Easter. Did you know that?"

Wyatt nodded, then grinned, also remembering how mad Toni had been at him when he'd interfered in her personal life.

"In a few weeks, it will be Easter again. Last year, someone gave us a little jumpsuit for Joy, complete with long pink ears on the outside of the hood. It made her look like a baby rabbit. The kids carried her around all day, fussing over who was going to have their picture taken next with the Easter Bunny."

Wyatt smiled, and when Joy leaned over, trying to stick her hand in the pot on the stove, he took the toddler from his sister's arms, freeing her to finish the pudding she was stirring.

Joy instantly grabbed a fistful of his hair in each hand and began to pull. Wyatt winced, then laughed, as he started to unwind her tiny hands from the grip they had on his head.

"Hey, puddin' face. Don't pull all of Uncle Wyatt's hair out. He's going to need it for when he's

an old man.”

Joy chortled gleefully as it quickly became a game, and for a time, Wyatt’s restlessness was forgotten in his delight with the child.

It was long into the night when the old, uneasy feelings began to return. Wyatt paced the floor beside his bed until he was sick of the room, then slipped out of the house to stand on the porch. The moonless night was so thick and dark that it seemed airless. Absorbing the quiet, he let it surround him. As a kind of peace began to settle, he sat down on the steps, listening to the night life that abounded in their woods.

He kept telling himself that it was the memories of the wreck, and the lost days in between, that kept him out of bed. If he lay down, he would sleep. If he slept, he would dream. Nightmares of snow and blood, of pain and confusion. But that wasn’t exactly true. It was the memory of a woman’s voice that wouldn’t let go of his mind.

You will always fight for those you love.

Eliminating the obvious, which he took to mean his own family, exactly what did that mean? Even more important, how the hell had that...that thing...happened between them?

Toni had told him more than once that he’d survived the wreck for a reason, and that one day he’d know why. But Wyatt wanted answers to questions he didn’t even know how to ask. In effect, he felt as though he were living in a vacuum, waiting for someone to break the seal.

Yet Wyatt Hatfield wasn’t the only man that night at a breaking point. Back in Larner’s Mill, Kentucky, a man named Carter Foster was at the point of no return, trying to hold on to his sanity and his wife, and doing a poor job of both.

Carter paced the space in front of their bed, watching with growing dismay as Betty Jo began to put on another layer of makeup. As if the dress she was wearing wasn’t revealing enough, she was making herself look like a whore. Her actions of late seemed to dare him to complain.

“Now, sweetheart, I’m not trying to control you, but I think I have a right to know where you’re going. How is it going to look to the townspeople if you keep going out at night without me?”

He hated the whine in his voice, but couldn’t find another way to approach his wife of eleven years about her latest affair. That she was having them was no secret. That the people of Larner’s Mill must never find out was of the utmost importance to him. In his profession, appearances were everything.

Betty Jo arched her perfectly painted eyebrows and then stabbed a hair pick into her hair, lifting the back-combed nest she’d made of her dark red tresses to add necessary inches to her height. Ignoring Carter’s complaint, she stepped back from the full-length mirror, running her hands lightly down her buxom figure in silent appreciation. That white knit dress she’d bought yesterday looked even better on than it had on the hanger.

“Betty Jo, you didn’t answer me,” Carter said, unaware that his voice had risen a couple of notes

Silence prevailed as she ran her little finger across her upper, then lower lip, smoothing out the Dixie Red lipstick she’d applied with a flourish. When she rubbed her lips together to even out the color, Carter shuddered, hating himself for still wanting her. He couldn’t remember the last time she put those lips anywhere on him.

“Carter, honey, you know a woman like me needs her space. With you stuck in that stuffy old courtroom all day, and in your office here at home all night, what am I to do?”

The pout on her lips made him furious. At this stage of their marriage, that baby-faced attitude would get her nowhere.

“But you’re *my* wife,” Carter argued. “It just isn’t right that you...that men...” He took a deep breath and then puffed out his cheeks in frustration, unaware that it made him look like a bullfrog.

Betty Jo pivoted toward him, then stepped into her shoes, relishing the power that the added height of the three-inch heels gave her. She knew that if she had had college to do over again, she would have married the jock, not the brain. This poor excuse for a man was losing his hair and sporting a belly that disgusted her. When he walked, it swayed lightly from side to side like the big breasts of a woman who wore no support. She liked tight, firm bellies and hard muscles. There was nothing hard on Carter Foster. Not even periodically. To put it bluntly, Betty Jo Foster was an unsatisfied woman in the prime of her life.

Ignoring his petulant complaints as nothing but more of the same, she picked up her purse. To his surprise, he grabbed her by the forearm and all but shook her. The purse fell between them, lost in the unexpected shuffle of feet.

“Damn it, Betty Jo! You heard me! This just isn’t right!”

“Hey!” she said, then frowned. She couldn’t remember the last time Carter had raised his voice at her. She yanked, trying to pull herself free from his grasp, but to her dismay, his fingers tightened.

“Carter! You’re hurting me!”

“So what?” he snarled, and shoved her backward onto their bed. “You’re hurting me.”

A slight panic began to surface. He never got angry. At least he never *used* to. Without thinking, she rolled over on her stomach to keep from messing up her hair, and started to crawl off of the bed. But turning her back on him was her first and last mistake. Before she could get up, Carter came down on top of her, pushing her into the mattress, calling her names she didn’t even know he knew.

Betty Jo screamed, but the sound had nowhere to go. The weight of his body kept pushing her deeper and deeper into the mattress, and when the bulk of him settled across her hips, and his shoes began snagging runs in her panty hose, she realized that he was sitting on her. In shock, she began to fight.

Flailing helplessly, her hands clenched in the bedspread as she tried unsuccessfully to maneuver herself out from under him. Panic became horror as his hands suddenly circled her neck. The more she

kicked and bounced, the tighter he squeezed.

A wayward thought crossed her mind that he'd messed up her hair and that Dixie Red lipstick would not wash out of the bedspread. It was the last of her worries as tiny bursts of lights began to go off behind her eyelids. Bright, bright, brighter, they burned until they shattered into one great, blinding-white explosion.

As suddenly as it had come, the rage that had taken him into another dimension began to subside. Carter shuddered and shuddered as his hands slowly loosened, and when he went limp atop her body, guilt at his unexpected burst of temper began to surface. He'd never been a physical sort of man, and didn't quite know how to explain this side of himself.

"Damn it, Betty Jo, I'm real sorry this happened, but you've been driving me to it for years."

Oddly enough, Betty Jo had nothing to say about his emotional outburst, and he wondered, as he crawled off her butt, why he hadn't done this years earlier? Maybe if he'd asserted himself when all of her misbehaving began, brute force would never have been necessary.

He smoothed down his hair, then wiped his sweaty palms against the legs of his slacks. Even from here, he could still smell the scent of her perfume upon his skin.

"Get up, Betty Jo. There's no need to pout. You always get your way, whether I like it or not."

Again, she remained silent. Carter's gaze ran up, then down her body, noting as it did, that he'd ruined her hose and smudged her dress. When she saw what he'd done to the back of her skirt, she would be furious.

"Okay, fine," Carter said, and started to walk away.

As he passed the foot of the bed, one of her shoes suddenly popped off the end of her heel and stabbed itself into the spread. He paused, starting to make an ugly comment about the fact that she was undressing for the wrong man, when something about her position struck him as odd. He leaned over the bed frame and tentatively ran his forefinger across the bottom of her foot. Her immobility scared the hell out of him. Betty Jo was as ticklish as they came.

"Oh, God," Carter muttered, and ran around to the edge of the bed, grabbing her by the shoulder. "Betty Jo, this isn't funny!"

He rolled her onto her back, and when he got a firsthand look at the dark, red smear of lipstick across her face and her wide, sightless eyes staring up at him, he began to shake.

"Betty, honey..."

She didn't move.

He thumped her in the middle of the chest, noting absently that she was not wearing a bra, and then started to sweat.

"Betty Jo, wake up!" he screamed, and pushed up and down between her breasts, trying to

emulate CPR techniques he didn't actually know.

The only motion he got out of her was a lilt and a sway from her buxom bosom as he hammered about her chest, trying to make her breathe.

“No! God, no!”

Suddenly he jerked his hands to his stomach, as if he'd been burned by the touch of her skin. To his utter dismay, he felt bile rising, and barely made it to the bathroom before it spewed.

Several hours later, he heard the hall clock strike two times, and realized that, in four hours, it would be time to get up. He giggled at the thought, then buried his face in his hands. That was silly. How could one get up, when one had never been down? Betty Jo's body lay right where he'd left it, half-on, half-off the bed, as if he wasn't sure what to do next.

And therein lay Carter's problem. He *didn't* know what to do next. Twice since the deed, he'd reached for the phone to call the police, and each time he'd paused, remembering what would happen when they came. There was no way he could explain that it was really all her fault. That she'd ruined him and his reputation by tarnishing her own.

And that was when it struck him. It *was* her fault. And by God, he shouldn't have to pay!

Suddenly, a way out presented itself, and he bolted from the chair and began rolling her up in the stained bedspread, then fastening it in place with two of his belts. One he buckled just above her head, the other at her ankles. He stepped back to survey his work, and had an absent thought that Betty Jo would hate knowing that she was going to her Maker looking like a tamale. Without giving himself time to reconsider, he threw her over his shoulder and carried her, fireman style, out of the kitchen and into the attached garage, dumping her into the trunk of his car.

Grabbing a suitcase from the back of a closet, he raced to their bedroom and began throwing items of her clothing haphazardly into the bag, before returning to the car. As he tossed the suitcase into the trunk with her body, he took great satisfaction in the fact that he had to lie on the trunk to get it closed.

As he backed from the garage and headed uptown toward an all-night money machine, the deviousness of his own thoughts surprised him. He would never have imagined himself being able to carry off something like this, yet it was happening just the same. If he was going to make this work, he had to look like Betty Jo took money with her when she ran. With this in mind, he continued toward the town's only ATM.

As he pulled up, the spotlight above the money machine glared in his eyes. He jumped out of the car, and with a sharp blow of his fist, knocked out the Plexiglas and the bulb, leaving himself in the bank drive-through in sudden darkness. Minutes later, with the cash in his pocket, he was back in the car and heading out of town toward the city dump.

Ever thankful that Larner's Mill was too small-town in its thinking to ever put up a gate or a lock, Carter drove right through and up to the pit without having to brake for anything more than a possum ambling across the road in the dark.

When he got out, he was shaking with a mixture of exertion and excitement. As he threw the suitcase over the edge, he took a deep breath, watching it bounce end over end, down the steep embankment. When he lifted his wife from the trunk and sent her after it, he started to grin. But the white bedspread in which she was wrapped stood out like a beacon in the night. He could just imagine what would hit the fan if Betty Jo turned up in this condition. He had to cover up the spread.

It was while he was turning in a circle, looking for something with which to shovel, that he saw the bulldozer off to the side.

That's it, he thought. All he needed to do was shove some dirt down on top. Tomorrow was trash day. By the time the trash trucks made the rounds and dumped the loads, she'd be right where she belonged, buried with the rest of the garbage.

It took a bit for him to figure out how to work the bulldozer's controls, but desperation was a shrewd taskmaster, and Carter Foster was as desperate as they came. Within the hour, a goodly portion of dirt had been pushed in on top of the latest addition to the city dump, and Betty Jo Foster's burial was slightly less dignified than she would have hoped.

Minutes later, Carter was on his way home to shower and change. As he pulled into his garage, he pressed the remote control and breathed a great sigh of satisfaction as the door dropped shut behind him.

It was over!

His feet were dragging as he went inside, but his lawyer mind was already preparing the case he would present to his coworkers. Exactly how much he would be willing to humble himself was still in the planning stage. If they made fun of him behind his back because he'd been dumped, he didn't think he would care. The last laugh would be his.

Days later, while Betty Jo rotted along with the rest of the garbage in Larner's Mill, Glory Dixon was making her second sweep through the house, looking behind chairs and under cushions, trying to find her keys. But the harder she looked the more certain she was that someone else and not her carelessness was to blame.

Her brother came into the kitchen just as she dumped the trash onto the floor and began sorting through the papers.

"J.C., have you seen my keys? I can't find them anywhere."

"Nope." He pulled the long braid she'd made of her hair. "Why don't you just psych them out?"

Glory ignored the casual slander he made of her psychic ability and removed her braid from his hand. "You know it doesn't work like that. I never know what I'm going to see. If I did, I would have told on you years ago for filching Granny's blackberry pies."

He was still laughing as their father entered the house by the back door.

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