

Free at Last

CHAPTER 1

The Parting

The door closed. Two-year-old Charles looked up from his blocks to find his mother had gone. Dropping his blocks, he tottered to the door, “Mama! Mama! Mama!” He saw her as she passed the window. She turned her tormented blue eyes toward him for a moment and blew him a kiss. “I’ll be back soon, Charlie,” she said. Her blond hair blew in the wind as she hastened down the sidewalk. Then she was gone.

Charles beat on the window with his tiny fists. A moment later, he threw himself on the floor in a tantrum, beating on the floor, kicking, screaming.

A worker walking by paused for a moment. “Do you miss your mommy, Chuckie?” she asked. “I guess you have to learn pretty young what life is really like. But you’ll get over it, Chuckie. Everybody does.” The young lady walked on, whistling a tune she had just heard on the radio.

Charles didn’t cry himself to sleep that night. Instead, he lay awake for hours, tense, staring at the ceiling, trying to make sense of life. He failed and, falling asleep, saw again and again a woman with blond hair and tormented blue eyes. “Mommy,” he cried. “Mommy.” In his dreams he ran after her. His short, stubby legs were unable to propel him fast enough to catch up with her. She turned a corner, and when Charles reached the corner and stared after her, he saw only an empty blackness...

Through the coming years, Charles dreamed this dream again and again. He tried to hold a picture of his mother in his young mind, but she faded, and Charles forgot.

He had other things to think about. The years were passing, and with them came a series of foster homes. The first while, when a woman came to get him from the home, he would look up at her hopefully. A new mommy, he would think. The woman would say nice things to him, and Charles would take her hand and walk close beside her as they went out the door of the children's home. But time after time, to Charles's shock, the woman would change when they got into the car, snapping and yelling at Charles.

At first that change baffled Charles. Wondering what he had done wrong, he tried to be as sweet as possible so he would not irritate these people. But before long, after a miserable time, they would bring Charles back to the Allen County Children's Home.

"He cries," they would complain. "He screams during the night and wakes everybody. He isn't completely potty trained."

As the years passed and the pattern repeated itself, Charles' small mind began to understand that these people took him because they wanted something from him. He was too young to understand the money they got from the state for taking him. But as he grew older, he did learn of something else people wanted. It began when he was eight.

CHAPTER 2

The New Home

"I'm going to take you to your new home," the lady said, smiling brightly. Charles stared up at her blonde wig and her too-bright smile. How many times had he heard those words, as people came to take him? Yet they always grew tired of him and brought him back to this home.

He hated it when she took his hand in her clammy cold one and led him to the door. At the door, she turned and asked, "How old is he?"

"He's eight," said the young social worker standing by the door. "He was born April 6, 1939."

As the door shut behind them, Charles tried to pull his hand from the lady's grasp. Her grip tightened. "If you don't quit that, you'll be sorry when I get you home," she hissed. "The only reason I'm taking you is the check I get every month from Social Services. But you'd better listen—or else."

Charles felt sure he could yank his hand free. He was big for his age, and generally knew how far he could push a new foster parent. But something in this woman's voice made him shiver. He walked meekly beside her and did not resist when she shoved him into the back seat of her car. As the car bumped across the parking lot and pulled out onto the street, he held the few belongings the children's home had given him.

"My name is Cindy," the lady said, smiling brightly into the mirror, "but you can call me Mama. When we get home, you'll meet Gary. You'll really like Gary. And you'll meet Carl too. You'll just love Carl."

Charles lowered his head. He figured that Gary was the lady's husband, and Carl must be the dog. But then, maybe it was the other way around. He didn't care. Whichever was the husband would call him Sonny, and the dog might or might not bite. Anyway, he had met the dogs of nine different households the last while.

Charles saw a sign flash by. "Leaving Fort Wayne," he read. He vaguely knew that he lived in Indiana. He wasn't sure whether Indiana was a country or a province.

Cindy turned a corner, and then several more. Then they bumped into a rutted drive and stopped in front of a ramshackle green house. Charles saw a rag stuffed into a broken windowpane. Cindy got out of the car and yanked on the house door. She managed to drag it open.

She turned to Charles and crooked one finger. "Hey you," she said. "I forget what your name is, but you bring your stuff in here."

Sullenly Charles climbed from the car and scuffed his way to the door. He kept a sharp lookout for the dog, Gary or Carl, or whatever its name was. No dog came to meet them, but a large dirty man came to stand in the doorway. A half-smoked cigarette dangled from

his lips. He looked Charles up and down through half-closed eyes, and again a chill snaked up Charles's spine.

"I got one, Gary," Cindy said.

Gary grinned briefly, showing stained and rotten teeth. "Didn't do much of a check on us, did they?" he said.

In the house, Charles stared at the dirty floor. His nose wrinkled at the smell of spoiled food. He felt someone watching him.

It must be that dog, Carl, he said to himself. But when he looked up, he saw a stout boy about ten years old watching him.

"This is Carl," Cindy told Charles. "He's Gary's son. We're just a happy little family here." She showed her teeth, but Charles did not think she was smiling.

After a supper of cold mashed potatoes and lima beans, Cindy chased the cat off the armchair and plopped herself down beside the radio.

"Charles," Gary said, "come here for a minute. I want to show you something. I'll give you a cigarette when we're done." Obediently Charles walked into the other room with Gary. Carl followed close behind.

Charles often thought of that encounter in later years. Whenever he wanted to get close to someone, he remembered Gary and Carl. "This is love," they told him, and Charles believed it.

A few months after that, Cindy took Charles back to the children's home.

"He's too hard to manage," she said. "He screams at night and keeps everybody awake. He won't listen to anybody."

Charles had quite a few "mamas" after that, and quite a few "papas" too. He did not like any of them, and none of them liked him. At least, they did not like him as an individual. As the years passed and the cycle continued, Charles came to understand that he couldn't trust

anybody. When he was fourteen years old, that understanding led him to take his life into his own hands.

CHAPTER 3

The Runaway

Charles lay on his bed. His stomach heaved, and he retched. He took a shower, but it did no good. He hated himself. He hated Jasper, now snoring in the next room. And where was Carole? Who cared? Conveniently absent. He had lived through many such experiences. The strong survived. And the weak? They became playthings for the strong.

Charles tiptoed from his bedroom and through the living room. Almost noiselessly, the front door opened, and he stepped into the October freshness of an early morning in Fort Wayne. Already traffic had begun roaring by. As he watched, he forgot for a moment the scene inside. He began to walk. He knew he would be far away by morning. He would be far away, and he would never come back.

Daylight found Charles in the slum section. He struck up a conversation with a young man selling crack cocaine on a street corner. The youth was friendly, even when he learned that Charles lacked money to buy his product. He invited Charles back to his apartment. Charles ran the route for the young man, Floyd, a few times, and Floyd let him sleep at his place and gave him something to eat. He offered Charles some of the crack. Charles found that it made him forget his loneliness and lostness. He felt powerful, euphoric.

After Floyd went to jail, Charles drifted on. He went from one place to the other, sometimes sleeping in the shadows of a building, under a porch, or in an abandoned warehouse. Always, he had to find food to support his growing frame. To buy food, he needed money. He hung around the bar, because there people spent lots of money. Sometimes someone gave him enough money to buy a sandwich. He recoiled the first time a man told him, “You look like a nice kid. Come down to my house and spend the night, and I’ll give you fifteen dollars.” But fifteen dollars was a lot of money, and Charles went. In fact, Charles began to

count on this means of income. At least they pay me, he thought. If he stopped to think, his relationships haunted him. But Charles made sure he didn't stop to think very often.

Charles did the things that made him feel included. He was sixteen years old now and carried a knife. He almost looked forward to a chance to use it. He spent time with the men and women who frequented that part of town, and he felt included. He especially felt included when he drank with them at the bar or shared a joint of marijuana or took the crack. Then he lost his feeling of aching loneliness for a little while. I'm in charge of my own life, Charles thought. Nobody controls me anymore. In fact, a lot of them are scared of me. Charles never slowed down enough to admit that he was scared of himself.

Charles also found another way of getting money. Sometimes drunks staggered around the corner of the bar and into the shadows to sleep off their inebriation. Charles began to stroll along that side of the building, his eyes open for a well-dressed man. When he found one, he would tug the wallet from the man's pocket and run. The first time he did this, the man must have just cashed his paycheck. Charles found over \$200 in the wallet. But there was something besides need that made Charles steal. Outwitting another made him feel powerful, as if he were less of a victim himself. He spent that \$200 in the next few days and was soon on the prowl for more.

He did not know that word was getting around about the robberies. He did know, on the evening of January 29, that the man in the shadows looked like easy prey. As he strolled back and forth, making sure the coast was clear, he noticed a burly workman standing out on the street, but the man had his back turned. At length, Charles made his move. As he straightened, wallet in hand, he saw the workman was now looking straight at him. "Hey, kid, I seen that," he said. "Don't try to run." Charles did try to run, but several other bar patrons arrived on the scene and held him until the police arrived. Charles spent that night in jail. The next day, he found himself no longer welcome around that bar.

Eventually, Charles got a job. It was not a good job, but it kept him going. He was helping with a new city beautification project. Charles planted trees and laid pavers. He proved quite a good worker and enjoyed his work. But every weekend, after he got his check, found

him hanging around the local bar or doing drugs with his friends. He felt included when he did that.

CHAPTER 4

Meeting and Parting

On a fine August day in 1960, Charles met the woman, predictably, in the bar on the corner, Sandy O'Brien's place. He somehow felt drawn to her blue eyes and blond hair and to her ready smile. He knew Lillian was in her forties, but she made him feel as if he belonged, at last. She cared for him in a way nobody ever had before. And so, when he stood with her before the judge and said, "I do," he felt the unaccustomed feeling of happiness. They rented a little apartment back on Burrell Avenue, and Charles hurried home every evening after work. He got off around six o'clock, although he sometimes volunteered for extra work with the paving crew he was on so he could earn overtime.

Now, in the evenings, Lillian and Charles sat in their little flat or went down to the park. Charles did not drink anymore. He took his responsibilities as a family man seriously. He loved the flowers Lillian planted in window boxes in the apartment. He loved the home-cooked meals. When Charles got his check on weekends now, it went into the little bank account they had started at Lillian's suggestion. That amount was growing, and they hoped someday they could buy their own place.

"A little place," said Lillian, "away from the main hustle and bustle of town. We'll have a few chickens, and I'll plant roses around the house."

"And it'll have a porch where we can sit and talk to the neighbors as they go by," said Charles. "If I get another raise or two, I think we'll be able to get it in another year."

"Down on Spruill Road," dreamed Lillian, "there's a little gray house that's been for sale for two years now. It needs a new roof..."

"But I can fix that," said Charles. "And we'll clean up the weeds around it and get ourselves a lawn mower to mow the yard." Thus dreamed the couple.

In the fall of 1971 Charles noticed that Lillian's cough was worsening. He talked to her about it, but she laughed. They still enjoyed their time together, but as time passed, Charles noticed that Lillian seemed tired. She had lost her zest for life, and he saw her grow pale and weaker as the winter came on. He kept the temperature high in their little apartment, even though the electric for the baseboard heaters cost them a lot. It was in December, just before Christmas, that he insisted she go to the doctor.

"I'm fine, really," Lillian insisted as Charles helped her up the steps to the doctor's office. "When spring comes, I'll feel better."

But when the doctor came out into the waiting room, he had a different verdict. "Your wife has lung cancer," he told Charles. "I'd give her a month to live, no more. I've had her admitted to the hospital. See the receptionist for billing options."

The prim young receptionist stared coolly at Charles. "I understand your wife has been admitted," she said. "Will you be able to pay anything?"

"We have a bank account," Charles said proudly. "We'll be able to take care of expenses."

But as the bills kept coming, Charles nearly despaired. He worked longer hours and then spent hours by Lillian's bedside. "How is the money holding out, Dear?" she often asked. "I want you to be able to buy that little place out on Spruil Road."

"Oh, the money's just fine," Charles would assure her. "I've gotten a raise at work, and we still have money in the bank."

As the bills came from the hospital, Charles paid them promptly. He knew now that Lillian would not live much longer, and he was determined that she not worry about anything. A mere bony caricature of her former healthy self, she was heavily sedated to ease the pain. But she still knew Charles when he came in, and gave him a wan welcoming smile.

And then came the day when Charles's boss took him aside. "The hospital just called," he said. "It was something about your wife. You'd better go see."

After a quick trip to the hospital, Charles stood beside the wasted form, from which life had now fled. His head bowed, he struggled to compose himself. The chaplain stood a short distance away, ready to offer comfort. At length Charles turned to the chaplain. "What can we arrange for a funeral?" he asked brokenly.

"I'll check with the funeral home," the chaplain said. "I'll get back with you and let you know what can be done."

Charles walked up to the receptionist's desk at the hospital. "How much do I owe for hospital bills for the care of my wife?" he asked.

Later that evening, he wrote out a check. When he totaled his bank balance, he found he still had \$48.71 in his account. With the chaplain's help, he arranged for the county to take charge of Lillian's body. It was cremated in the local county-owned crematorium.

That evening, Charles sat in his apartment. Every moment, something reminded him of Lillian. He heard her step on the stairs and started up to open the door, only to remember. He thought he heard her working in the kitchen. Her footsteps sounded across the floor in the bedroom. At length, Charles could stand it no longer.

"I'm going down to O'Brien's for a little drink," he said aloud. "Just a beer. The fellows will be down there, and maybe I can forget."

Some weeks later, Charles noticed a woman watching him from one corner of the bar. She was not particularly attractive, but like most men Charles felt attracted to a woman who could make him feel sought after. Charles walked over and sat on the stool beside the woman. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. Already, he felt powerful and masculine. He was impressed with his suave ease in charming her, in saying just the right things. He never realized that he appeared to excel only because she hung on his every word and laughed at all the right places. And the reason she did that? Well, Charles never considered that. When he proposed marriage to Judy, he thought it was totally his own idea. And when she accepted, he knew he was the happiest man around.

One night Charles sat down with Judy and told her all about his past life. She sat with a half-glazed, smoky look in her eyes until he was finished. Then she started, as if wakened from a reverie, and said, "Oh, you're done talking? But that's okay, Chuck. Whatever you did, that's in the past. We'll go on from here." That night when he rose to go home, Charles realized he still liked this lady. She reminded him of a woman, somewhere, with blond hair and blue eyes that he had seen going by a window and waving goodbye. He couldn't remember who the woman was, or where he'd seen her, but it seemed that in his dreams he had often searched for her. Charles and Judy spent a lot of time together after that.

Charles stuck to his job with the paving crew. Now that he was married again, he turned most of his money over to Judy. He never asked how she spent it, just as long as she provided food and some of the creature comforts of home. They ate at restaurants most of the time. Judy said she didn't have time to cook. Charles cringed a bit when he came home to find dirty floors and unmade beds. But then, he knew Lillian had had faults too, and he reckoned that love and a home were worth anything.

Charles worked later and later in the evenings, trying to earn more money to support Judy. It seemed that as the due date for the baby came closer, she grew ever more demanding. Charles did not know where she was when he tried to call home, but she always had some excuse.

When the baby came, Charles stared down into her black eyes. He patted her dark hair, a proud papa. At last, he had a child of his own. He beamed down at Judy, who lay there with the covers pulled up to her chin. "She's beautiful," he said. "Let's name her Jennifer Lynn. Jennifer Lynn Kearney. But isn't she awfully early? I mean, we've only been married seven and a half months..."

"Closer to eight," said Judy briefly. "Yes, she is early. But she'll make out okay. Aren't you even going to get me a present of some kind? Most men bring their wives flowers or something." Charles felt stricken at his clumsiness, his rudeness. It was just that he had never had a baby before, and Judy was so different from Lillian. She seemed so odd, so distant sometimes. He had not even been sure she would want a present. He had thought that when the baby came, she would no longer be distant. They would marvel together over their new little one. But

it must be that he just did not know how to relate properly. Judy had a good reason to feel irritated.

Charles rushed down to the corner store and bought a big bunch of balloons and a card. When he returned, he pushed the button for the hospital elevator. It was some time coming down, and when the door opened, a dapper gentleman with dark hair and black eyes stepped out. Charles would have thought nothing of it, but even in his preoccupation, he noticed the man look him up and down speculatively before he walked on down the hall.

Judy thanked him for the present, but said she would rather have had flowers. She turned her back, but Charles decided she was just tired. He lingered for a moment, staring down at the little infant. “My baby,” he cooed. “My little sweetie.” Uncharacteristically, his mind wandered. He imagined himself walking beside a river with Jennifer Lynn, now a toddler. Together they would toss bread to the ducks. He would sit with her on a park bench with Judy at his side. At least, he supposed Judy would be at his side....

Charles did not sleep too well that night. Nightmares floated over him as he tossed and turned. He saw himself walking in the park, holding bread to feed the ducks. But he could not find his daughter, little Jennifer. As he walked, vainly searched, he saw someone coming toward him—a dapper gentleman with dark hair and eyes. As the man came closer, Charles saw that a woman walked beside him. In the mists, Charles could not quite make out the face of the woman. But he clearly saw the toddler who walked between them—Jennifer. Charles’s cry woke him. He did not go back to sleep that night.

Charles continued to work the long hours that would buy the things Judy wanted. But two years after Jennifer was born, he still had not gotten to take her to the park. Judy was simply too busy, going wherever it was she went.

Then came the evening that Charles got rained out of a job. Dark clouds scudded in from the north. Overhead, puffy gray clouds wept torrents of rain. Charles entered his apartment early. From the light in the house, he had figured Judy must be home. He opened the door and tiptoed in. He put his lunch box by the sink. He noticed first little Jennifer

playing on the floor. Then he realized that Judy had a visitor. He stared at the man, speechless at first. Then he tried to speak.

Charles reeled to the door and into the hall. He leaned against the wall, his breath coming in rough, ragged gasps. Vaguely, he realized he was crying.

Charles shuffled down the stairs and headed for the bar on the corner. It was 1:00 AM when he swayed back to his apartment. Nights and weekends now found Charles a regular customer at Sandy O'Briens. Charles was drowning his loneliness, or so he thought. Liquor was all he had.

He was in his cups when he enticed a young boy he found standing on a street corner. Yet the liquor wasn't enough to stifle his guilt, or to make him forget the incident. He remembered it well enough to plead guilty two weeks later, after he had been arrested for the incident.

After his prison stint, he found, reasonably enough, that there were no openings at his former job.

CHAPTER 5

Guilty as Charged

Charles did not waste a lot of time in self-pity. He heard they were building roads around Phoenix, Arizona, and that is where he wound up at the end of a ride on a Greyhound bus.

The pay was good for his skills as a heavy equipment operator. Of course, Charles did not save any of that. He put it into booze on the weekends.

Charles Kearney was a pretty good fellow, according to the fellows he hung out with. Maybe that is why the Anderson family invited him when they threw their party. They had invited three of the other fellows from the crew and their families. They served plenty of beer, along with some hard liquor. They had some pretty high-grade cocaine there too. Charles tried it all. He was feeling lonely there, the only fellow without a wife, and he was bent on being the

life of the party. He vaguely remembered jostling people around and crawling on all fours after the children in the living room, pretending he was a bear. Then everything went black. When he woke up, he was in bed in his apartment.

About eight o'clock in the morning, he called in sick at his job, and crawled back into bed, his head spinning. About ten o'clock, he woke to someone hammering on his apartment door. He clutched his reeling head and tried to remember the night before. He had been clever, somehow. He remembered laughing uproariously at his own jokes, with everyone else joining in. Just what the jokes were, he wished he could remember. The hammering on the door came again. "Open up," someone ordered. Charles staggered to the door and opened it. He found himself face to face with a uniformed police officer. Two more stood behind him. Charles drew himself upright. He felt a strange sensation, as if the hot throbbing in his head was draining away toward his feet. He was suddenly cold, stone sober.

* * * * *

Charles looked around the courtroom. He saw the Andersons there, and wished he had not gotten them into this mess. "I can't remember," he told the judge. "But as far as I know, I didn't do anything of that sort to those children."

"Mr. Anderson," said the judge.

Bruce Anderson rose to his feet, reddening. "I—we—were there the whole time," he stammered. "Kearney didn't do anything like that."

The judge looked at the district attorney, who walked out to confront Charles Kearney. "Kids don't lie about things like that," she said. "You can take this to trial and lose. And when you do, we'll send you away for ninety years. Or you can enter a plea bargain and say you did it, and we'll give you five years."

Charles stared slowly around the courtroom. He realized that if he fought the case, the Andersons would face a lot more questioning. He thought of five more years gone from his life. But then, who cared? No fond wife would cry when he went away. No children would cling to his legs and cry, "Daddy, Daddy." And if he lost, as this woman in a business suit said he would, he

would never be a free man again. He read no hope in anyone's face. He glanced at his court appointed lawyer. "Not a chance, Bud," said that elegant gentleman in his tie and three-piece suit. "You'd better take the plea bargain."

Charles Kearney straightened a bit as he looked at the judge. "Okay," he said. "I'm guilty as charged."

As they led him away in handcuffs, Charles wondered briefly if he had done the right thing. But then, he did not have much choice.

CHAPTER 6

Free to Love

In April of 1978 Charles Kearney stepped from the prison into the free world. He walked out to the road and thumbed for a ride, but nobody would pick up a hitchhiker so close to the prison. He trudged on into town. He still remembered the road crew boss's phone number, and he dialed it at a pay phone. To his surprise, the number still worked. His boss was home and, amazingly, was glad to hear from his former worker. He knew Kearney was one of the harder workers they had ever had, and he asked him if there was anything he needed. The last thing he said was, "You show up for work on Monday morning, Kearney. We have work for you."

Charles never drank heavily after that. He worked hard, but he still hit the bars in the evenings or on weekends.

He saved a little money, and he received several promotions at his job. Life was not really special, and whenever he paused, he still felt the ache in his heart. But he no longer tried to drown it. He pushed it back and worked doggedly on. Eleven years passed, and when Charles Kearney looked in the mirror now, he saw streaks of white in his hair. His work kept him down to a trim one hundred fifty pounds, but he walked with a bit of a stoop. He dated occasionally, but had accepted that fact that he was not particularly attractive to the fairer

gender. So he was pleasantly surprised when a worker at the local McDonald's struck up a conversation with him one morning. Her name was Mary, she said, and after a good bit of teasing on his part, she admitted her age—forty-six.

Charles hung around the counter until the customers cleared away, and then struck up the conversation again. He did not realize how long he stood there, chatting with her, until he saw the restaurant manager emerge from the back and stand there, silently observing. Charles glanced at his watch—9:33. He had been supposed to show up at work at a quarter till eight that morning. He arranged to meet Mary at the park that evening at seven o'clock.

“I have a boy, Jimmy,” she said. “He’s eleven. Is it okay if he comes too?”

“Sure,” said Charles. “Bring him along.”

That afternoon in the park, they ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. They talked, Charles and Mary, as they sat close to each other, and Jimmy fed the remainder of the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to the ducks.

“I’ve been in prison,” said Charles. He saw no reason to hide his past, and decided that if Mary was going to drop him, it might as well be now.

“Really?” asked Mary. “What’d you do, rob a bank?”

“I wish it were that easy,” Charles said. “You see, I’ve done a lot of things. I’ve spent a lot of time with men, a lot of time with women. I’ve been into most things. I’m not trying to hide anything. I’m not proud of my past, but I’ll tell you whatever you want to know. Anyway, I drank a lot in those days, and...”

Mary listened sympathetically until he was done. “Those things happen,” she said. “Just forget about the past. I didn’t come from a foster home like you did, but I know what you’re talking about. My mom raised me, and lots of times she was gone days and nights, and me and my sister and little brother just lived the best we could. I’ve done a lot of things in my life too—things I ain’t proud of. But we’ll just forget the past and look into the future and make ourselves a life.” She stopped short of saying “together,” but Charles knew what she meant.

He looked up to see Jimmy standing there, a skinny, freckled boy with blond hair.

“See,” said Mary. “Jimmy likes you already.”

It was true, Charles noticed as he looked at Jimmy. The boy had a look of hero worship as he looked at him.

“Say Chuck,” said Jimmy. “Will you teach me to run some of that big equipment you used to run on the road?”

“Sure thing, buckaroo,” said Charles. “I’ll teach you to run every piece of equipment on the job. When you get just a little bigger, you can work with me.”

Jimmy glowed, and all three of them fell silent, each thinking his own thoughts. Jimmy doubtless saw himself running a D10 bulldozer. It was hard telling what Mary was thinking. Charles found himself thinking of all his years of searching to belong, to mean something to someone. He saw himself introducing Jimmy as his son—that is, after he and Mary married. “My son, James Kearney,” he would say. “He’s the best equipment operator around.” Charles imagined himself and Jimmy sitting at the table swapping stories and...

Charles came back to the present. No sense rushing things. But he and Mary were getting along pretty good.

CHAPTER 7

Goodbye, Charles

Charles saw Mary a lot over the next eight or nine months. And he was careful to include Jimmy. He knew what it was like to grow up without someone to care about you, and he planned something different for Jimmy. Charles had no full-time job. He worked for an asphalt company, repairing roads in Tucson. Sometimes, when Mary had to work, Charles took Jimmy out fishing. He taught Jimmy to be a pretty expert fisherman. The second time they were on a fishing trip, Jimmy was snuggled up against Charles, listening to him talk, and Charles took him up on

his lap. It seemed like the natural thing to do with a skinny, insecure fellow like Jimmy. But in the back of his mind, Charles heard a danger bell clang.

Charles kept his dreams, and he and Mary kept seeing each other and liking each other. And more and more they talked about marriage now.

“We can’t get married till I get a full-time job so I can support you and Jimmy,” Charles told Mary. “When I get a full-time job, you can quit working and just stay at home. When I come home, why, there’ll be you and Jimmy waiting for me, and the smell of fresh baked pizza and apple pie in the air. And after supper, we’ll have that apple pie with vanilla ice cream, and we’ll sit out on the back porch while we eat it and look out over our little apple orchard and the pond where Jimmy and I’ll fish. And we won’t have a landlord to tell us we can do this or can’t do this, and we’ll be the happiest people around. Won’t we, Jimmy?”

Jimmy turned his freckled face up to Charles and grinned. “I reckon we will,” he said. “And I’ll fly my kite in the side yard, and you can be the coach at our little league soccer games at school, can’t you Chuck?”

“Not a problem,” Charles said. “I’ll be there.”

Charles glanced at Mary. “Funny thing, about freedom,” he said. “It seems like everybody’s always searching for it, but they don’t want to be tied down to something. Like, I’m going to be tied down when I marry you, but I’ll have more freedom. Freedom to love, and freedom to tell stories to somebody that doesn’t just think I’m weird.”

Mary blinked. “Huh?” she said. Then she went on, “Charles, you keep talking about getting a full-time job. Last week you said you’d know for sure this week. Now this week—”

“The boss just talked to me today,” broke in Charles. “He said he likes my work real good, but there won’t be work come this winter. He says he has a full-time job for me in El Paso, Texas, though. If it’s all right with you, I’m going to El Paso to check it out. I’ll get us a house, and then...”

He stopped. Mary was staring speculatively at him. “Us a house?” she said.

Charles found himself stuttering. “Well Mary—I thought we got along so well—and—well—I feel like Jimmy is my own son, and—Mary—well—would you like for us to get married?”

The speculative look did not entirely leave Mary’s eye, but she said simply, “Yeah, I think that’d be real fine, Chuck. Jimmy and I’ll be waiting for you, and you and me can get married in Texas.”

Charles caught a ride at three o’clock the next morning on one of the tractor-trailers that was moving road equipment to El Paso.

Once they had enough equipment there, the crew started to work. Winter crept up on them, but it did not matter much in El Paso. They kept on working, and Charles kept putting money back. He had spied a little house toward the edge of town. It wasn’t the little farm he had planned to buy, but that would come. His wages were good, and for the first time in years, he started a bank account. He sent some money back to Mary too. In the back of his mind, worry niggled. Maybe it was the way he had acted with Jimmy a time or two, or maybe it was just that something was not quite right between him and Mary, he did not know. But things would be different. He was starting over here in Texas. He worked long hours, but he called Mary when he had a chance. He took turns talking to her and Jimmy.

“Can’t you at least come home for Christmas?” Mary asked. “You know we do the best we can, but it won’t be Christmas without you. Surely you’ll have some time off at Christmas!”

Charles did not tell her, but his boss had just told him that they would need to push it to get this project done before Christmas Day. “I’d sure like to let you off, Chuck,” said the boss. “But you’re one of the best men we have, and we can’t afford to let you go right now. Just take a few extra days off at New Year’s, after this project is done.”

“I’ll try for New Year’s Day,” Charles told Mary. He heard the disappointment in her voice. He knew that kind of thing meant a lot to women, but he also wanted to keep his job. He would make it up to her when they were all moved to Texas. Charles talked a bit to Jimmy and then hung up.

The next evening, he called Mary again. Her voice sounded hollow and dispirited. He asked her if she was mad at him, and she said, “No, of course not.” But then she said, “Yes, I am.” After that, she didn’t have much to say.

Charles rented a Ryder truck the day before New Year’s Day. He left at midnight and headed for Tucson. He figured he would be in Tucson first thing in the morning and get an early start loading Mary’s things. Charles repeatedly found himself driving over the speed limit. Fortunately, the Ryder’s governor kicked in at seventy miles per hour and kept him from overdoing things too much. As he caressed the wheel of the truck speeding down the interstate, Charles thought of Mary and Jimmy. He allowed himself to dream of their marriage ceremony in El Paso—a few friends there—and of Mary dressed in a white dress and veil. And Jimmy, rushing along beside them, toward a future glowing with promise.

“Looks like I need fuel,” Charles muttered aloud as he wheeled the truck toward the exit. After he fueled the truck, he walked to the bank of pay phones on the side of the Triple-T Truck Stop. He stuck in a quarter and dialed Mary. “I’ll be there in three-quarters of an hour,” he said. Just thought I’d let you know. I’ll round up a few of my friends, and maybe we can head for Texas tonight yet. I’m hoping we can get married next week.”

He waited for her exclamations of joy, but the phone was oddly silent. “Mary,” he said, “Are you still there?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Mary, are you happy?” “Yes,” she said.

“Mary, I’ve missed you so much.” “Yes,” she said.

“Mary, I’ll be so glad to see you and Jimmy,” Charles said. “You don’t know how much I’ve missed you. Will you be glad to see me?”

“Yes,” said Mary.

“And Jimmy. I can hardly wait to see him again. He’s probably grown since I left. Is he pretty anxious to see me again and move to Texas?”

“Jimmy isn’t here right now,” said Mary. “But I’m very anxious for you to get back. I can hardly wait, Charles. You say in three-quarters of an hour? I’ll be here. I’ll round up a couple men to be waiting for you when you get here. Goodbye, Charles.”

Sure enough, Mary was standing out on the sidewalk when Charles pulled up to a parking spot in front of their apartment. “Hi, Mary,” he said, and moved to give her a kiss. But she pulled back. “Where’s Jimmy?” Charles asked.

“He’s not here right now,” Mary said. “But there are a couple of men I’d like you to meet.”

The door of the apartment opened, and Charles found himself confronting two uniformed police officers.

“Mr. Charles Kearney?” asked one, as they moved to either side of him.

“I’m Charles,” said Charles.

“We have a few questions to ask you about your relationship with this lady’s son,” said the officer, as he took out a pair of handcuffs.

As the two officers shoved Charles toward the police car parked in the lot behind the apartment, he heard Mary’s parting shot. “You wondered about Jimmy!” she screamed. “You’ll never see him again!”

CHAPTER 8

Prison Again

Charles stared numbly at the judge. “And how do you plead, Mr. Kearney?”

“Well, Your Honor, it wasn’t anything much. I mean I didn’t . . .”

“Mr. Kearney, are you guilty of the charges as they have been read to you?”

“Yes, I did that. But . . .”

“Are you then prepared to enter a plea of guilty or not guilty?”

Charles’ mind reeled. Prison, again. At least six months in prison. Maybe two years. Maybe five. But he had made it before. He would make it again. He would be older when he got out. But . . . somehow . . . he would make it through.

“Guilty as charged,” he said without emotion.

In a daze, he heard the judge’s voice droning out, “. . .and in consideration of this, your third conviction, I hereby sentence you, Mr. Charles Kearney, to twenty years in prison, with no possibility of parole.”

Charles stared at the judge. He knew his gasp must have been audible throughout the courtroom. Twenty years in prison! Twenty years would be the rest of his life. He knew it. No possibility of parole . . . He suddenly noticed a woman leaving the courtroom—Mary.

Two bailiffs moved to escort Charles back to his holding cell.

Suddenly, the anger Charles had held for years flooded over him. He raised his manacled hands and struck at the nearest bailiff. The man avoided the blow, and as Charles fought in a frenzy, two more bailiffs rushed to help. Together they dragged him from the courtroom. That afternoon, a police car took Charles to the penitentiary at Florence, Arizona to begin serving his sentence. To begin serving a sentence that would likely end only upon his death.

It was the beginning of 1990, Charles noticed on a calendar as he was led into the corridor of the Florence prison. As the six guards hustled Charles along, he began to fight. Handcuffed and shackled as he was, he could neither hit nor kick. But he threw his body around.

He braced himself. When one of the guards clapped his hand over Charles's mouth, Charles sank his teeth into the soft flesh.

Inmates staring from their cells gave catcalls and jeers as the procession fought its way down the corridor to C-B-4, cell block four, where Charles was released from his handcuffs and shackles and thrust into a cell.

Charles raged through the night and into the next day as helplessness overwhelmed him.

The pressure in his head was horrible. Nausea in his stomach. They had no right to keep him. The last time they had tricked him into pleading guilty to something he couldn't remember. This time they remembered it and added it onto his sentence. He knew he would probably never live to get out of prison. Never to get out again! Never to hear the birds sing. Never to hear a child's voice prattling—but he hated children now. Charles pounded his head against the prison wall.

“Can I talk to you a bit?” said a voice. It was that prison “shrink” they had hired to try to make him easier to manage.

“Get out of here!” Charles screamed hoarsely. “If you come close, I'll break you in two. I've given you due warning. Next time I won't warn you. I'll let you come in.” He felt his eyes bulge, and he noticed that the psychiatrist's eyes were bulging too, as the little man scuttled to safety.

Two of the guards lingered. “I feel like coming in and teaching you a lesson,” the one sneered.

Charles could feel himself foaming at the mouth. Dully he realized that the scream that rang down the corridor was his own. “Come in!” he screamed. “Come in, pretty boy, and you'll never leave!”

The guard made an obscene gesture at Charles as the two headed down the corridor. Charles raged on, pounding the walls, yelling, and, suddenly, to his shock, crying. He collapsed on his bunk, dizzy—one aching void, with the whole world spinning idly around him.

A New Freedom?

A year passed. Two years passed.

Two years was a long time to rage, but Charles kept at it. He had tried to be polite to the world. The world had slapped him down, shoved him away, and locked him up. For the rest of his life. The guards didn't dare come close. The psychiatrist kept his distance, although he did tiptoe up the corridor once a month and stand at a safe distance from the cell. As he listened to Charles rage, he wrote on the neat little sheet on his clipboard, "Severe adjustment disorder. Delusional. Possibly bi-polar. These diagnoses cannot be completely validated because subject does not cooperate."

Charles did not care, even when he heard the psychiatrist making plans to have him declared criminally insane. He hated them. All of them. If they put him in a straitjacket in a mental institution, he would fight them. He would fight. Never again would he tamely try to meet society's mold.

When Charles thought back, he could remember that first Sunday in his cell. He remembered the guards walking down the corridor calling, "Church services in the chapel. Anyone want to go to church services?" They did that every Sunday. The hypocrites! What did they expect a church service to do, make prisoners forget they were prisoners?

This Sunday, the guards walked down the corridor again, calling, "Church services in the chapel. Anyone want to go to church services?" A guard wandered close to the cell where Charles sat. He came close enough to the bars to see Charles, but not so close that Charles could reach him. "We're having church services, Chuck," he said. "But you know what, Chuckie? You can just go to hell."

"You too!" screamed Charles. He lunged at the bars. He looked for something to throw. He spat at the guard. The guards wandered down the hall, shepherding the prisoners who wanted a break from their routine.

Hell, thought Charles. If there is a hell, it can't be any worse than what I'm living in now. If I was there, at least it'd be an escape from here.

That evening, as Charles prepared for bed, he noticed a slip of yellow paper on the floor of his cell. Oddly enough, Charles preferred to keep his cell clean. He mechanically picked the paper up and put it into the trashcan.

The next day found Charles raging as usual. As usual, the three guards who brought him food put his paper tray on the floor. Then they pushed the tray under the cell door with a broom handle. That way they could stay a safe distance away.

That night as Charles prepared for bed, he noticed a yellow piece of paper on the floor. He stopped. "I'm sure I put that paper in the trash last night," he said to himself. He picked up the yellow piece of paper and placed it into the trash can.

The next two days passed for Charles much as had the last two years. The exception was that on both evenings, he found the yellow piece of paper in the exact same spot on his cell floor as he had that first evening. He knew he had been acting mad. The fear now pursued him that he actually was losing his mind. The next evening, he once again put the piece of paper in the trash. He went to stare out the cell door at the big clock which hung out in the corridor.

When he turned around, he stopped. His mouth fell slack. The little yellow piece of paper lay on his cell floor. Trembling a bit now, he picked the paper up and put it into the trash. He stuffed it far down in the trash and put his paper plate from his lunch on top of it. He grinned as he again turned around to stare out the cell door. To think he was being scared by a little piece of paper!

When he turned back to his cell, Charles stopped and stared. He found his knees quivering now, as his eye caught sight of the little yellow piece of paper in the familiar place on the cell floor. He stumbled to his cot and sat down, and stared.

In his lifetime knocking about alleys with all types of people, he had met those who claimed to be witches or warlocks. Supernatural powers they claimed for themselves. In nearly every

instance, they had been fakes. But now, Charles felt himself face to face with the supernatural. Somebody, or something, with unknown purpose, was trying to communicate to him, Charles Kearney. Through his fear, Charles felt a bit flattered.

“I fear neither demon nor fiend,” Charles croaked, aloud, to reassure himself. Then he caught himself. “I don’t fear anything,” he told himself. “Nothing worse can happen to me than what has already happened.”

He scooped the yellow piece of paper from the floor. Sitting on his cot, he began to read. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.”

God? thought Charles. Who is God? I know a god, Satan. He has walked with me most of my life. I hear his whisper every night. I know I’m his son. But who is this God the paper talks about?

Charles hunched over, reading the paper again, with intense concentration. He had never known a real father. Now, according to this paper, there was a God, one who wanted him for His child.

Now Charles sat, staring into space, thinking harder than he had for a long time. It makes sense that God exists, he thought. All my life, I’ve tried to run my own life, and it hasn’t worked. I’m not able to do it. God offers to do it for me. All my life, I’ve wanted love. But everybody that I wanted to love hurt me.

He thought of his mother, of Judy, of Mary. Then he thought of the way he had lived his life. “I guess I hurt a lot of people too,” he said aloud. “I thought since people hurt me, it was okay to hurt anybody to get what I wanted.” His mind traveled way, way back, to a dark shadow beside a bar, as he stooped over to snatch a drunk’s wallet. He thought of the men and women he had stayed with and of the boys whose minds he had polluted and whose bodies he had defiled.

“Lord,” he said aloud. “I’m sorry. I realize that what I did was wrong. I realize too that you sent your son to show me how to find you. Do you have other children Lord? Or is it just your son? At any rate, Lord, I want to be yours.”

Kearney felt a peace wash over him that he'd never known before. Suddenly he felt clean, and the weight that had weighed him, and made him gnaw at his hands and rage at the world, was gone. Charles slept peacefully that night.

CHAPTER 10

Just One Cut

The next morning, Charles heard footsteps. He heard the food cart rolling along. The usual three guards were handing out breakfast to the inmates. He noticed that the youngest carried a push broom. They planned to use its handle to push his tray of food under the door.

Charles sat on his cot, smiling a bit as he watched them. Yesterday, their features had seemed twisted, hateful. He had seen them only as symbols of the establishment he hated. Today, he saw they were people—all young, probably each with his own problems and struggles.

They placed the tray on the floor. The youngest one had just placed the broom handle against the tray when Charles spoke.

“Hey, fellows,” he said. “That’s kind of awkward for you.

Why don’t you just bring it on into my cell?” He smiled.

The guards stared at him a moment, petrified, and then they abandoned Charles’s plate on the floor of the corridor. Down the corridor and around a corner the three guards clattered. Charles could hear their footsteps still clattering as they headed for the offices. After a while, he heard their footsteps returning. They were escorting the little psychiatrist that Charles had threatened to rip apart. Charles heard them tell the little doctor, “Somethings not right here.”

“Hi, there,” said the little man, through the bars.

“Hi,” said Charles. “How are you doing this morning? Did you sleep well? I had a great night.” He grinned at the little man. The psychiatrist peered at Charles. Then he moved closer, nearly stepping in Charles’ plate of food growing cold on the floor.

“Can I come in and sit down on your cot and talk a bit?” “Are you nuts?” the guards shouted.

“Yes, that will be fine,” Charles said.

After moving Charles’s plate, one of the guards unlocked the door, and the psychiatrist walked in and sat beside Charles. “Tell me, Charles,” he said, “how are you feeling?”

“I feel great, Doc,” Charles said. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt so good.”

“What are you thinking about?” the doctor asked. “What are you seeing in your mind?”

“Bright clouds,” said Charles, “with the sun shining through.” “What is that slip of paper you’re holding?” asked the doctor.

“I see it comes from a place called Lamp and Light Publishers. How did you get it?”

“I don’t know,” Charles said, “but I mean to find out.” Then he looked at the psychiatrist earnestly and said, “This paper offers free Bible courses through the mail. It talks about God, Doc. I don’t know who He is or really where to find Him. Can you tell me where He is, Doc?”

The psychiatrist shifted uneasily. “I suppose that would be something to find out in a church,” he said. “The chaplain might be able to help you. I’ll see you later.”

After a week, Charles was allowed to have a phone book and a pen and paper. Charles leafed through the phone book until he found the section in the yellow pages on churches. He had three stamps, three envelopes, and three pieces of paper, so he simply chose the first three churches on the list.

He began laboriously to write his first letter. He had never written a letter in his life. He began, “Dear people.” That did not sound quite right, he thought, so he crossed that out and

tried again. "Dear folks." He wasn't sure, but he thought that sounded better than the previous try, so he continued, "Can you people tell me about God? The psychiatrist here tells me you people in the church know about God, and I've met him, I think, but I want to know more about him. If you know about him, please write and tell me."

He wrote the identical thing in all three letters, since he could not think of anything better to say. Then he carefully folded the papers, put them in the envelopes, and stamped and addressed them.

Charles waited quite impatiently the first week. The second week, he was beginning to lose hope, but he kept watching the hall for the dorm officer to bring him a letter. He had never gotten a letter in his life, and he savored the idea of someone caring enough about him to send him a letter. "Dear Mr. Kearney," it would say. Or would it say, "Dear Charles"? He wondered if all three churches would reply, or if only two of them would bother. By the third week, Charles realized that he was not going to get a letter from any of the churches.

He had always vaguely thought that people who went to church were supposed to love and care for others, but he supposed he could have been mistaken. He now had three more stamps, and three more envelopes and three more sheets of paper. Again he laboriously crafted his letter. Again he had them mailed, and again he waited, full of hope. Three weeks passed with no letters. But Charles was not easily dissuaded. Again he wheedled a guard into bringing him the phone book, and this time he chose the next three churches on the list.

This writing to churches and waiting for a reply took some months to complete. When Charles asked for the phone book and saw there were no more churches listed, he sat in his cell for a long time, looking at the ceiling. Finally he put the phone book down and looked through the bars. Now he knew the truth. Those church people, they loved everybody. Everybody, that is, except those that were hard to love or those in prison, like him, Charles Kearney.

Life went downhill for Charles after that. He was no longer the mad man of Cell Block 4. But all the guards could see he was depressed. Charles had a lot of time to think now. He thought of a door somewhere, a long time ago, closing, and of a blond, blue-eyed woman going by

the window and saying, “I’ll be back soon, Charlie.” He remembered now that had been his mother. He thought of all the times he had reached out for love, only to get slapped down. Love, he realized weakly, was only an idea. It was hate that gave meaning to life.

Charles found another meaning to life, now—death. He was still the master of his fate, the captain of his soul. He could in no way control his life, but he could choose when and how he would die. Charles smiled a little when he thought about that, and he began to prepare. He had gotten a razor blade through a trade with another inmate. But before he took his last journey into that great beyond that surely could be no worse than the agony in this life, Charles had another idea. He remembered how carefully he had saved the little yellow piece of paper he had found on his cell floor. He remembered that it had an address on it—an address for Lamp and Light Publishers. He didn’t know if they were a church or just what, but they wrote about God. Charles wrote to Lamp and Light, and to his joy they sent him the address of a bishop in Arizona. Charles wrote to the bishop, and then he counted the days. As months went by, Charles realized with an odd detachment that he, Charles Kearney, had reached the end of the road.

I’m going to die next week, Charles told himself. I’ve been yanked around too often. I’ve never had control of my life. Now I have control. If I don’t get a reply by six o’clock next Tuesday evening, I’m going to take a trip into the great unknown. Where? I don’t know. I’ll just make one cut. It won’t hurt. Not as much as the uncertainty of living like this, anyway.

CHAPTER 11

Countdown for a Letter

Tuesday came. Charles kept checking to make sure he had the razor under his mattress. He had a plastic grocery bag to wrap around his arm to catch the blood so it would not run under the door. That way nobody could see it and rush in to stop him. By the time they found him, he would be gone. Gone to...somewhere.

Charles watched the black hands creeping around the white-faced clock in the corridor. Five forty-five. Fifteen minutes of life on this earth. Fifteen more minutes of torment. Charles wrapped the bag around his arm. "Six o'clock, you're slow coming" he muttered. "I have an appointment to keep." Charles glanced at the clock. "Three minutes till six." He brought the razor down along his wrist. He touched it to the blue pulse of life which he would open in two minutes and let drain out. He glanced at the clock. "Two minutes," he whispered. "Two minutes, and I'll be out of this agony."

He glanced around his room. He allowed himself to think of the reaction of the guards. He knew there would be very little reaction, except of relief. He tried to think of someone who would care. He thought of his baby, Jennifer Lynn. But no, she wasn't his baby. Judy had said she wasn't.

He thought he heard a familiar voice in his ear. "Do it Kearney. Do it now. You'll never regret it. Hurry!" He heard the urgency. He recognized the voice. It had followed him through much of life, sometimes muted, sometimes distinct. He had first heard it distinctly when he'd robbed that drunk man. He glanced at the clock. Six o'clock. He moved the razor to the upper end of his vein, finding just the right spot. He pressed down. Firmly. A little harder now. Now he could begin to trace the path of death. He heard the voice again, this time louder, more triumphant. It cackled and howled, and then he heard the chorus of cackles and howls in the background. Perhaps, by his death, he would still those haunting voices. That would be peace, compared to his agony.

As he tensed his hand to join them, he heard footsteps. Kearney recognized those footsteps as he recognized all the footsteps of the regulars. The dorm officer stopped at Kearney's cell. "I have a letter for you," he said, peering in. His eyes took in Kearney's poised razor and the plastic bag. A small grin crossed his face. "What are you about to do?" he asked, as he turned and walked away. Charles heard the sound of his retreating footsteps.

With his razor, Charles neatly slit the envelope. Inside was a letter from Lyle, that bishop Charles had written to. Charles read it, not daring to hope. He'd written to so many churches. Probably this was a rejection. "God loves you, and wants you for His child," ran the letter. "I love you too." Charles felt a wetness on his wrist. Had he cut his wrist? He glanced down

and realized that he, Charles, was crying. He thought of those who had used the word love through the years. They had used it when they wanted to use him. But here was a man who wanted to give instead of to take.

CHAPTER 12

No Father But God

It took some time for the Mennonite bishop to gain permission to see Charles. Charles waited impatiently. At last came the day when the dorm officer announced, “A visitor to see you, Kearney.”

Lyle was the first visitor that Charles had ever had in prison.

Charles tried to fight down something he considered a weakness—mounting excitement. He had tried so long to find meaning, friendship, and love. In every case he had been disappointed. Why should this be different? But hope flamed again. The strong in Charles’s world denied this hope, this longing. They were cynical. The goal of life, their lives said, was to take advantage of another before he took advantage of you, to spy the weaknesses of another without revealing your own. It was a game, a struggle of Homosapiens on the quadruped level.

Charles felt something calling him beyond that, and as he looked at this Christian man before him, he hoped he had brought some answers.

Lyle sat down with Charles and gently explained to him salvation’s message. For the first time, life’s events made sense to Charles. His mother’s abandoning him was not God’s will. It was not God’s will that others had taken advantage of him, or that he had taken advantage of others. Men had left God. They served Satan. Satan loved for people to hate and kill, and he looked forward to their spending eternity with him in hell. Violence, hate, and lust bound everyone, unless they accepted God’s buy-back program, His perfect sacrifice, His son, Jesus.

When Charles knelt beside Lyle to pray to God, he paused for a long while. His mind raced back through the years. A little boy looked up from his blocks to find his mother leaving. A little boy lived in homes, homes of people who had fathers. The fathers stood up for their own sons. They protected them from bullying, and protected them if they were accused of something. He, Charles Kearney, had never known a father. But now, according to Brother Lyle, he did have a Father—God. Not just a Father who had created everyone, but a personal Father, one who wanted to walk and talk with His children. Many of those He created and loved walked away, but they could come back and obey this Father and have a personal relationship with Him.

Charles took a deep breath as he began his prayer. “My Father,” he said, and suddenly life made sense. “My Father,” Charles said, “I’m coming to You. I’m coming to You because I know You want me because I’m Your child. I know You want me to obey you and love You. That’s hard, but it’s a whole lot easier than trying to go through life on my own. I need you, Father, and I admit it.”

To Charles, it seemed he had always known part of this. He simply had groped for the key. Now Lyle presented it to him. Before they parted, Lyle gave Charles a Bible. He also helped Charles fill out a request for a Bible correspondence course from Lamp and Light Publishers.

In due time, the Bible correspondence course, *The First Step*, came. Charles opened the booklet and read about Jesus, the Word of God—God’s communication to man. With every page, he understood more about God. He realized now that God wants to walk and talk with man.

As the months passed, visitors came to see Charles. These were the first people since Lillian who cared about him. His correspondence teacher from Lamp and Light Publishers traveled from New Mexico to visit him. Lyle and Nancy came, and others from their church. One day when he was ushered to the visitation room, he heard childish voices. He tensed as he saw Brother Allen with children. A sweat broke out on Charles’s forehead. Children. Charles battled conflicting emotions. Whichever emotion won, he knew one thing—children meant trouble. Charles sat quietly in a corner, eying his small visitors out of the corner of his eye. He felt ashamed for his feelings, yet he knew of no way to escape them.

“Brother Wendell, would you please read from Psalm 102,” said Lyle. Wendell began reading in his rich voice, “Hear my prayer, O LORD, and let my cry come unto thee. Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble...’ ”

Charles felt the tension leave him, and he listened quietly.

Charles was a church member now. “The only Mennonite in this prison,” as he told Lyle.

“What is more important is that you are a Christian,” Lyle replied, but he smiled. Charles had a *Doctrines of the Bible* now and the Eighteen articles of faith adhered to by the Mennonite church of which Lyle was a part.

One day, a few members of the Wickenburg Mennonite Church came to share Communion with Charles. Charles tried to enter into the spirit of worship. He thought of the Last Supper when Christ “rose, and girded himself with a towel, and washed the disciples’ feet.” He thought of God’s Son setting the perfect example when He told His disciples, “Take, eat, this is my body.”

But Charles could not keep his mind on the communion service. Instead, it wandered back, back...He saw a little boy looking up from his blocks and crying for his mother. He remembered a dark room smelling of stale cigarette smoke. He thought of innocence lost, of hate and lust discovered. As his mind wandered through the years, he eyed these people from the Mennonite church who had never experienced these things. They thought life was good, because it had always been good to them. They had families. They had friends. They had a church family. Charles swallowed a bitter lump in his throat. The bitter lump slid down to his heart.

“They’ll walk out these doors, Kearney,” whispered a voice. “They’ll walk out these doors, and they’ll be free. They’ll hold their children, and these men will eat a good meal prepared by their wives. You’ll go back to your cell, and you’ll eat what the prison system feeds you. These Mennonites don’t understand, Kearney. They’re innocent. They’re biased. Give it up, Kearney.” Kearney tried not to listen. But when he took the Communion cup, he was still struggling within himself. If only he could tell them about his life! But time was limited. And he had lived in a different world.

Lyle and the other visitors said goodbye and left. Kearney knelt beside his cot and poured his heart out to the Lord in prayer.

At last, Charles found peace. He sensed God's voice. "Each person faces his own struggles," the voice said. "Each person must overcome the evil within him with My help. You have repented and found forgiveness for the sin in your past. These Mennonites who just left have needed to repent and find forgiveness for sins in their own past. There is only one way to Me."

Charles opened his Bible. It opened to John 21, where Peter asked Christ, "Lord, and what shall this man do?" Christ replied, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me."

Charles sensed God speaking to him through the verse as well. God had a plan for these others. He had a plan for Charles Kearney. Those plans were different, but both were required to relate properly to God. If they related properly to God, they would relate properly to each other.

CHAPTER 13

The Path of Peace

Charles became an avid Bible student. He also began to collect worthwhile sayings. He wrote them in the back of his notebooks, and loved to ponder them as he sat on his cot. "Evangelism is one beggar telling another about bread, the Bread of Life, Christ," he wrote one night. He sat, pondering that. He vaguely grasped that through the ages since Christ, each generation told the following generation of God and His plan for man. Men were determined that the Good News should never be lost—the Good News that God once more walked and talked with man—that man could have a relationship with God, and when they died, go to live with Him in His home in heaven.

As Charles grasped this, he naturally talked to other people about God when they asked him about his experiences. Many of the inmates realized that Charles had once been considered the tough man, unreachable. They admired this. But they also saw that he was now in control of his actions. And when they asked questions, Charles had the answers.

One day as Charles sat reading his Bible out in the prison courtyard, Jeremy, a young Black Muslim, walked by carrying his Koran. He stopped to talk to Charles. "Hey, man," he said, "tell me about this Jesus man." Charles told him of Christ's death on Calvary, of God's buy-back program after man strayed.

"God is so Holy, He couldn't accept anybody as sinful as man had become," Charles said. "For instance, Cain, Adam and Eve's oldest boy, murdered his younger brother. Without God, man couldn't keep himself from doing that kind of thing. Christ, God's sinless Son, was the only sacrifice good enough."

Charles did not realize that baleful black eyes were peering at him from the other side of the exercise yard. He did not realize that a hulking dark form had begun a slinking, circuitous path to come up behind him. He did realize that Jeremy was honestly looking for answers. He continued, "Jeremy, now that Christ died, God can again accept man. He can accept you, like He accepted me. He's your Father, Jeremy, and He wants you to come to Him with your problems. I can show you here in God's Word what He says about..."

Charles never finished his sentence. He saw Jeremy look up in alarm, and he started to turn his head. But age and the sedentary prison life had slowed him. A tremendous blow on the back of his head hurled him into the courtyard. He landed with a thud. He lay there a moment, waiting for the ringing in his ears to subside. Then he looked up to see Mohammed Kari, a massive African-American, standing over him, fury in his face. Mohammed stood there for a moment and then stalked away.

"Mohammed," muttered Charles, as he sat up. "I should have known. The Muslim teacher would not be overjoyed that one of his pupils was talking to me, a Christian."

The next day, Charles watched for a chance to talk to Mohammed. At length, he saw the giant and walked over to him. He saw the man's muscles tense as he approached, and his

old intuition from years on the streets told him the man was afraid. Mohammed, who lifted weights for hours every day to build up his body, feared him, Charles Kearney.

“Why did you hit me yesterday?” asked Charles.

“You were trying to convert one of my students!” Mohammed yelled. “You were telling him about Christ and about that book of yours. I know who you are, Kearney. I know all about you and that Mennonite Christianity. You leave my students alone!”

“Jeremy came to me; I didn’t go to him,” replied Charles. “I answered his questions. Then you came up behind me, an old man, and hit me. You know what, Kari?” Charles said. “You’re a coward. Is that the way your religion teaches you to act—sneaking up behind old men and hitting them?”

Charles’s eyes held the gaze of the giant for a moment, and then Mohammed walked away, muttering.

Charles thought that was the end of the incident, and he was thankful for that. Nowadays his heart acted up when he had too much stress. But Charles was to be disappointed. He was sitting in his usual place at the edge of the exercise yard reading his Bible when a large shadow fell across his book. With a start, he looked up to see Andy, the head of the Aryan Brotherhood within the prison complex. Andy, who boasted of a black belt in karate and sported tattoos over much of his body, looked friendly enough. Charles felt his eyes go involuntarily to the tattoo on Andy’s chest—the tattoo that said, “Hitler was right.” Then he glanced at the tattoo on Andy’s left hand. It said, “Whites, the supreme race.” Charles felt an involuntary spasm of distaste. Then he reminded himself that Christ loved everyone.

“Say, Charlie,” Andy began, “we like you right well. We mean to protect our people, and we heard that one of the Black Muslims took a whack at you. Just tell us who it was, and we’ll get him for you.”

“It could be that one of them did hit me,” Charles began, praying for the right words. “Before I was a Christian, I would have hated him. But I’m a Christian now, and Christianity is a religion of peace. You’ll never get anywhere with fighting, Andy. Everybody keeps trying to

have the last word in revenge, and they never will. They'll just keep fighting. Turn to Christ, Andy. Act instead of react."

Andy wheeled and stalked away, his two sidekicks shadowing him. Up in the guard tower, a veteran prison guard turned to his companion. "Remember what I said about a fight shaping up between the Black Muslims and the neo-Nazis?" he said. "I saw Kari hit Kearney a couple of days ago, and I knew the Aryans wouldn't let that pass. I told you then there was probably going to be a dead man or two before we got them stopped."

"Yeah?" said his companion.

"Well, Andy's just talked to Kearney and doesn't look in the fighting mood anymore. Maybe there is something to what Kearney has to say about peace. I know my grandmother used to talk about this Jesus that Kearney preaches. I think I'll look into it."

"Could be, Judd, could be," said the other guard. "For now, I'm just thankful we won't risk getting hurt breaking up a gangfight."

CHAPTER 14

Kearney Needs Help!

Charles bent over in his cell, wheezing. Pain squeezed his chest and radiated down his arms. He gasped, cold sweat breaking out all over him. He leaned forward—tried to call for help. He was only vaguely conscious that he was falling, falling... The thud of his unresisting body hitting the concrete roused him slightly. He could not see the clock and without it, had little idea what time it was. He tried to call out, but could not get his breath. Satan doesn't like me talking about God. He's trying to kill me, he thought, dully. He'll probably succeed.

Suddenly, he heard someone yelling from the cell across the hall from him. He vaguely realized that it was Andy, pounding on the bars and yelling, "Kearney needs help!" He doubted the guards at the guard station would hear. If none of them came up the corridor soon, he

was sure he would die. Then in the distance, up toward the guard station, he heard someone else take up the cry. He vaguely recognized the thundering voice of Mohammed Kari, bellowing, "Kearney needs help!"

Soon he heard racing footsteps. The guards stopped at Mohammed's cell. "Hey, shut up in there," he heard one snarl. "Do you realize that you're gonna go into lock-down for this, you..."

Charles could not make out Mohammed's reply, but just before he passed out for good, he heard footsteps clattering down the corridor toward his cell.

Charles took some time to recover over in Central Medical Unit. After two weeks, he was transferred back to his old cell. Charles could feel himself aging. When younger, he could work for hours without fatigue. Many nights he had spent partying and then gotten up and worked a full day. He had snorted cocaine, smoked marijuana, and gone on countless drinking binges. And, until he had found victory in Christ, he had smoked cigarettes regularly for over fifty years. Now his body was rebelling. He tried to remain cheerful, in spite of his pain. His teeth had decayed to the point that they all had to be pulled. A prison doctor fitted him with false teeth. An eye operation for cataracts only partially improved his vision.

Charles still read his Bible, but the words were beginning to swim before his eyes. Another heart attack sent him back to the Central Medical Unit. A few months after that, a third nearly killed him.

One thing kept Charles steady. "I have my faith in God," he told the other inmates. "Someday soon, I won't live in a prison cell."

He saw the other prisoners gape at him. About six of them had gathered around him in the exercise yard. "Won't be in prison?" asked Wolfgang, a gangling, scarred inmate. "Whatcha gonna do, get a good lawyer?"

"What are you planning?" asked another. "A prison break? We'll help you. I'll hold you up, Charlie, and you jump over the fence and run for it."

“I suppose if we were going to make a run for it, I’d better hold you up,” Charles grinned. “I can’t run very well with this oxygen bottle on a cart and this nasal cannula.” Everyone joined in a good-natured laugh.

“No,” said Charles, “I’m going where I’ll have a mansion instead of a cell. I’m going to see my Father in heaven. It won’t be long now. Won’t some of you fellows accept the Lord now, so you can meet me up there?”

The group looked superstitiously away. Then they slowly dispersed. Charles looked after them. “I have planted, and Apollos watered, but God gives the increase,” he said to himself. “One of these days, maybe there’ll be a Christian church here in the prison.” A tightness squeezed his chest. He wheezed. His gaze wandered around the prison courtyard at the knots of men talking. He knew many of them. He knew their sad stories of unrequited love or betrayal. Many of them came from broken homes. “If only they would know their Father,” Charles said aloud. He thought of his own mostly wasted life. The words of a song came to his mind—a song Lyle and Nancy had sung for him the last time they visited.

O the years in sinning wasted,
Could I but recall them now,
I would give them to my Saviour,
To His will I’d gladly bow.

Charles also remembered part of the chorus, “Must I go, and empty-handed?”

Charles knew exactly how the writer of that song felt. He thought of the children he could have had a good influence on. He had loved children, but, he realized, he had loved himself more. He had always felt justified. After all, he had reasoned, nobody ever did anything for me. I need to just take what I want.

But now he knew that Somebody had done something for him. He thought of Christ, falsely accused, hanging on a cross, suffering and dying because people didn’t understand Him. Of course, in His case, they hadn’t wanted to understand Him.

“ ‘He came unto his own, and his own received him not,’ quoted Charles aloud. “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.’ That’s me,” said Charles. “I’m a son of God. I wish these other fellows would just realize that they need to give up what they want to do and follow what God wants them to do.”

Charles glanced up at the guard tower as he thought of Judd, who had come to him last week and started discussing Christianity. At length Judd had told him, “If I accepted this kind of peace you claim to believe in, I’d have to quit being a guard. You know, Kearney, I bet you’re just trying to convert us all so we’ll let you out of here.” Judd had left, laughing. Charles figured Judd was up in the guard tower right now, cradling a rifle, sweeping the exercise area with his keen gray eyes.

“The Prince of Peace,” Charles mused. “He came unto His own—that’s Judd and all the other guards and every single prisoner—but they didn’t receive Him.”

Charles felt a familiar tightness in his chest, and eased himself to a sitting position. The tightness in his chest did not let up. Instead, it grew. Charles found himself back in the medical ward that evening. His bedmate was an eighty-seven-year-old man named Smith.

Charles noticed that when the nurses came to feed Smith, they haphazardly handed him some food. When he was too weak to eat right away, they yanked the food away and left. Charles noticed that as he ate, Mr. Smith rolled his eyes over and watched him.

Charles offered the old man a spoonful of his instant mashed potatoes. Mr. Smith ate it slowly but hungrily, even though the food was cold, as if it had just been pulled out of the refrigerator. Suddenly a shadow fell across the bed. Charles glanced up to see Mr. Greenbar, the warden in charge of the ward, standing over him, livid with rage. “Get that food away from him!” Mr. Greenbar screamed. “We decide what he eats and what he doesn’t eat. If I ever catch you feeding him again, I’ll write you up a citation, Kearney!”

Several days later, Charles awakened from a nap to find Mr. Smith dead in the bed beside him. A doctor stood by Smith, accompanied by Mr. Greenbar. “In these cases it’s hard to

tell,” the doctor was saying. “I’m going to write ‘death due to occlusion of the arteries stemming from arteriosclerosis.’ ”

“That sounds about right, whatever it means,” agreed Mr. Greenbar. “A gurney should be here any minute to pick him up. We really need this bed.” He glanced over at Charles. “I don’t think you need to be in intensive care anymore, Kearney,” he said. “We’re moving you out this afternoon.”

That evening, Charles ate the first hot meal he’d had in over three weeks. As he ate, he thought of Mr. Smith, starved to death in a prison hospital. It could have been me, he thought. God obviously has some purpose for me here yet.

CHAPTER 15

Father, I’m Coming Home

The year was 2004. Charles enjoyed the visits from his church family, but he felt himself getting weaker. One day when Lyle came, Charles handed him a paper.

“That’s my testimony,” he said. “That’s about my life. Use it any way you want to. I haven’t done much for God in my lifetime, and now it’s pretty well too late. I hope somehow my testimony can do somebody some good.”

Charles was back in intensive care when the heart attack struck. Instinctively, he realized it was the last one, and those around him saw his lips moving as his breath came in ragged gasps.

Charles Kearney found himself floating in and out of consciousness. A great longing filled him to be in his eternal home—with his Father.

“Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit,” he said. “Father, I’m coming home.” Suddenly, Kearney heard a voice he recognized—a voice he had listened to often these last few years. It said, “Come on home, Son.”

“He’s gone,” the doctor said. “I can’t get a pulse.”

“Look, Doc,” the male nurse said quietly. “Kearney was in a lot of pain, but he’s relaxed. Got a smile on his face, like he was going somewhere he liked.”

The two men glanced at each other and then looked quickly away. Gently they lifted the body and placed it on a gurney.

As the men moved down the corridor, they met a knot of inmates. Usually one of the guards would have ordered them to disperse, but now nobody said anything. Andy moved closer to the gurney and looked at Charles’s face. Then he turned to the others and said, “That’s Kearney. Look at the peace on his face, man. He’s smiling, and he was in pain.”

Beside Andy stood Mohammed Kari. Finally he said quietly, “That Kearney, he was a tough man.”

“Yeah, years ago,” Andy said.

“Naw, I mean in these last few years,” Kari said. “He saw death coming, and he had all that pain, but he faced it square in the eyes. He took it like a man. I appreciate that, man; I appreciate it.”

“I’ve heard that Kearney never knew his father,” said the nurse as they wheeled the gurney along. “It makes all the more interesting his last words. He said, ‘Father, I’m coming home.’ ”

“He found a father,” the chaplain agreed. “He had a Father’s guidance these last years, and he’s gone home to his Father for always.”

Together the chaplain and the prisoners stood and silently watched until the gurney turned a corner. As they dispersed, Andy turned to Mohammed Kari. “Kearney was right,” he said. “He’s free now. In one sense, he’s been free for these last few years. And now he’s free for always.”

THE END.

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