

Ripples In our Lives

Nancy and David Brundage

We dedicate this book to three very special men in our lives.

Charles Whalen Birdy – Nancy’s Dad
Russell Edward Brundage – David’s Dad
William Russell Brundage – David’s Brother

Chapter 1

It was March 31, 2003 when David grabbed his stomach and fell to the living room floor. He yelled to his wife, Nancy, "Help me, Hon. I need to get to the doctor fast. This pain feels different than all the other diverticulitis attacks!"

David had a problem with the disease since he was twenty-six years old. Two years after he was diagnosed with diverticulitis, he had a diverticulum removed from his small intestine along with three feet of his intestine.

Diverticulitis is an infection of the small intestine. A diverticulum is a pouch or sac opening out from the colon or small intestines. It causes severe pain when it is infected. Not treated, it can destroy the tissue of the small intestine or colon. The only treatment for a massive infection is surgery.

David grabbed on to the sofa and slowly got to his feet when his wife came running into the room. Together, they got him to his feet, but he was still doubled over in pain. He was convinced the problem must have been the result of Agent Orange exposure in Vietnam. But it is not one of the recognized diseases caused by the exposure. In David's opinion, it should be investigated. After he was as comfortable as possible in his recliner, in a determined voice, Nancy said, "We are going to Dr. Anderson's office so you can get this treated right away."

Dr. Richard Anderson had been Nancy's doctor for more than twenty years, but David had just become his patient about six months ago at her insistence. She trusted him with her life and wanted David to feel that same kind of trust with his doctor. They were getting older and would probably need to see a doctor more frequently. From his very first appointment with Dr. Anderson, David knew he made a good decision thanks to his loving wife.

Nancy cautiously helped David get into the car and rushed him to Dr. Anderson's office. As soon as they walked in, the receptionist told them to go to examination room #3. David was still in severe pain as he walked into the room and got on the examining table.

Dr. Anderson was busy with another patient, so his physician's assistant, Edward "Eddie" Tanner came in to do the preliminary examination.

When he walked into the room, he said, "Looks like the big guy has got a serious problem."

Eddie took his blood pressure and temperature. They were both high, causing a serious look on Eddie's face. He pressed on David's abdomen. David winced in pain with every touch. After a brief examination, Eddie left the room to report the result of his exam to the doctor.

Eddie returned and told Nancy to take David to the hospital about three blocks away. Dr. Anderson and Eddie felt his condition was very serious.

At the hospital, he would be treated more efficiently, getting test results back faster to diagnose his condition. David was in excruciating pain on the way and every bump in the road added to his agony. He told Nancy again that the attack felt different from the other attacks of diverticulitis. He was scared he would need an operation. He had a bad feeling about having surgery. He had a premonition something would happen to him if he went through an operation any time soon.

When they arrived at the hospital, the emergency staff was waiting for him. Dr. Anderson called ahead to tell them David was on his way. The emergency room nurse, Thomas, took him to the triage room to take his vital signs and temperature. They were even higher than they were at the doctor's office. When Thomas finished, he helped David get on a gurney and wheeled him to Emergency Room #5.

Nancy stayed behind to fill out the paper work so he could be treated. She told the nurse, Tammy he was fifty-five years old and weighed three hundred and twenty pounds. He had high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes. She gave Tammy the names of his daily prescription

medications. Nancy continued to tell Tammy the rest of his medical history, which included all the surgeries he had in his life, including the removal of a diverticulum twenty-seven years ago.

It was only a minute or two after David was settled before the doctor came into the room. The emergency room doctor, Dr. Douglas Dennison, made a quick assessment of his abdomen and ordered enhanced X-rays. He was given a red dye solution to drink. The dye highlighted the abdomen for the X-ray. While he was drinking it, Nancy walked into the room.

David had a frightened look on his face and said, "This is very different, Hon. It hurts like hell. I do not like what is about to happen to me."

Nancy said, "Before you get too upset, let us see what the X-rays tell us. You have to calm down or you will have a stroke because your blood pressure is so high. Maybe it is not as bad as you think. Try to calm down and wait for the results, Honey."

She tried her best to calm him down. However, she did not believe what she was saying to him. She was just as frightened as he was, but needed to stay strong for her husband.

After giving the solution time to illuminate his abdomen, a technician came in with a wheelchair for David to be taken to X-ray. David was wheeled back to the emergency room where Nancy was waiting for him after they were taken.

The whole time he was at the hospital, he had not been given any medication for the pain. They wanted to see the results of the X-rays first. There was a possibility medication would mask his symptoms. His blood pressure got extremely high because of the pain. About a half hour after his return from X-ray, Dr. Dennison came in and told David and Nancy the results.

"You have a severe case of diverticulitis. It will require surgery. We have excellent surgeons on staff. I will send one in to talk to you as soon as he can come down here. Now I can give you something for the pain."

As he wrote the order, he asked if they had any questions. They were both so frightened, they could not think straight. Nancy told him they did not at that moment. He told them to have him paged if they thought of anything.

The surgeon he recommended was Dr. Andrew Emanuel. He was the best surgeon they had on the staff in Dr. Dennison's opinion.

Before leaving the room, Dr. Dennison noticed some blood on David's right big toe and said, "We need to get someone to look at that toe. It looks badly infected, probably an in-grown toenail."

David and Nancy assumed he would send someone to look at it, but no one ever came. At the time, they had more important things to worry about, so the toe was forgotten for the time being.

By the time Dr. Emanuel arrived, David was so drugged from the pain medication he was unable to understand what the doctor was saying. Nancy listened. He explained what would happen in the next couple of weeks. She would tell David when he was able understand.

"David needs to have a sigmoid colectomy. That is the removal of the infected part of the colon. I have done many of these surgeries. It is a simple operation, but like all surgeries, there are some risks. The main risk to David will be infection because he has so much already," the doctor explained.

He went on to explain he would admit David to the hospital immediately. He would be treated with massive doses of antibiotics to reduce the infection for the next four days.

"On the fifth day, April 4th, he will have the surgery. Barring any complications, he should be in the hospital five to seven days after surgery," he continued.

He ordered strong antibiotics and pain medication to be given intravenously. While putting the intravenous line into David's arm, the nurse noticed his right big toe was infected. She said, "You should get someone to look at that toe."

David responded, "I thought I was in the right place to have a doctor check it."

She told him it was, but still no one came to look at it.

For the next four days, Nancy stayed by his side as much as possible. They had Lucky, a female black Labrador/Chow dog. She needed to be fed and let outside for obvious reasons. Nancy would go home around noon to get something to eat, take care of Lucky and call David's mother to update them on his condition.

His mother, Dot lived in Massachusetts. He also had a sister, Gail who lived in New Hampshire. The fact that David lived in Austin, Texas was hard for them, knowing he was so sick. Dot was seventy-eight years old and not in the best of health herself. She was unable to fly down to see him. David did not want Gail to come either. He wanted her to be close to their mother in case Dot needed her.

After talking to Dot in the afternoon, Nancy would go back to the hospital. In the evening when she went back home, she called Dot and Gail with new updates on his condition. After talking to them, she called her daughter, Susie.

Usually, by the time she got home, Jackie and John would be home from work. Jackie was David's daughter and John was Nancy's son. The three of them would have something to eat while she gave them the update on David's condition. After eating, she would go back to the hospital.

The next four days went by slowly for them. By the fourth day, his pain was under control and the antibiotics were clearing up the infection. They talked about things they still wanted to do together and watched a couple television shows. Their favorites were *Survivor* and *American Idol*. They would watch both shows in his hospital room. From the very beginning, they both were crazy about Clay Aiken, one of the idols on *American Idol*. They thought he had an awesome voice. His transformation from a geek to an idol amazed them. They wanted him to win and become the next *American Idol*. After the show went off, Nancy would kiss him goodnight. Then go home to call and vote for Clay as many times as possible. After voting, she would call Dot and Gail.

On the night of April 3rd, David was stable enough for the surgery. Dr. Emanuel left orders for him to drink a gallon of nasty tasting liquid to clean out his system. He had two swallows left when he started vomiting. He could not force himself to drink anymore of it. His nurse told him that he drank enough. He was so relieved. Just thinking about drinking anymore of it made him gag. When his stomach finally settled down, he was able to get some sleep. He did not sleep very well. He kept dreaming about the surgery he was having the next day. He got more nervous as the minutes ticked away.

About nine o'clock the morning of the surgery, he felt like something was wrong. He had a strong feeling something was going to happen to him. Before he could get too upset about it, Nancy and Jackie walked into his room. He told them he felt something strange about having the surgery. They blamed it on the drugs he was taking.

They were supposed to start his surgery at eleven o'clock that morning, but an emergency came into the hospital delaying his until later that afternoon. He told Nancy and Jackie to get some breakfast. He wanted to take a nap and would see them before the surgery.

Something happened causing the emergency surgery to end quicker than the doctor had expected. Shortly before noon, the operating staff came in to prep him for his operation. When they were finishing, they put him on a gurney to take him to the operating room. He was concerned because he did not get to see Nancy and Jackie before he was wheeled into surgery.

Before they gave him the anesthesia, one of the operating nurses noticed his big toe was bleeding and infected. Jerry, the nurse said, "You should have someone look at that toe. It is infected. When the surgery is done, get a podiatrist to remove the nail."

David laughed because every doctor or nurse that had any contact with him mentioned his toe. But so far, not one of them had done anything on his behalf to have it treated. Just then, the anesthesiologist placed the masks over his face and he went to sleep.

Chapter 2

“He is flat line! Call a code! We need a cardiologist in here stat!” the doctor yelled.

“Code blue in O.R. 4!” blared throughout the hospital.

The doctor started CPR and administered meds. The medical orders were flying as fast as the surgeon worked on reviving David. He just made the initial wound in David’s abdomen when his heart stopped. Emergency medical staff poured into the operating room taking charge of their specialties. The clock ticked past thirty seconds with no response.

While the doctors worked on him trying to save his life, he went on a fantastic journey of his own.

“I was whisked away to a very comfortable place. I could see a beautiful, bright light in the distance. It had the brightest whites, palest yellows, lightest blues and all the other colors of the rainbow. Every color was vivid in detail. All of my pain was gone. As I walked toward the light, I saw many other spirits and souls walking toward it, too. I seemed to be surrounded by them. We were being bathed in a warm mist that was not only cleansing, but soothing as well. The spirits that were the greatest distance from the light were bright in the front of their bodies and dark in back. As they approached the light, it started to show through them like an unbelievably, colorful hologram. They seemed to be as bewildered as me. However, I felt the best I had ever felt in my life. I felt an incredible feeling of peace and unconditional love. I understand everything that happened in my life now. It finally makes sense.

“I ran toward the light. I could see someone coming toward me!” The person said, ‘Go back! It was my time! Not your time, David! Go back!’ It was my bother, Billy, who passed away November 17, 1998. The feeling of ecstasy taking over me was more intense than I could describe. Billy repeated, ‘It was my time. It is not your time! Go back!’”

“I felt myself being pulled away from the light. Extreme pain in my abdomen started as soon as the bright light disappeared. I looked up and the operating team was surrounding me. The room was filled with faces. I do not know if they were all living people or not, but they were around the operating table.”

As he returned from the other side, he heard one of the nurses say she felt something was different about him. She could not put her finger on it, but she was positive it was not medical. His vital signs were back within normal range.

She thought, *Maybe it was something spiritual and beautiful. He looked like he was at peace when we were reviving him.*

It took thirty-eight seconds to revive him!

“David, this is Dr Emanuel. Do you know what happened to you?” he asked.

“Yes, I died and my brother sent me back. The pain is really bad, Doc. Please give me something for the pain,” David cried out.

The entire staff, including his doctor, were shocked he knew he stopped breathing. They were even more shocked by who told him. The only one not shocked by his statement was the nurse who thought she noticed something different about him. She was smiling.

Dr. Emanuel continued, “We were unable to complete the operation. The operating team agreed your heart must be thoroughly checked out before trying the surgery again. I will give you something for the pain now and you can go back to sleep.”

Dr. Emanuel had to tell David’s wife and daughter the news. He never came so losing a patient on the operating table. In fact, what he went through with David was the closest he ever came to losing anyone in surgery. It was a new experience for him, telling a patient’s loved ones the problem he had that day in the operating room.

When Nancy and Jackie got back from breakfast, they were shocked to find David was taken to the operating room. They were under the impression the surgery was moved to later in the afternoon. The floor nurse told them the doctor finished with the other patient. They waited in his room until he was brought back. At ten minutes after one, Dr. Emanuel came in the room. They stood when the doctor entered.

He started by saying, "The operation did not go as planned. David's heart stopped on the table."

The two women flew in each other's arm and started crying. By their reaction, the doctor realized how the news sounded and quickly said, "He is alive! He is holding his own now." He began to smile when Nancy and Jackie starting smiling through their tears.

He continued, "We were unable to complete the surgery. When his heart stopped, we concentrated on reviving him. We revived him in thirty-eight seconds, which is a good thing. It was not enough time to cause any brain damage. We are going to keep him in recovery until the anesthesia wears off," he told the two scared women. "Dr. Joseph Brown, the cardiologist is in with him now. I will report back to you when he is taken to recovery."

Nancy asked, "Is there any medication you can give him to counteract the anesthesia?"

Dr. Emanuel answered, "Yes, there is but it could cause a shock to his system. With the problem we just had with his heart, we do not want to do anything more until he comes around by himself."

Then Jackie asked, "What is going to happen when he does wake up?"

The doctor replied, "He will be taken to recovery for an hour or two. He will be taken to the Intensive Care Unit or ICU for the night, maybe longer.

"The floor nurse will help you pack his belongings and show you to the ICU waiting room. Do either of you have any more questions?" he asked.

They shook the heads and the doctor left to check on David.

The women hugged each other tightly and cried. When they finally stopped, they packed up what few belongings he had in the room and asked the nurse how to get to the IUC waiting room.

When they got settled there, they called the family.

All the calls started the same way, "David is doing all right now. But his heart stopped on the table and they were able to revive him quickly." Everyone was in shock at first because it was supposed to be a simple operation.

Nancy called Gail first. After she told her, she asked how she should tell Dot that her son almost died. Gail told her to tell her the same way she was told and not to leave anything out. Somehow, Dot could always tell when someone was lying to her. She finished talking to Gail and called her mother-in-law. She did as Gail suggested. She told her everything they were told by the doctors. Dot took it as well as any mother could news that her only living son almost died. She told Nancy she wanted to be kept informed with any news, good or bad. Nancy promised she would tell her anything new. They said they loved one another and hung up with Nancy promising to call later that evening.

David's two stepchildren had to be told. Nancy called John at work. He was extremely shy and did not like to talk about illnesses of any kind. After his mother told him the news, he asked if David would be all right. She said he would be. That was good enough for John. He had heard enough of the details. It is not that he did not care about David. That fact was, he loved him very much. He just had a very hard time expressing himself. She told him she did not know when she and Jackie would be home, but not to worry.

Last but not least, she had to tell Susie and Nolo. He was Susie's life long friend and roommate. Susie was the hardest one for Nancy to tell. She was born with cerebral palsy. She was dependent on her mom to help her with everything when she was younger. That created a

very strong bond between them. Nolo was also born with it. He handicap was not quite as severe as Susie's.

Nancy was exhausted after the trauma and telling the story over and over. She decided to tell Susie in the morning when she could be with her. She wanted to help her deal with the news like she helped her so many times before in her life. She called them, but they were not home. She left a message telling her that David was fine. She would stop by their house in the morning to tell them the details of the surgery.

It was after seven o'clock in the evening before all the telephone calls were made. Finally, at five minutes to eight, Nancy and Jackie were told they could see David in ICU. He was awake before they went in to see him.

When he woke up, he saw three figures standing beside his bed. He did not know who they were. He was still very groggy from the drugs, but felt comforted knowing they were there. Two more people walked in the room. It was Nancy and Jackie.

"I love you!" they said to the most important man in their lives.

He said, "Billy sent me back!"

By the look of amazement on their faces, he could see the doctor did not tell them about Billy sending him back. He tried to continue to explain what happened, but was too tired. Nancy told him that they were glad Billy did send him back. He could tell them the whole story when he was feeling better.

He asked if they knew the other three people standing beside them. They looked at each other and around the room.

Jackie said, "What other three people?"

He was upset because they could not see the people he was seeing and said sharply, "Right beside you. Have you both gone blind?"

They tried to tell him it must be the drugs making him see things. He was too tired to argue with them, but knew there were three other people in his room. He let it drop, he was too tired.

He said, "I have to go back to sleep now. I am so tired. I love you both." He closed his eyes and was asleep again. They watched him sleep for a few minutes then left. In ICU, visitors could only visit for five minutes every hour. They both decided to go home for the night and try to get some sleep. The next day was going to be another very long day for them.

The next morning Nancy went over to Susie's house to tell her the problem during David's surgery. After Nancy told her, she said she knew something was wrong. She almost called Nancy, but was afraid she would wake her. Nancy told her and Nolo to get dress and meet her at the hospital as soon as they could make it to see David.

Nancy, John and Jackie met Susie and Nolo later that morning in the ICU waiting room. Only two visitors were allowed in the room at a time, so Nancy and John went in first. This was a big step for John to even go to the hospital. He is afraid of them, but needed to see his step-dad. They stayed long enough for John to tell David he loved him and was praying for him. After they left, Jackie went in with Nolo. He was in Susie's wheelchair because his cerebral palsy caused his arms and legs to move involuntarily. He was afraid he would bump something and hurt David. When they came out, Nancy wheeled Susie into the room in her wheelchair. Susie started crying when she saw him. She was crying because he looked sick. They were also tears of joy because she was happy he was still alive. With each set of visitors, all David could do was tell them he loved them and not to worry. He would make it because Billy said he would.

That evening, David was well enough to be moved to a regular room on the cardiac floor. When the orderly wheeled him into the room, he was terrified. He saw dark shadows in the corners of the room. He began mumbling something, but the orderly could not understand him. Once he was moved from the gurney to the hospital bed, a nurse gave him some morphine. They

thought he was in pain. They were right, but it was more than that. He was scared of the dark shadows in his room.

Nancy went back that evening. As she walked in, the morphine was working and he began to calm down. He told her something was wrong but he did not know what.

“I need to get out of here!” he cried.

Nancy said in a worried voice, “We have to find out why your heart stopped. The cardiologist has scheduled you for a cardiac catheterization to check your heart. Please stay long enough to get the test done. I am very worried about you, David. It is scheduled for tomorrow.”

Still frightened, David said he would stay long enough to get the test done. After that, he wanted to go home. To settle him down, she said they would talk about it after they got the test results. It made him feel better and he calmed down enough to go back to sleep.

The next day, a technician came in and checked his wristband to make sure he was the correct patient. An orderly wheeled him to the place where the heart catheterization was being done. The technician asked Nancy to wait in the waiting room. The doctor would be out to tell her the results of the test when it was completed. The test was done in a temporary trailer in the parking lot due to reconstruction of the hospital.

David told the orderly and technician that all the angels were waiting outside the hospital and the sky was filled with them. He heard the most beautiful music as they sang. At last, the fear, pain and worry were gone. He smiled and relaxed for the first time in days. The orderly and technician looked at each other and smiled thinking it was the drugs talking.

None of the children could be with Nancy the day of the procedure. They all had to go to work. They wanted to make sure they would be able to get time off if things got worse for David.

Nancy called her best friend, Milli to see if she would be able to keep her company while David was having the test. Milli said she would be right there. In less than a half hour, Milli was in the hospital waiting room looking for Nancy.

They waited for about an hour, talking and drinking coffee. Nancy saw Dr. Brown as he came into the waiting room. They stood up to greet him. He told them David was doing well after the procedure, but was groggy from the medication he was given before the test. He had pictures of David’s heart. Everything looked good. He pointed at the pictures as he was talking. When he got to the picture that showed the arteries to the heart, he explained there was a slight build up of plaque, but not enough that would cause the heart to stop during the surgery. Nancy thanked him for the good news. He gave her the pictures. She was to give them to Dr. Anderson, their primary care doctor, for his records. He said goodbye and left the waiting room. Nancy started crying from relief and Milli hugged her. She was happy the results were good for David and Nancy.

They met up with David in his room. The nurse was checking on him. He would sleep for the rest of the day and probably half the night, too. She recommended they go home and get some much needed rest.

Nancy looked at Milli and said, “That sounds good to me. I am pretty tired. Can you come to the house for dinner?”

Milli said she would stay as long as Nancy needed her. They left the hospital, stopped at a fast food restaurant for some fish and chips then went home. After eating, they talked for a while. Nancy was so tired she fell asleep on the couch. Milli covered her with a blanket then wrote a note saying she went home. She went out the front door, locking it behind her.

Nancy slept until six o’clock the next morning. She took a shower and got dressed. She fed Lucky and let her outside for a few minutes. Then she left for the hospital again.

When she arrived, she found David huddled up in a ball weeping. He was terrified. The room was freezing. During the night, he had a bad case of the dry heaves and it caused his groin

and right thigh to become numb and bruised from adhesions. The adhesions were from the catheter leads that were used during the cardiac catheterization.

He had a wound in his abdomen, numb and bruised leg and groin and still needed the sigmoid colectomy. He was frustrated, to say the least.

He told Nancy he had to go home before they killed him. There was only negative energy in the hospital. The doctor told him he needed an Electrophysiology Study or EP Study, but David refused. He told the doctor that he would not have any more procedures or tests done to him. He totally withdrew and would not let anyone touch him.

Nancy was extremely worried about him. She left under the pretense of getting a cup of coffee to call Dr. Anderson. She told him how badly David was doing and thought that a visit from him would help. He did not usually check on patients in the hospital because the attending physician took over the patient's care while they were in the hospital. Hearing the concern and fear in Nancy's voice, he said he would go that night after office hours.

Nancy was not there when Dr. Anderson arrived. He walked in the room to find David frightened and paranoid someone was trying to kill him.

Dr. Anderson said, "Let me see what I can do for you."

After he left the room, Dr. Anderson talked to the attending doctor and surgeon. He told them he knew David as a patient. His state of mind was not doing him any good. He asked them if it would hurt David to recuperate at home. He was refusing to let anyone help him in the hospital anyway. They discussed it and decided David would do better at home. He could be released as soon as it was safe.

Dr. Anderson went back into David's room a short while later and told him that he would not have to do any more tests for the time being. He would be released as soon as it was safe for him. It would probably be a couple of days. David was happy with the news, but still frightened. He only took his blood pressure medication. He refused the pain medication. He knew the sooner he was off of it, the sooner he could go home.

David was feeling better that night when his wife came to visit.

"Did I miss *American Idol*?" David asked.

"It will be on in a few minutes. Do you feel like you can watch it?" Nancy asked.

"Yes, I have to know if Clay is going to make this round. He got a second chance when America voted him back. Kind of like how I got a second chance from Billy when he sent me back to you and the kids," David said.

They watched the program, commenting on all of the contestants. There was still no question in their minds. Clay was the best of the group.

Finally, after David had been off the pain medication for two days, his doctors allowed him to go home. When he was being wheeled out of the hospital, he had the biggest smile on his face Nancy ever saw.

Chapter 3

David was very weak when they arrived home. Nancy had everything set up downstairs so he would not have to climb the stairs. A wound care nurse came twice a day to change his abdominal bandages. He was doing well until about a week after he went home. His temperature was up to 103.2 degrees. Nancy called Dr. Emanuel's office. He told her to take David to his office. He wanted to evaluate his condition.

Nancy helped him get dressed and assisted him into the car. When they arrived at the office, they were instructed by the receptionist to go into the examining room. A few minutes later, the doctor came in the room. He took the bandage off David's abdomen. The wound was infected. He removed the staples holding the wound closed. He used his gloved hand to open it. Thick, whitish-yellow pus mixed with blood came oozing out. The doctor drained it and cleaned it with sterile water. He told them the wound would have to remain open because of the infection.

Nancy asked, "Will it be safe to leave it open? It will not get infected again?"

Dr. Emanuel replied, "After an infection like this, it is safer to allow the wound to close on its own. If it remains closed, the infection will get worse. We do not want to do this again."

Leaving the wound open meant the bandages would have to be done in two layers. It was called the wet-to-dry procedure. The first layer was wet gauze sponges to keep the wound moist. The second was dry sponges to absorb the drainage. Dr. Emanuel said he would call the home care nurse to tell her about the infection. He gave her the order over the phone to use the wet-to-dry procedure.

Becky Jackson, the home care nurse, came to the house every morning to change the bandages. Nancy watched and sometimes helped. By the middle of the second week, Nancy was changing them by herself. She asked Becky if it were possible for her to cut back on her visits because she could change the bandages herself. They would have to get it approved by Dr. Emanuel, but it was all right with her. The next day the doctor gave his approval for Nancy to change the bandages. They decided Becky would visit every Tuesday and Friday mornings. She made sure Nancy had her home and cell phone numbers before leaving and made promise to call if she had any questions at all, no matter how silly or insignificant they sounded. Nancy gave her word she would call.

The days went by slowly. It seemed like it was taking forever for the wound to heal. The wound got infected causing deep holes to form. The holes were usually a little smaller than a dime in width, but went down as deep as five centimeters. Each hole was packed with a medicated packing strip by using a cotton swab to push it into the hole. This was the hardest part for Nancy. Sticking something that deep into her husband's stomach was not easy. After the first few times, she got used to it though. She knew he needed it done to recover and was willing to do anything to make that happen as quickly as possible.

About the same time, David started noticing flashes of spirits dancing around the living room. They were in his peripheral vision, just flashes of light and shadows. He saw them quite often during the day. He was not quite sure what to think of them, so he did not tell anyone about it.

One day, Becky could not make it to the house. She sent another nurse to check David's wound. Her name was Sally Garfield. She asked David what had happened to him so far since the surgery. He told her about his heart stopping on the table and going to ICU. He told her his fingernails had ripples in them. They were just little raised lines that went laterally across the nails. Each nail had four or five ripples on them.

She told David her son had a near death experience six months ago. He accidentally overdosed and she had to revive him. About three weeks after, they noticed that he had ripples on his fingernails.

David said, "Like these?"

"Yes, that is exactly what they looked like. Are you seeing anything strange?" she asked.

"Yes, I am seeing things that look sort of like shadows, spirits or entities, whatever you want to call them," David replied.

Sally told him the visions of spirits might start happening more often. She advised David, "If a spirit confronts you, tell it to go toward the light. That is what my son did when they frightened or annoyed him. They did as he asked. I believe when you are on the other side, the hand of God marks you. You can see the marks on your fingernails."

After talking to Sally, David went on the Internet and researched near death experiences and psychics. He went on different types of sites and in chat rooms to verify what Sally told him. He discovered she not only told him the truth, but there was more to it than even she knew.

Some people thought the ripples were caused by a calcium deficiency or lack of some other vitamin or mineral in your system. Some people who had a near death experience have a better understanding and know the truth about the ripples.

Many do not associate the ripples with their near death experience because they can appear a month or two after the experience. They also grow out completely on some people after an undetermined amount of time. Some have them for a lifetime, but most of them have not had a near death experience. However, they are heavily connected to the religious or paranormal worlds. They may not understand why they have the ripples, but are amazed when they are told people who had a near death experience also have them.

After researching, he understood more about the ripples in his fingernails. Talking in the chat rooms and receiving hundreds of e-mails from people about their experiences, helped him feel better about seeing spirits. He realized he was not crazy, but these things were happening to him.

He had been home a month, when Nancy scheduled an appointment for the EP study, another heart test. It was at the hospital. He was not admitted. It was done as an outpatient. He was not mentally ready to go back in the hospital.

The test showed there was no problem with his heart. Finding nothing wrong, the doctor thought that maybe he had a sensitive vagus nerve. It is the longest of the cranial nerve. It goes from the brain stem through organs in the neck, thorax and abdomen. After talking to David's sister, Gail, they found out she had a sensitive vagus nerve, too. The doctor told him they would do the sigmoid colectomy as soon as the infection cleared up.

As the weeks went by, the spirits became distinguishable to David. Sometimes Lucky would bark at an empty couch or chair. She even barked at thin air when she saw a spirits floating around the room. Nancy finally got use to her barking at them, the lights going on and off, the television shutting off by itself, and few sounds of unknown origin. When the spirits appeared, David would tell them to go to the light like Sally advised him. He did not tell anyone, except Nancy, of the experiences. They were afraid people would think they were crazy.

The spirits had many different appearances. There were hologram types he could describe them in detail, but was still able to see through them. Some were like heat waves. They were completely clear, but the air was moving rapidly around them taking on humanlike shapes. Others were silhouettes rather than a distinguishable form.

They wanted David to do things. He could not hear them or understand what they wanted him to do, so he told them to go to the light. When they were told to go, they listened to him, like Sally said they listened to her son, because he never saw that particular spirit again.

The most detail David ever got from a spirit was from one that looked like a plastic doll. He was vivid in natural human colors. His name was Walter and used to live in Salt Lake City, Utah. He was trying to show David something, but he could not make out what Walter meant. When David told him to go to the light, Walter got a sad look on his face, but turned and walked toward the light as he was told.

David's wound was healed after three months. The time was fast approaching to try the surgery again. David and Nancy were not looking forward to it. Dr. Emanuel did not look too happy about it either.

For the second surgery, he had to drink the salt base solution after being on a liquid diet for three days. Even though he only had to drink eight ounces in the morning and eight ounces at four o'clock in the afternoon, it still upset his stomach and tasted terrible. He had to take four antibiotic pills the size of horse pills at six and eleven o'clock the night before surgery.

The salt solution made him sick. He vomited after drinking the last drink and was weak. He took the four antibiotic pills at six o'clock that evening. By eight o'clock, he was very sick. He vomited everything he had taken then got the dry heaves. His temperature rose to 102.4 degrees. Nancy monitored his blood pressure and took his temperature every twenty minutes for the next hour.

By nine o'clock, he was pale and incoherent. Nancy called 911. David passed out. She was talking to the emergency person on the phone, trying to get the dog in the back yard and get the front door opened for the medics.

"John, come in here. I need your help!" she screamed.

John came running out of his room.

"An ambulance is on the way for David. Please put the dog outside then open the front door," Nancy said as calmly as possible. She did not want to frighten John.

He followed her orders without hesitation then asked what happened to David. She explained as quickly as she could while still waiting for the ambulance to get there. The 911 person was still on the line and would end the call when he heard the sirens.

The sirens could be heard throughout the neighborhood as the emergency vehicles approached. A fire truck arrived first. The firemen ran into the house. A couple of minutes later, the ambulance arrived. They rushed in the house, too and went over to David. One of them asked Nancy what was going on with him.

"He is due to have his second colon surgery for diverticulitis in the morning. During the first operation, about three months ago, his heart stopped on the table. He had tests on his heart. The results were negative. He had a slight sign of plaque build-up along the arteries. The cardiologist is sure that did not cause his heart to stop.

"He is allergic to vicodin. He is a hard stick if you need to start an IV line, so it may take some effort to get a line going," Nancy said.

"He sure is a lucky man to have a nurse for a wife," said the medic.

"I am not a nurse. I have just learned a lot in the last three months taking care of him," Nancy stated.

He asked her for any medications David was taking daily. She took the list out of her wallet and gave it to him. He copied them on his form and returned it to her. She showed him the bottles of antibiotics and the salt solution he had taken earlier and he added them to the list.

One of the medics working on him rubbed hard on David's chest to get a response from him. David mumbled a few incoherent words.

"All right, we got a response. Let us get that line going." The first stick was a miss. The second was also a miss. "His vein keeps moving," exclaimed the medic. A second medic tried and got it on his first try.

After David's first surgery, he lost some weight, but still weighed two hundred and eighty pounds. Therefore, he stood up as they held him. They helped him get on the stretcher. They put him in the ambulance and took off for the hospital.

Nancy took the back roads and was waiting for them when they arrived at the emergency entrance. He was taken to the emergency room. The medics gave his vital signs and history to the admitting nurse. Again Nancy stayed behind to fill out the endless paperwork.

David was quickly moved to one of the trauma rooms. They were concerned about his heart again even though all the tests were normal. The emergency room doctor, Dr. Lee Chen examined him and did not find anything life threatening. He called Dr. Emanuel to ask if he wanted to admit David. Dr. Emanuel told him to admit David. He had Dr. Chen give David nausea and pain meds to keep him comfortable for the rest of the night. He said he would be in to check on David about seven o'clock. After David was given the medications, an orderly took him upstairs to a room.

Nancy called the children early in the morning to tell them David was back in the hospital. Jackie planned to be at the hospital for the surgery. When she got to the hospital, she went to up his room. The three of them waited for Dr. Emanuel to get there. He arrived at precisely seven o'clock.

"Good morning. I understand you had a rough night. We should be able to eliminate those problems this time. The heart tests were negative so that was not the cause of the problem. It was probably because the vagus nerve is sensitive, like your sister. We should be able to complete the sigmoid colectomy today. I will have a cardiologist in the operating room with me, just in case. However, I really think things will go fine. After the last time, I am taking all the precautions I possibly can. How do you feel? Are you ready to do this?" he asked.

"Let's get it done, Doc" he replied. He was in a good frame of mind. He was feeling better about his second surgery even though he felt sick. He did not have the strange feeling he had the first time.

"All right, a member of my operating team will be here in a few minutes to take you downstairs. The operation should take about three hours. You will be in recovery for two additional hours. I will meet your wife and daughter in the waiting room after the surgery. Is that all right with you?" the doctor said.

"It is fine with me, Dr. Emanuel. I think you should ask them because I will be out of it," David laughed. He had been sedated and was feeling lightheaded.

Before the doctor could ask them, Nancy said, "We will be in the waiting room at the main entrance waiting for the good news." She wanted to make sure the doctor knew that it was the only acceptable news.

Shortly after he left, a technician took David to the operating room.

"I love you," Nancy and Jackie said in unison.

"Do not worry, I feel good about this one," he said. It helped a little, but it was very difficult to erase the memory of the last operation from their minds.

He was wheeled away on a gurney. They followed for as long as they were allowed. Their eyes welled up with tears as he was wheeled through the double doors to the operating area. They held it together until he got inside then they let the tears flow freely.

There were a number of new faces in the operating room and additional equipment. Dr. Emanuel was being more cautious this time. He was doing everything possible to ensure David's heart did not stop again.

David noticed a couple of people without masks in the background. They made him feel safe.

David said, "Do you want me to jump on the operating table?"

Looking at his size, the nurse said, "Yes, but do not jump and please let us help you." They all knew the story about his heart stopping and wanted him to feel as safe and comfortable as possible.

As soon he was situated on the operating table, the anesthesiologist told him to start counting backwards from one hundred. David got to ninety-nine and was out like a light.

Dr. Emanuel said, "Please be careful and precise. This one must go smoothly. There are a couple of women waiting for him. They have informed me they will not accept bad news today."

Everyone laughed. The mood in the room was relaxed. The operation went perfectly. When David was stable, they moved him to the recovery room.

Dr. Emanuel entered the waiting area with a big smile and said, "The operation was a great success. We removed the bad portion of the colon. He is in recovery and starting to come out of the anesthesia." He saw their relieved looks, but knew they needed to see him as soon as possible. "The recovery room nurse gave me permission to let you go see him. I think you need to this time," the surgeon said.

They smiled and thanked him. They hugged each other and followed the doctor.

He was awake when they walked into the room. A sigh of relief was heard in the room. Nancy had a true smile and her eyes were welded up as tears of joy ran down her cheeks.

"I love you, David. Everything went great the doctor said. Jackie and I will be waiting for you in your room. You rest now and we will talk soon."

Jackie said, "I love you, Dad."

David said in a low, raspy voice, "I love you both, too." Then went back to sleep.

His recovery was normal for the next two days. He had a central line in his neck, an IV in his arm and an NG tube in his nose. The NG tube is a nasogastric tube. It goes in the nose, down the throat and into the stomach. It is used to remove poison from the stomach. Feeling as badly as he did, he asked to see the other three children which including Nolo, of course.

Nancy called them and asked them to get to the hospital be two o'clock that afternoon. He was all right, but wanted to see them.

When they arrived, Susie and Nolo went in to see him first. Two nurses pushed them into the room in wheelchairs. Nolo borrowed one from the hospital for the visit. Even though Nancy told them about the tubes and wires David had, they were still stunned to see him at first. They hid their emotion very well. Nancy could hardly see the shock on their faces.

"Hi, I love you, David," Susie spoke out with a cheerful voice.

"Hi kids. Glad you could get here. I needed to see you guys. Everything went great and I am feeling fine. It is a lot better this time. I will get rid of this tube in my nose in a couple of days. It is preventing me from getting sick to my stomach," David explained.

They talked for a few minutes then left so John could go in to see him.

He went into the room slowly. He was scared when he saw David with all of the equipment around him and tubes going every which way. Nancy told him what to expect, but it is hard to prepare someone for something like that.

"Hi, John, I am all right. Some of this stuff will be gone in a couple of days. Thanks for coming. I know how much you hate hospitals. You do not have to stay any longer than you want. I just needed to see you and your sisters," David said.

John asked, "When do you think you will be able to come home?"

"It will be at least a week," David replied.

They talked for a few minutes then David let John off the hook. "Thanks for coming, John. I am starting to get a little tired. I will see you when I get home. I love you," David said.

John said, "I love you, too," and left much quicker than he walked in the room. David smiled as he watched him rushing out.

Jackie went in for a few minutes then the four of them left the hospital together.

Nancy stayed until he fell asleep, which was only another half hour. Then she went home, too.

On the third day after the operation, David started getting a fever. The doctor increased the antibiotics to reduce the infection. However, it did not help. He got worse.

When Nancy arrived that evening, he was sweating from the fever. He gown was soaking wet. Barely able to talk, he said, "I am not doing very well tonight. I just need to sleep, all right?"

“Do not worry about me, David. You just go to sleep. I love you and I will see you tomorrow,” Nancy said, very concerned. She kissed him on the cheek and left the room. Tears flowed as soon as she was out. She knew something was wrong. She stopped by the nurses’ station to ask them to change his gown. They took care of it immediately.

As the night progressed, David got worse. The night shift arrived about six o’clock that evening. When his nurse, Debbie, took his temperature, it had climbed to 105.2 degrees and his blood pressure was 210 over 120. She called the doctor immediately. He told her to increase the antibiotics and pain medication and prescribed an additional blood pressure medication.

He was on a regular floor. They were not equipped to take care of a patient as sick as him. The nurse tried to transfer him to ICU, but no beds were available.

And so the night from hell began for David and Debbie!

Chapter 4

Debbie begged Amy, the head night nurse for help. It was the peak of the allergy season in Austin and many of the staff called in sick. All the floors were short-handed for the night. Amy told Debbie she would be in to help as soon as she made rounds.

Preparing for a rough night, Debbie read over the charts and got one of the swing shift nurses to prepare the night meds. She called the equipment room to get a cooling blanket delivered for David. She made a quick round of her other patients and got back into David's room as quickly as possible. By the time she got back, he was soaking wet again.

David was almost to the point of unconsciousness. She took his temperature. It was still 105.2 degrees. His blood pressure was extremely high, too. She got him out in a dry gown and changed the sheets on his bed. She wiped him down with alcohol to bring his temperature down. She took his temperature again. It was down to 104.3 degrees. The alcohol rub helped some, but she needed to do more. It was still much too high.

When Debbie got back to the nurses station, the cooling blanket was there. One of the other nurses was just about to page her when she walked up and saw it. She immediately took it to David's room and plugged it in. It did not work. While removing the cooling blanket, she bumped the urine bag. It spilled all over the floor.

"What else can go wrong tonight?" she said out of frustration.

She could not worry about the spill at the moment. She had to get his temperature down. She took it again. It was up to 106.1 degrees. She rushed out to get a bucket of ice. She shoveled the ice with her hands onto his body. She spread it evenly over him. It was melting as fast as she could spread it. She rushed out to get another bucket and some ice packs. When she returned, it had completely melted and dripped onto the floor.

David was awake. "Debbie, I feel really hot and I can hardly move. What is wrong with me? Who are all these people in the room?" he asked.

Puzzled by his statement, Debbie replied, "You have a high fever and I am covering you in ice packs to reduce it. I need to put more ice on you. It will be cold, but I need to get your temperature down as quickly as possible."

She continued to put the ice over him. She took his temperature again. It went down to 104.4 degrees. The room was getting very cold.

While he had the ice and ice packs on him, she went to check on her other patients. Amy had a minute she could spare because none of her patients were as sick as David. She used it to check on David. She knew he was alone because she saw Debbie in with another patient. As sick as David was, she did not want him to be alone for any length of time.

When she walked in, the room was freezing. It was only 45 degrees, but the thermostat was set on 70 degrees.

He was moaning and groaning or so Amy thought. She was hearing noises made by the spirits. He was terrified because the dark spirits were all around him. He was praying, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference." He kept saying it over and over again. It was the only prayer he could think of in his condition.

He was lying there soaking wet, completely nude with just a sheet to cover him. He kicked until it fell on the floor because he was too hot with it on him.

The floor was soaking wet and very slippery. There were dirty sheets, towels and gowns on the floor because the hamper had fallen over. His room looked like a cyclone hit it.

Amy got some clean towels, sheets, blankets and hospital gowns. She wiped him down and put a sheet on him so she could open the door to let some heat in from the hall.

When Debbie walked in, Amy said firmly, “We need to talk after we get Mr. Brundage cleaned up.”

They worked together to wash the sweat off him. As they worked, Debbie told Amy everything she had done for David since her shift began.

They looked haggard as they lifted the two hundred and eighty pound man several times trying to get him clean. They were splashing as they moved because of the melted ice and spilled urine.

After he was settled, the two nurses stepped outside his room to talk.

Amy started by saying, “It looks like he is going to have a hard night. Stay with him until he is stable. I will take care of your other patients until I can get more help from one of the other floors.”

“Thank you, Amy. Would you please call housekeeping to get the floor wiped up? I need to take his vitals again and administer his meds. I have to keep a close eye on his blood pressure. If it goes any higher, I am afraid he will stoke out.”

Amy replied, “I will call them right away. You better get back in there with him. I do not want you to leave him for anything. If you need something, use the call button and I will have someone get what you need.”

Debbie went back into his room and took his vital signs. His temperature was 103.4 degrees and his blood pressure was 220 over 126. She had Amy contact the doctor to get an increase on his blood pressure medication. The doctor prescribed a catepris patch to be added to his other medications.

When she finished talking to Amy through the intercom, she turned back to David. He looked like he was not breathing.

He took another trip to the other side. He was out of his body looking down on himself. He noticed a person sitting beside him, also looking down at his body.

“Who are you?” asked David.

“I am your spirit guide, Brownie. You have seen me many times before when you were very young and on your last visit to this side,” replied Brownie.

“I thought you were an angel,” David said.

“One of your angels is over there. They only come when you really need them. It is time for you to go back now before Debbie gets upset,” Brownie said with a little giggle.

Before David get a glimpse of his angel, he slid back into his body just as Debbie took his blood pressure. It was down to 149 over 93. The catepris patch worked. She took his temperature. It was better at 102.3 degrees, but it had to come down even more before Debbie would feel comfortable.

She did not realize that he had been back to the other side. Amy came in and told her to check his heart monitor. The screen out at the desk showed that it had stopped for 20 seconds. She took his vital signs and he was all right. She looked at the heart monitor and assumed it was a faulty battery. She called for Amy to bring her another one so she could change it.

The ice packs were working to keep his temperature down.

Housekeeping finally came to clean the floor and remove the dirty laundry. There was only two hours left of Debbie’s twelve hour shift. David was getting better.

She felt comfortable leaving him alone while she did the paper work for the night and got the morning meds ready. She still checked on him every five minutes. When she finished, she gave him his medication.

She walked in his room and it smelled like death. It looked like he was not breathing again, but she saw his stomach move as he took a breath. She did not know it, but it did stop for a few seconds. He went to the other side again, but Brownie sent him right back.

Unfortunately, just before he stopped breathing, he had his first bowel movement since the operation. When he woke up, he said, “I am sorry, I did not even know I did it.”

“Do not worry about it, Mr. Brundage. It is a good sign. You are getting better,” Debbie consoled him as she cleaned him up. “We have plenty of clean gowns and sheets. The first bowel movement after a surgery like yours is always difficult,” she told him.

David was extremely emotional and he said, “Thank you, Debbie. You saved my life several times last night. I know I would have been dead if you did not stay with me and keep me cooled down. There were times when I could not even move a muscle, but I heard you tell Amy my temperature was 106 degrees. The things you did to get my temperature down took a lot of work. I watched you worked on me. I was out of my body while I watched. I am sure you saved my life and I will never forget you for that. Thank you does not seem like enough, but I cannot think of any other way to tell you how much I appreciate you for saving me.”

Shocked by the comment that watched her from out of his body, Debbie could only managed to say, “You are welcome, Mr. Brundage. I will never forget you either. Times like last night are the reasons I became a nurse.”

Her scrubs were still damp and stained. Her hair was a mess and her make-up was a disaster. She looked like she had gone through hell. But she was still smiling.

David was feeling better, but extremely weak and tired. It had been a rough night for both of them.

Debbie gave him another bath and put clean sheets and blankets on the bed. Before housekeeping woman left, she completely sanitized and deodorized the room. When the day shift came into the room, it looked like the night from Hell never happened.

Chapter 5

After the night from hell, the day was routine. Nancy arrived about nine o'clock to visit David and help change his bandages. He told her how bad the night was for him and Debbie. As he told her the details of the night, he did not realize how devastating news like that would be for her. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. She controlled her sobs, but could not hide the tears. He was on heavy pain medication and had no idea the impact of his words had on her. He continued telling her the torrid details. He ended by telling her how Debbie saved his life. He told her every detail he could remember of what Debbie did for him though the night.

After he had finished talking, she told him she wanted to talk to the nurses. She went to the nurses' station to ask if what he said was true.

Kathy, the head nurse, picked up his chart and read the information. She said, "Yes, Mr. Brundage did have a rough night. His chart shows that his heart monitor was not working properly and Debbie had to change the battery. His temperature and blood pressure were high for most of the night. They are not back to normal, but they are much better than they were last night. The doctor ordered a catepris patch to add to his other blood pressure meds. So far it has worked. Did that help answer your questions?"

"Yes, it did, thank you. He said his heart stopped for a few seconds. Is that true?" Nancy asked.

"The monitor showed his heart did stop, but when the nurse checked him, he was not in distress. That is why she changed the battery to the monitor," replied Kathy.

Nancy was not sure if the drugs were playing tricks on him. Getting confirmation from the Kathy helped her believe his story. Still concerned about her husband, but very happy he was still alive. She thanked Kathy again for answering her questions then she hurried back to his room relieved. She was thankful that Debbie was his nurse for what he refers to as "the night from hell".

When she entered the room, the wound care nurse, Stella, was there. She changed his bandage, using the wet-to-dry bandage.

After it was changed, Stella left them alone. They talked for a while about things Nancy was doing at home and how the family was doing. David was tired and had to go to sleep. As usual, Nancy watched him sleep a minute before she went home to do some chores.

She called Dot with the morning update. She was understandably upset to hear how sick her son was, but thankful he was doing so much better. After talking to Dot, she laid down on the couch for a few minutes. She woke up three hours later, but it was a good thing. She was tired and needed the sleep.

While Nancy was at home sleeping, the attending physician, Dr. George Wills, woke David up to talk to him about his blood pressure.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Brundage. Your blood pressure gave you a problem last night the nurse informed me. I am here to make sure it does not spike like that again. I need more medical history to help me decide what medications to leave you on, change or add. The current meds are working for now, but I would like to see the pressure back in the normal range.

"Let me take it again to make sure it is still in the acceptable range. It is 152 over 94. That is still high, but much better than last night. We will try different combinations of medications until we find something that keeps it down.

David gave the doctor his history of long-term high blood pressure. "I have had high blood pressure since I was twenty-six years old. My mother and sister also have it. My dad did too when he was still with us. Mine always goes way up when I am in pain, angry or upset. Last night I was in tremendous pain, so I am not at all surprised it shot up so high."

Dr. Wills wrote the information in David's chart and said, "I am going to add a caterpres patch to your meds permanently. The nurse put one on you last night and it helped. They are weekly patches, so you put it on and forget it for the week. Make sure you keep track of when it needs to be changed. If you do not have any questions, I will be back tomorrow." He rushed out to see his next patient.

David dozed off again when the technician came in to take his vital signs again.

About ten minutes later, Doctor Emanuel came in to check the wound for signs of infection. There was none. It looked good.

"It is doing very well. How do you feel today?" he asked David.

"I am getting nauseous and I have some pretty severe pain on my left side," David answered.

After checking his left side, the doctor said, "I will have the nurse give you something for the nausea and pain if it is due. I will be back in the morning. As I said before, the wound is not infection and has good color," he said, giving David words of encouragement as he left the room.

Later that afternoon, Dr. Brown checked on him. He listened to his heart and checked the heart monitor readings.

"Your heart sounds fine. A faulty battery on the monitor caused the problem last night. I want to leave it on and continue to watch it for a while longer just to be on the safe side," the doctor said. "I will check on you sometime tomorrow."

That evening, Nancy went back to visit David.

He said, "Hi Hon, I am feeling a little sick tonight, but nothing close to how I felt last night. I do feel strange though. I cannot put my finger on it, but I have a feeling something else is going to happen. I am getting scared again."

Nancy was praying silently, *God, please do not let it be too serious. David cannot take much more. I cannot either. Please watch over him tonight and keep him safe.*

She did not want him to focus on his anxiety. Therefore, she tried to steer the conversation in a different direction by asking, "Did any of the doctor's see you today?"

He told her three of them were there. They all gave him good reports. She felt better hearing that and had accomplished her goal of changing the subject. She also knew his instincts were usually right on the money. Something was going to happen to set his recovery back again. She was sure of it.

The nurse came in to change his bandage while Nancy was there. She gave him a dose of pain medication before changing it.

"Your wound is pink with fresh blood around the edge. That is a good thing. It is clean and healing very well," she said smiling. She was aware of how bad the night before was for him and the fear they both felt. She was trying to reassure them there was nothing wrong. They were not buying it. No matter what it looked like, something bad was going to happen.

They talked about who was going to win on the show, *American Idol* while the nurse changed the bandage. The nurse thought Ruben Studdard would win, but David and Nancy still wanted Clay Aiken to win. When she finished with the bandage, she gave him his nighttime meds and left them alone. Within a few minutes, he was tired.

"I need to close my eyes, Hon. I love you and I will see you in the morning," he said with a yawn.

"Goodnight, I love you, too. You go to sleep and I will see you in the morning," Nancy replied giving him a kiss. By the time she finished her sentence, he was sleeping. She stood there watching him sleep for a couple minutes, saying another prayer. She asked God to let him get a good night sleep and protect him from harm. She went home to get some much needed sleep. She was exhausted.

The next morning she went back around seven-thirty. While Nancy and the nurse were changing his bandages, the nurse noticed an oozing coming from the wound. She said it was

getting infected. She would call Dr. Emanuel to inform him when she went back to the nurses' station.

David was in pain. His temperature was 100.3 degrees. It was not too high. They were hoping the doctor would increase the dosage on his antibiotics and order him something for the fever. Then he would get better again, but they were wrong.

Dr. Emanuel came in a couple hours after the nurse called him. He had to finish an operation or he would have gotten there sooner. When he walked in the room, he gave David a puzzled look saying, "What is going on with you? You just cannot catch a break, can you, David?"

David said, "No, I can't. Can you tell me what is going on now? I do not feel that bad. Why is everyone getting so concerned?"

"Let me look at the wound. As soon as I know what it is, you will be the first one I tell," answered the doctor.

Dr. Emanuel removed the bandages and confirmed it was infected. He told David and Nancy he needed to remove the staples and open the wound to clean out the infection. With the nurse's help, they cleaned it. The nurse put wet-to-dry bandages on it. They knew that it would heal because the same thing happened after his first surgery. There was no reason for them to believe that it would not heal again. The doctor wished them both a good night, told them he would be back the next day and left with the nurse.

Nancy told David it was weird and gross to look inside his belly, straight down to the internal stitches of the stomach muscles. Her definition of gross had changed drastically. She used to think the staples holding his stomach closed were gross. Since the infections, she could see inside him. That was really gross in her opinion.

David felt good enough to watch television before she had to leave for the night. They watched *Gilmore Girls*. By the time the show was over, David was tired again.

Noticing he could hardly keep his eyes opened, Nancy said, "I am going home and let you sleep. Please have a good night. I will be back in the morning. I love you very much, David," she said, kissed him and left the hospital thinking about how much she loved the man she just left.

It was about four o'clock in the morning when the nurse went in to take his vital signs. His temperature was getting higher. He was nauseous again. She gave him nausea and pain medications. She also gave him something for the fever. Before she left his room, she told him to use the call button if he needed anything.

She went back in about five-thirty to take his temperature again and it was down to 100.6 degrees. She left the room so he could get a little more sleep before his day began.

About a half hour later, he woke up feeling sick. He could hardly move. He strained to roll over on his side frantically looking for the call button. He saw it on the edge of the bed. Just as he reached out, it fell on the floor. He got dry heaves, but nothing came up because he had not eaten any food in over a week. The pain and nausea were getting worse. While trying to vomit, he was pushing hard. Then, with a final push, he could feel and hear a gushing sound. That did it. He started vomiting. Nothing but mucus was coming out. The pain was intense. The dry heaves went on for what seemed like hours, but was really only a few minutes. Finally the urge to vomit had stopped.

While he was vomiting, he felt something strange in his stomach. He thought he pulled a muscle. It was not important enough to mention to the nurse or so he thought.

He looked down on the floor at the call button. It was a million miles away as far as he was concerned. He could not look at it any more. He was getting frustrated because he was not able to reach it. The pain was getting more severe. He thought if he could get on his back, he would feel better. Using every ounce of energy, he finally did it. The pain was excruciating. He

tried to call out for help, but he was too weak to utter a sound. He lied there sobbing, waiting for someone to come in the room.

All of a sudden, the pain was gone. A feeling of complete peace was left where there used to be pain.

He looked over at the window and saw a man climbing into his room to help him. The man said, "Do not worry, David, you will make it through this crisis. For now, please come walk with me."

This man made he feel safe. As they walked, David looked back and saw his body still in the bed, but he was not afraid. They walked to a beautiful garden with brilliant colored flowers. Everything around them was vivid and colorful. He could see everything down to the finest detail even without his glasses.

"I have never seen things this clearly or heard such beautiful music in my life. Where are we?" asked David.

The man answered, "We are in our Father's garden. I am giving you a break from the misery and pain you have been enduring for so long. You will have many encounters during the next few weeks. Learn from them. Identify each event and tell the world about it. There are many paths you can take. I hope you choose a path with our Father. You must return to your body now. I promise you will feel no pain for a while. I will send an angel to watch over you during your next surgery. There will be many spirits with you as they get their prayers answered. You will live to tell this story."

In a flash, David was back in his body.

David was going to need another surgery. God was sending an angel to him.

About seven o'clock that morning, as Nancy got off the elevator, she saw David's nurse. She asked her if he had a good night.

She said, "According to his night nurse, he was fine up to five-thirty when she checked on him. I just came in for my shift and went over my patient's charts. I am going in to change his bandages."

He was looking good to them, not knowing what he had been through in the last hour. Nancy noticed the call button on the floor and picked it up.

He said, "I could have used that a little while ago. I am fine now. Would you please tie it to the bed railing so it does not fall on the floor again?"

Nancy tied the cord around the bed railing and laid the button on his chest. The nurse asked him why he needed the call button.

He explained about the dry heaves and the pain, but told them he was feeling much better now. He did not tell them about the walk he took with God.

When the nurse removed the bandages, Nancy was shocked. The day before when the doctor opened the wound and cleaned the infection out, it looked like a gully in his stomach. It looked completely different. His intestines were coming out of him. It looked like a string of uncooked sausages laying on top of his stomach.

The nurse was a different one from the one that helped the doctor the day before. She was not sure what it was supposed to look like. Most nurses have never seen a wound like his. It is rare for a wound as large as his to be left open, but it had to be so the infection did not spread throughout his body.

Nancy said, "That does not look like it did yesterday. Something is wrong."

The nurse asked her what it was supposed to look like.

Nancy explained what she saw the day before then said again that it did not look right. She asked the nurse to call the doctor. The nurse thought Nancy was over reacting so she continued changing the bandage.

Nancy was getting very upset and demanded that the nurse call the doctor immediately. She said she would call him as soon as the bandage was done. It is not be safe to let it stay

uncovered for any length of time. That calmed Nancy down some what, but she was still very worried about her husband.

She went out to the desk with the nurse to make sure she called Dr. Emanuel as soon as they got to the nurse's station. With Nancy right there, the nurse had no option but to call him. She explained the appearance of the wound to Nancy's satisfaction. That is all she wanted to hear then went back to the room.

When she walked in, he asked her what was wrong. She told him his wound looked different than it did the day before. She wanted the doctor to look at it. She tried to make it sound like it was not too serious because she did not want to frighten him, but she knew it was extremely serious.

Dr. Emanuel was in the room within a half hour after the call from the nurse. Looking at David, he thought the nurse was exaggerating. He looked peaceful.

"How do you feel, David?" asked Dr. Emanuel.

"I feel better than I have in days," answered David.

"I need to look at your wound. Your nurse has a question about its appearance." When he removed the bandage and looked at the wound, he said, "This just got you another trip to the operating room."

David looked shocked because he felt the best he had in a long time.

The doctor said, "You have eviscerated."

David asked, "What in the world is that?"

"Simply put, your intestines are coming out of your body through your wound and I have to get them back in as quickly as possible. You must have coughed or sneezed and popped some of the inner stitches."

"Could the dry heaves have caused it?"

"That would do it. When did you have them?"

"It was earlier this morning. I could not tell the nurse because I could not reach the call button."

"Make sure the call button is in his reach at all times from now on," the doctor said to the nurse.

"David, you must tell the nurse anything that would possibly cause a problem," Dr. Emanuel told David.

"I will from now on, Doc," David promised.

"Now that we have that taken care of, let me get an operating room ready so we can get you taken care of quickly."

To Nancy he said, "We will get him fixed up. He is in very good spirits, despite his condition which will help tremendously in the operating room. It should take about four hours. I am going to put him in the Step Down Unit when he comes back from recovery. I will meet you in the usual place as soon as I can leave him."

With that he left the room and went to make arrangements for David's third surgery. It was his second one in only five days!

It was almost time for Jackie's visit. When she walked in the room, she felt the tension.

"What is wrong? Dad, are you all right?" she asked in a panic.

"I am, but I have to have another surgery," he said.

She was frightened and David could not explain fast enough, so Nancy took over for him. She told Jackie everything the doctor told her and David.

Jackie asked, "How serious is it?"

"I will be fine," said David as he was thinking about the conversation he had with God in the garden.

"I am going to call work and tell them I will not be back for the rest of the day. I do not want Nancy to have to wait by herself. I would not be able to work anyway," she told her dad.

Nancy was thankful Jackie was going to keep her company. She did not think she would be able to handle waiting alone while the man she loved most in the world was having emergency surgery for eviscerating.

“Eviscerate, that is the scariest word I have ever heard in my life,” Nancy thought.

David could not understand what all the fuss was about. He felt better than he had in days. He told Nancy and Jackie not to worry. He had it on good authority that he would be fine. Before they could ask him what he meant, two technicians came in to take him to the operating room. They told the two women standing in the room the patient’s wife could follow them, but quickly.

Nancy told Jackie to meet her in the front lobby waiting room and ran behind the gurney as they pushed it down the hall. When they got to the operating room hallway, they told Nancy she could not go any farther.

David saw her just before they took him into the operating room. She looked terrified. He yelled out to her, “I will be fine, do not worry, Honey. God told me I would make it through this one.” She thought he was delirious.

Nancy wanted to kiss him before they took him in, but they kept the gurney moving. She told a male nurse standing in the doorway of the room to give him a kiss for her. He said he would have one of the female nurses do it instead. She thanked him and walked slowly to the waiting room to wait with Jackie. They ran to each other and cried their heart’s out hugging in the middle of the waiting area.

Nancy admitted to Jackie that she was really scared this time. Jackie would have been more scared than she was if she had seen what Nancy saw that morning. Nancy was thankful she did not see it though. After all, it was her father and it would have been a frightening thing for a child of any age to see.

In the operating room, David asked, “Do you want me to get up and get on the table?”

“No, Mr. Brundage, we will lift you onto the table. Try not to move, please,” said one of the operating room nurses. They were all amazed at how alert he was considering his condition. His good state of mind would help him during the surgery.

“I feel important. I have never seen so many people in an operating room before. There are even angels in here,” he mumbled, but no one understood what he meant.

“Everyone, please get ready to transfer Mr. Brundage to the operating table. Ann, please hold his intestine with a damp, sterile towel while we transfer him. We have to move him very carefully. Ready! On three! One! Two! Three! Good work.” the operating technician said.

There were more people than necessary to perform the operation in the room. It was a teaching hospital and David’s case was a rare one. Severe evisceration was not common and it provided a rare opportunity for the medical staff to observe the surgery. The closing was rare, too. The doctor had to use wire to close the abdomen. The wires are called retention sutures.

David watched calmly as they rushed around getting things ready for the operation. Everyone was finally in place, but the surgeon.

Dr. Emanuel walked into the room just then and said, “David, we are going to put you to sleep now. I will talk to you in recovery.”

The anesthesiologist covered David’s face with the mask and started the medication to put him out so the surgery could begin.

The survival rate for an evisceration of the intestine is only twenty-five percent! It was a good thing Nancy and Jackie did not know have that information while they were waiting for the doctor tell then David would be fine.

Chapter 6

Nancy and Jackie had been through this twice before, but this time they were very nervous and anxious because it was an unexpected operation.

They talked about their feelings and cried a lot. When they were cried out, they called David's mother and sister to tell them what happened with David that morning.

Dot was extremely upset. Nancy told her the details of the morning's events. She told her he was not in as much pain as would be expected. He was in good spirits, which would help him in surgery and with his recovery. Before they hung up, Dot made Nancy promise to call again as soon as his surgery was completed. Dot said she loved Nancy and thanked her for keeping her informed on her son's progress or lack of it, in this case. Nancy returned her love and promised to talk to her later that evening.

Then she called Gail. She took the news almost as hard as their mother. She asked the same questions as Dot. Nancy answered them as well as she could. Gail wanted her to call when there was any news, too. Again Nancy promised she would call as soon as the surgery was over.

Now that the long distance calls were made, Nancy still had to call Susie and John to tell them. She called John at work. He was upset when he heard the news, but did not ask too many questions. Like everyone else, he just wanted to know if his step dad was going to make it. He asked if she needed him to come to the hospital. Knowing how much he hated them and Jackie being with her already, she told him he did not need to come. She could hear the relief in his voice. He really did not want to go to the hospital. He told her to call him right away if she needed him for anything. She told him she loved him and would see him at home, but would probably be later than normal because she was not leaving until after she saw David.

As soon as they hung up, Nancy called Susie. When she answered the phone and heard her mom's voice, she knew something was seriously wrong.

She asked, "Mom, what is it? Is David all right?"

Nancy started to cry which scared Susie even more. Through her sobs, she said, "He had to have emergency surgery." She explained the situation she had already said three times before to the others. When she was finished, Susie told her she and Nolo would get to the hospital as soon as they could. Nancy told them where she and Jackie would be waiting for them. They said they loved each other and hung up.

After all the necessary phone calls were made, Nancy and Jackie sat there in the waiting room talking quietly. Jackie's birthday was three days away. She told Nancy some of her co-workers and friends were supposed to be taking her out for a birthday dinner that evening. They were supposed to meet at her favorite restaurant between six and seven o'clock and had an eight o'clock dinner reservation. They were waiting in the restaurant bar until everyone in their party got there. She did not know what to do about it because of the emergency with her dad.

Nancy suggested she call Carole, her best friend and explain the situation. When she knew more or it got closer to the party time, she could call again.

Jackie like the idea and called Carole. She said she would be late or have to cancel the whole thing. It depended on her father.

All of a sudden, they hear over the intercom, "Code blue in O. R. Three."

Jackie looked at Nancy horrified and asked, "What room is Dad in?"

Nancy answered in a panic, "I do not know. The doctor did not tell me. Let's go ask the volunteer at the reception desk if she can find out for us."

They started to go over to the desk, but everyone one in the waiting room had the same idea. They were all told to wait in line. They would be told as quickly as possible if their loved one was in O. R. Three.

Nancy and Jackie were third in line. They could not wait to get to the head of the line so they could find out if the code was in David's room. Finally, they were able to get the answer they were both praying for since they heard the announcement. It was not David's room. They thanked the lady and went back to their seats thanking God for answering their prayers.

A few minutes later, they noticed an elderly lady, probably in her late seventies crying at the desk. They were happy it was not David, but felt sad for the lady that received the bad news. They found out later that her husband of fifty-eight years was in O. R. Three. He was having heart surgery, a triple by-pass. His heart stopped during surgery from a massive heart attack. The doctor tried, but could not revive him. He died before she could tell him that she loved him one last time.

Shortly after things calmed down, Susie and Nolo came in the main entrance. Nancy met them at the door and walked them to the waiting area. Nolo pushed Susie in her wheelchair until they got to the chairs. Nancy took over so Nolo could sit down. Jackie moved one of the chairs to the other side of the room to make room for the wheelchair.

When they were seated, Nancy told them there was no news on David. Jackie told them about the code blue. Nolo and Susie felt bad for the lady who lost her husband, but were very happy David was still alive.

Susie said it was hot and muggy outside, but it looked like a storm was on the way. She was thirsty from the heat. Nancy and Jackie realized they had not had anything since their morning coffee. They decided to get sodas and chips in the hospital cafeteria. Jackie and Nolo went to the cafeteria while Nancy and Susie sat there talking and watching their belongings.

They had just finished eating when the lights went out, but the emergency lights came on a few seconds later. When the power went out, all the doors to the hospital locked.

Five minutes later, two fire trucks pulled up to the hospital's main entrance. By the time they got there, someone must have overridden the locks to the doors because the firemen ran in the main entrance. They were told a fire was in one of the storage rooms on the second floor. Eight firemen ran up the stairs to get to the fire as fast as they could before it spread and caused more damage. They were able to put the fire out quickly and contained it to the storage room.

As they were leaving, they talked to a well dress man who must have been someone of authority in the hospital. They were standing close enough for Nancy to overhear their conversation without trying to eavesdrop.

The captain told him someone was smoking in the storage room and did not put the cigarette out completely before throwing it in a trashcan. Some paper in the can caught fire and spread to some of the supplies. They would investigate. When they caught the person responsible, they would make sure he or she was prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

The man asked the captain how a storage room fire would cause the power to go out. The captain said it was coincidental that the lights went out at the same time the fire started. The bad weather outside caused the power failure. We were called about the fire a few minutes before the power went out.

Nancy said, "What else can go wrong today?"

Jackie answered, "Nothing, I hope. I cannot take too much more."

They all agreed with her. None of them could take it much longer.

It was after four o'clock and still no word about David. He had been in surgery for almost four hours. They were concerned even though Dr. Emanuel said it would take about that long. If they did not hear anything within the next hour, they were going to ask the volunteer if she would get some information for them.

Susie and Nolo had to leave by five o'clock because they had friends coming to visit them from Massachusetts. They wanted to stay, but had to be at their house when their friends arrived. They had not seen each other in almost five years, so they were excited about seeing them, but upset they could not stay until the surgery was over.

Nancy promised to call them as soon as the doctor told them any news.

Jackie told them about the birthday dinner her friends were giving her. The three of them were talking together while Nancy listened. The two sisters were adults. They got along great with each other and could tell each other anything.

As Nancy listened, she thought about how proud she was of all three of her children. They were her best accomplishment in life.

When Susie said they had to leave, it startled Nancy. She was caught up in her own thoughts. She walked them to their van and helped Nolo get Susie in the front seat and her wheelchair in the back. They kissed each other and Nancy promised again to call as soon as she heard anything about David. As they drove away, Nancy stood there waving to them until the van disappeared. She went back in the hospital hoping Jackie had some news.

When she walked back to her seat, Jackie said, "No word yet."

Jackie called Carole again to tell her they had not heard anything. She told her if she was not there by eight o'clock to keep the dinner reservation and eat without her and apologized for causing so much confusion.

Carole said, "Jackie, do not give it another thought. We will keep trying until you can make it."

Jackie replied, "I am very lucky to have such good friends."

After she got off the phone, they decided to go for a walk around the hospital. They were getting tired and thought the walk would help. They stopped at the desk and asked the volunteer to page them if there was any news. She said she would be happy to let them know right away. She knew how anxious they were to hear about the man they both loved.

They walked around the inside of the hospital a couple times and decided to go back to the waiting room. By the time they returned, it was five-thirty. The volunteer told them she was sorry, but she had not heard any news. They asked her if she could find out what was happening with David. She found out that the operation was over, but David was still in the operating room. The recovery room was full. Therefore, they had to keep a couple of patients in the operating rooms to recover until beds became available. The surgery went well, but the doctor wanted to stay with him until he went to recovery. He would be out to talk to them as soon as David was moved. It would probably be another half hour to an hour.

Jackie made another call to Carole to let her know the surgery was over. She would try to be at the restaurant between seven-thirty and eight o'clock. She wanted to see her dad for a few minutes before she left. Carole told her they understood and would wait in the bar until she could get there. Jackie told her to thank everyone for being so patient.

When she got off the phone, Nancy borrowed it to call Dot, Gail and Susie again with the news. Gail drove down to Massachusetts from New Hampshire that afternoon to spend the weekend with her mother, so that eliminated one call Nancy had to make. She told them she would call again after she talked to his doctor.

She called John then Susie. They both asked if she needed them to come to the hospital. She told them it was not necessary. She would be fine. Jackie was still with her and as soon as they saw David they were leaving the hospital for the night.

Dr. Emanuel walked down the hall towards the waiting room. Nancy stood up, but Jackie stayed seated and reached out for her hand. Nancy looked at her and saw how scared she was and sat back down with her. The doctor walked over to them and sat down.

He looked tired as he said, "He made it through the surgery fine and is doing pretty good for what he has just been through. I used retention sutures instead of regular stitches to close him up this time. His tissue is very weak, so I had to do a colostomy. That means he has a bag on the side of his stomach that will act as an anus. It should be temporary. As soon as the tissue is healthy, I will reverse it and he should be back to normal."

“He will be in the hospital for about six weeks now because of the retention sutures. I will explain everything in more detail after you have seen him in recovery, if that is all right with you ladies,” he said.

When they heard that, they both said, “Can we go right now?”

The doctor smiled and led them to recovery so they could see him for the first time since he was rushed into surgery.

“I will meet you in the cafeteria to explain how the retention sutures work. I can answer any questions then,” he said.

They thanked him and walked into recovery. It was very cold in the room, but they hardly noticed when they saw David. He was awake, but just barely. They both touched his hand for a second, but it hurt him. They jerked their hands away when he winced.

He was hooked up to machines and tubes were in his arms and neck. He was in tremendous pain. He said he hurt all over and asked them to get the nurse to give him more pain medication.

Jackie went over and asked if he could have more. He just had a dose and would have to wait for a half hour. Jackie went back and said the nurse was busy with another patient. She would give him more as soon as she was finished. She did not want to give him a time limit because it would get him anxious waited for the time to pass.

The nurse motioned to them that they had to leave. They told him they loved him and would see him in the morning when he was in his room.

He was extremely agitated because he was in so much pain.

He whispered, “I just want to sleep. Maybe I will not feel the pain as badly. I love you both.” He fell asleep before they even walked away from the bed.

They thanked the nurse and asked her to take good care of him. She said she would do her best and smiled at them. She told them not to worry, he would be fine.

In the hall, they hugged and cried tears of joy that he made it through the surgery.

As they walked to the cafeteria, Jackie said, “I do not want to hear the gory details of the surgery. Just knowing he made it is good enough for me. Would you tell me the details without the gore tomorrow?”

Nancy answered, “Yes, I do not think you need to hear the gore either. You go meet your friends and have a good time. I will see you in the morning and we can talk then.”

Jackie kissed her and thanked her for understanding. Nancy wanted her to have a good time after spending all day at the hospital with her. It had been a stressful day. She was glad Jackie could get away from it for the night and have some fun.

Jackie told her to call her if she needed her or if anything happened that she needed to know. They kissed each other goodbye. Jackie headed for the exit and Nancy went to the cafeteria to meet Dr. Emanuel.

He was waiting for her at a table. She sat down and thanked him for getting them in to see David. He asked if Jackie was going to join them. She told him she had plans with her friends to celebrate her birthday. He said that was good. She needed to get away from all the stress for a while. Nancy told him that was exactly what she told her.

With everything they have been through with David, they felt comfortable together. He asked if she had any questions or wanted him to explain anything. She asked him to explain what he did and then she would ask questions if she had any.

He started by saying, “I cleaned out the infection and examined the tissue. At that point, I knew he needed a colostomy. Colostomy was a wound into the colon that creates an artificial opening called a stoma on the outside of the abdomen. The stoma serves as a substitute anus through which the intestines can eliminate waste products until the tissue can heal and it can be reversed. The bowel movements fall into a collection pouch called a colostomy bag. A

colostomy nurse will work with you and David to learn how to clean and change the colostomy bag and take care of the stoma and skin around it.”

Nancy asked, “Is David aware that he had the colostomy yet?”

He replied, “He has not been told yet. He is too drugged to understand or remember anything right now. I will tell him in the morning, but if he notices it before then, the night nurse will tell him. The nurse will be able to answer any of his questions.”

“Is it definite that the bag is just temporary?” asked Nancy.

“I cannot promise that it is, but I am ninety-five percent sure it will be. In a few months the tissue should be strong enough to hold the stitches necessary to do a successful reversal,” he answered.

“I hope he does not get too depressed. Before he had the first surgery, we talked about the possibility of him needing the bag. That was one thing he did not want to have happen through all of this. If he gets too depressed about it, I am afraid it will hurt his recovery.

“I understand as much about the colostomy bag as possible without having seen one. I will probably have questions after we start working with the colostomy nurse.

“Can you explain the retention sutures? What they look like and how they work?” she asked.

He explained, “Retention sutures are heavy, metal-like sutures that are placed through all the layers of the abdominal wall and used to reinforce the regular sutures in the muscle and the layer of tissues covering the muscles. They are like fingers spread opened going around a big ball. They are used on patients who take more time than normal to heal. With his diabetes and the problem we had this morning, this was the best way to close him. The advantage of using retention sutures is that if the abdominal wall does not heal, the sutures will prevent him from eviscerating again. The part of the retention sutures that are on the outside of his abdomen do not close the wound up completely. It is left opened slightly, in case of infection. The opening will have to be packed with wet sponges and then covered with wet-to-dry bandages like we used before.

“If you want to watch the nurse change the bandages to understand better, I am sure they will not mind. Just make arrangements to be here at a time when they do a change. They usually change it in the morning when they change the colostomy bag, so you will be able to get a pretty good understanding of how both changes are done,” he said.

He warned her about the retention sutures. He said, “They look scary and painful, but he will be well medicated for the pain while they are in him. It will be a slow process. He should have them in for about six weeks. In the beginning, he will be very uncomfortable, but as the wound starts to heal inside, the sutures loosen and the pain should lessen.”

When he was finished telling her everything he could think of she need to know, he asked if she had any more questions.

She asked, “Will he pull through this and be back to normal someday soon?”

“I think he will. I did not expect the bout of infection and certainly did not expect him to eviscerate. I cannot promise that nothing else will happen. I will take every precaution to have things so smoothly with him for the rest of his recovery. That I will promise.” he said with conviction.

Nancy was getting tired and told him she did not have any more question.

“You need to go home and get some sleep. The nurses will take care of him. Do not worry about him for one night. Just get some sleep. I am going to check in on him and then go home myself. Do you want to see him one more time before going home?” he asked.

“Of course, I do” she answered quickly.

They walked to recovery again. Nancy noticed some commotion inside. She looked frighten. The doctor told her they were getting him ready to move to the Step Down Unit, which

is one step down from the Intensive Care Unit. In ICU, there was one nurse for every two patients. In step-down, each nurse had four patients.

As they rolled David out of recovery, she got to see him for a few seconds. He was sleeping, so they kept moving. They wanted to get him in his room before he woke up and needed more pain medication. She walked beside the gurney as it moved down the hall. She kissed her hand and then placed it on his cheek. That was the closest she could get to giving him a kiss. She probably needed it more than he did anyway.

Dr. Emanuel told her to go home and get some sleep. He was going to do the same as soon as he checked on another patient. She thanked him for everything he did for her husband then left the hospital.

It was a very long day and it was still not over. She had to call Dot and Gail, Susie and Nolo and Jackie.

As soon as she walked in the door, Lucky greeted her, tail wagging. Behind Lucky was John. He was glad she was finally home. He was anxious to hear how David was doing. She told him that he was doing as well as could be expected.

She told him she had to call Dot and Gail before it got any later. She asked him if he would mind listening to what she told them so she did not have to repeat everything again. If he had any questions, she would answer them when she got off the phone. He said it would be fine with him, so she dialed Dot's phone number.

Dot picked up the phone on the first ring and Gail was on the extension in the bedroom. Nancy told them about the retention sutures and explained what they looked like and how they worked. Then she told them about the colostomy bag. Dot got very upset when she heard about it. She knew how upset her son would be. Gail asked if it was permanent or temporary. Nancy told them there was a ninety-five percent chance it would only be temporary.

Dot said, "Thank God! Poor David, he is been through so much already and now this bad news. Does he know yet?"

Nancy answered, "No, he has not been told yet."

Gail said, "I hope he takes it better than we think he will take."

Nancy and Dot agreed with Gail.

When she was finished telling them everything the doctor said, Nancy said she would call again the next afternoon.

Gail said, "Call Mom first because I am going home in the morning. I will call Mom when I get back home."

Dot and Gail thanked Nancy for keeping them informed about David and then they hung up.

John stood there listening and told his mom he did not have any questions when she hung up. He asked if she needed anything before he went to bed. He had to get up early the next morning for work. She said she would be fine. She was going to call Susie and Jackie and then go to bed herself. They said goodnight and he kissed his mom on the cheek before going to bed.

She called Susie and Nolo. They were waiting for her call. She told them everything she had told Dot and Gail. They did not have any questions because Nancy knew all the questions they might have asked by the ones Dot and Gail asked her. While she was telling them about everything, she included the topics that they asked. When she was through explaining everything to them, she said she had to go. She still had to call Jackie. They said they would talk more in the morning after Nancy saw David. Again they said they loved each other and hung up.

Jackie was last on the list to call then she could go to bed. She was so tired. She needed to get into bed before she fell asleep on her feet. Jackie was at another bar with her friends, so it was hard to hear her. Nancy told her he was in a room in step-down sleeping. She added that

Jackie should put it all out of her mind until she got home. Jackie thanked her for letting her know, said she loved her and hung up.

The day was finally over. Nancy went upstairs to the bedroom she shared with her husband. She washed her face and brushed her teeth. She got into bed and was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Chapter 7

Day One

David was taken to a room in the Step Down Unit on the second floor of the hospital when he recovered enough from the surgery to be moved. He would be in the unit for twenty-three days.

He slept all night from the anesthesia and pain medication. Dr. Emanuel was in at five-thirty on his first day in the unit. The doctor read over his chart and noticed that his white count was rising. In order to catch the infection early, he ordered a stronger antibiotic. He noted the change on David's chart then went into his room.

Turning on the overhead light as he walked into the room woke David up.

"Good morning, David. I know you are in a lot of pain. I have you heavily medicated to help with it. I had to put retention sutures in your abdomen to keep your intestines inside the bowel cavity. Your small intestine came out yesterday and we had to do an emergency surgery to fix it. It required more internal sutures and six retention sutures. They will have to remain in for approximately six weeks. Due to the evisceration, we had to give you a colostomy because the bowel tissue was too weak from the infection. The colostomy will allow time for the tissue to heal. I strongly believe it will only be temporary," the doctor explained.

"I am not going to remove the bandages until tomorrow. The wound needs some time to settle before we disturb it. You will sleep for the next twenty-four hours. We will try to keep you as comfortable as possible. Do you have any questions about anything I have told you?" the doctor asked.

"Does Nancy know all of this?" he asked.

"Yes, I have explained everything to her. She will be here early this morning to see you. Take it easy today and I will stop by again after my scheduled surgeries," the doctor said.

Twenty minutes later, Nancy walked into his room. He was sleeping so she went to the nutrition room. There was a pot of hot coffee for visitors. She made a cup and took it back to his room.

As she walked in, David stirred and managed a smile when he saw his wife. He said in a raspy voice, "I am still here and I love you very much." He was in good humor for what he went through the day before.

With a big smile, Nancy replied, "I love you, too."

Because he was in such a good mood, she did not think he remembered the doctor telling him about the colostomy. She was afraid to mention it. He once told her that he would not want to live that way. Therefore, she was frightened he may give up once he knew about it. She decided she would not mention it for a while. He quickly lost his sense of humor when the pain overwhelmed him.

"It feels like someone is trying to rip out my guts. It hurts more now than it did after the first operation. I do not know if I can take this pain," he moaned as the retention sutures cut into his stomach. His face was contorted from the pain.

Nancy called the nurse to ask if he could have more pain medicine. Ann, the day nurse, came in and gave him a dose of morphine. The morphine was given to him through his IV so it

worked quickly. He went back to sleep within a few minutes. Once again Nancy was terrified for him. His ordeal was not over yet.

She watched him sleep in complete silence for about an hour. She was deep in thought about what else could happen to him. She finally got up and kissed him on the forehead. It was time for her to go home to take care of Lucky, get something to eat and make the first phone call of the day to his mother.

As Nancy approached the nurses' station she asked, "Can I call you to check on his condition throughout the day?"

"Yes, I will be keeping a very close eye on Mr. Brundage," replied Ann. Nancy thanked her and walked to the elevator.

David woke up just about every hour in pain. Ann had orders to keep him heavily medicated the first day so he could get some sleep after what he had been through. His blood was tested every six hours to determine the amount of infection in his system. Staph infection can come on quickly and is extremely dangerous after an evisceration, so they were trying to be proactive. The technicians were having a tough time finding veins to draw blood from because most of his veins had collapsed. Every time they came to draw the necessary blood, it aggravated David and caused him more pain.

The doctor checked his chart about six o'clock that evening then looked in on him. He was sleeping, so the doctor let him sleep.

Nancy came back that evening just as the doctor was leaving the room. She asked him if her husband knew he had the colostomy bag yet. The doctor assured her that he did know about it and was taking the news quite well so far. She thanked him and told him to have a good evening before she turned to go visit David.

She stopped at his door before walking in and said a quick prayer to God thanking him for protecting and keeping her husband alive. When she walked in the room, it was dark except for a light coming from underneath the bathroom door. She walked over, kissed him on the cheek and whispered, "I love you."

David mumbled, "I love you, too," but never woke while she was there. She sat in the chair beside him and prayed. She kissed him good night and left the room in tears about a half hour later. She was still scared for him. He was a very sick man.

"You will call me if there is any change in my husband's condition, no matter what the time. Will not you?" Nancy asked at the nurses' station.

"Yes, you will be contacted if he needs you or if there is any change in his condition. You can call here any time, too. It might take a little while for his nurse to come to the phone, but she will be able to tell you how he is doing," she replied.

Nancy thanked her and then left the hospital. She went home and called the family with an update on his condition. There was no change in his condition, but they wanted her to call them anyway, even if it was just to report that there was not any change.

She made the calls, ate a sandwich with Jackie and John and then went straight to bed. She was very tired and was asleep in no time at all.

Day Two

Dr. Emanuel arrived at the hospital about six o'clock the second morning after the evisceration to check on David before he got started with his first surgery.

"Good morning, David. How are you feeling today?" he asked, while removing the bandages. "I need to check your wound. Your bandage will need to be changed at least twice a day. It will be painful. I have instructed the nurses to wipe the dried blood and keep it clean. I have authorized additional pain medication prior to each bandage change."

The doctor was moving fast. Bea, the nurse, finally caught up to him and he repeated the wound care instructions to her. She saw the open wound with the retention sutures. The wires were digging into his flesh. There was dried blood around each one of the retention sutures.

It is going to be extremely painful when I remove the dried blood. No wonder the doctor said to give him a dose of pain medication before I start to clean it, thought Bea.

David was very groggy as they worked on him changing the bandage.

“I am so dry. My throat really hurts. Can I have a couple of ice chips?” he asked.

“No, David. I am sorry, but you will not be able to have anything by mouth for a while,” he answered.

He turned to Bea and said, “Would you swab his mouth with the lemon swabs? Try to keep his mouth greased with them. It will help protect his lips from cracking. I am sorry, David. It is going to be extremely uncomfortable for you for the next few days. Your surgery was very serious. We need to take every precaution to prevent you from vomiting. The NG tube will have to stay in for about a week to keep your stomach from filling up with bile. Until your stomach wakes up, you need the tube. You will also be getting nausea medication every six hours.”

“Bea, you must clean the wound and the retention sutures carefully to help the tissue heal and promote healthy tissue growth. The procedure will be extremely painful. I want him to have a dose of morphine before you start cleaning it. I have already put instructions in his chart. The retention sutures will not move too much, but when you work around them, he will feel it internally. I will show you what I want done and how to do it,” he said.

While Bea watched, he cleaned the wound. David winced in pain with every touch. As the procedure became more aggressive, David started screaming in pain.

“I am sorry we have to put you through this, David. But it is necessary to keep it clean so the infection can be kept to a minimum.”

As the tears rolled down his cheeks, Bea started to well up with sympathy as they worked on the horrific wound.

Finally, it was clean. The doctor told Bea to pack it and use the wet-to-dry bandages twice a day.

“I will check on you tomorrow, David. It will be tough, but you can do it.” Dr. Emanuel smiled. He had a pleased look as he walked out because he knew he had a hand in saving the man’s life.

“This gown is choking me. Would you take it off? It is tight around my throat and touching the central line in my neck. When it hits the tube to the central line, it hurts,” David whined to the nurse.

“Yes, I can take it off for you. Whatever you need to keep you comfortable,” Bea said as she removed the sweat soaked, blood stained gown and covered him with the sheet. Without the hospital gown, it would be easier to check the colostomy bag and get him washed. He was sweating considerably from the drugs and needed to be washed often.

“I have to give the turnover to the next shift. Ann will be taking care of you today. Take care, feel better and I will see you tonight,” Bea said as she waved goodbye.

“Thank you for helping me, Bea. I will see you when you come back. Unfortunately, I am not going anywhere,” replied David weakly and fell back to sleep.

He was only sleeping for about twenty minutes when the lab technician came in to draw more blood. He let her take the blood, but moaned and groaned about it while she was drawing it. It took three tries to get the sample. His arms were black and blue from collapsed veins. They were extremely sore from all the blood they were taking from him. The technician apologized for hurting him and then left him to rest.

David tried to get some rest, but it was a hospital. Kathy, the day technician, walked in a few minutes after the lab technician left the room. She took his vital signs. His blood pressure was extremely high. She immediately reported it to his nurse, Ann.

Ann went in saying, "Good morning, Mr. Brundage. I need to give you more medications. I will give you the blood pressure medication first, and then the pain meds. I need to hang a bag of antibiotics that will slowly drip through your IV. But first, I want to take your vital signs again."

Ann weighed about 90 pounds soaking wet. She had long, black hair that was down to her waist. She was small, but she could move David with very little effort. She checked his colostomy bag and his urinary catheter.

"Bea told me you did not want to wear a hospital gown. If you get cold, let me know and I will put a blanket on you. We cannot let you catch a cold. That could cause some serious problems," Ann said.

He fell asleep shortly after getting the medication. It had been a rough morning and it was only seven-thirty!

Nancy came in about eight-thirty and sat down in the chair beside his bed. She watched him sleep with her eyes filled with tears. She never knew what to expect when she saw him from visit to visit. The tears were out of relief because he seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

Kathy walked in a few minutes later with fresh linens. It was time to give him a sponge bath.

"Hi, Mrs. Brundage, David's doing pretty well this morning. He had a slight temperature and elevated blood pressure, but they seem to be under control now," she said.

To David, she spoke quietly, saying, "David, it is time for your sponge bath." She tried not to startle him when she woke him.

David moaned. It had been a while since his last dose of pain meds. Just then, Ann walked in with the pain medication and put it in his IV.

"Now, you are ready for your bath. Will you be staying, Mrs. Brundage?"

"Yes, I will help Kathy if she does not mind," Nancy said, looking at Kathy.

Kathy answered, "I would appreciate the help, thank you."

They gave him the bath together. Kathy washed one side and Nancy washed the other side. Kathy showed her how to clean around the urinary catheter saying, "When you clean the catheter, you have to make sure you get around the head of the penis. With all the infections he has had, we have to make sure his private parts are clean including his buttocks. He sweats just lying in the bed because of the drugs we are giving him."

After he was washed, Bea rubbed some bath oil on him to protect his skin. When they changed his sheets, Nancy held him on his side while Kathy pushed the sheet under him. Then Nancy rolled him onto his other side, while Kathy pulled it from under him. Finally, the bed was made. Kathy covered him with a clean sheet and blanket.

She said, "That was fast with your help, Mrs. Brundage. Thank you so much. Have a good day," she said leaving the room.

Nancy asked David if he knew about the colostomy bag. All he said was, "Yes." She was surprised he did not have a bigger reaction. She figured he just was not ready to talk about it, so she dropped the subject. What she did not know and he was not going to tell her was that he did not care because he was convinced he would never leave the hospital alive. He had been through so much and he still had a long way to go.

Ann came in and gave him more pain medication before she changed the bandage. "Did you want to stay and help, Mrs. Brundage? I will be back in five minutes. We need to give the pain meds time to take effect."

"Yes, I will help you," Nancy said.

"Bet you never thought you would be getting instructions from another woman on how to clean my thing. Never mind, watching another women handle it," David laughed.

"Boy, you have a dirty mind," Nancy said sternly, but she felt great that he was able to joke about it.

Ann went back into the room. It was back to pain and suffering for David. She took off the bandage and gave a little gasped. She did not have to change the bandage the day before, so it was the first time she had seen the wound. She did not expect it to look as bad as it did.

“This is going to take a few minutes,” she said as they cleaned it.

When it was finally clean, David was exhausted. He went right to sleep. Nancy watched him sleep for a few minutes and then went home for the afternoon. She called his mother. Dot was worried sick, but unable to travel to Texas to see him. She had a bad back and emphysema. Her doctor told her she was not healthy enough to make such a long trip.

Nancy usually went home when Jackie was visiting him. Jackie used her lunch break to visit every day. When she walked in the room, David was asleep and too tired to wake up. She stayed a few minutes and decided it was best to go back to work and let him sleep.

The nurses and technicians were in and out of his room all day. Nothing seemed to wake him up except pain. When he woke up complaining about it, Ann medicated him again and he went immediately back to sleep.

It was seven o'clock in the evening. Bea came in to take over for Ann. She told Bea David slept most of the day. He was still in a great deal of pain. The two nurses said there goodbyes and Ann left the room to go home.

Bea was in the process of changing his bandage when Nancy came in for her evening visit

“Hi Hon, you are missing out on all the fun. It is not every day you get to look inside me. Well it is lately, huh?”

What a change from that morning. David was awake and in a good mood. He was trying to cover up how much pain he was feeling. As Nancy got closer, she could see his eyes tearing up. Seeing the tears in his eyes made her cried, too.

“Don't cry, Hon. It only hurts until the medication kicks in again.” He said, trying to cheer her up.

When Bea finished changing the bandage, she asked, “Would you like a sponge bath?”

“That would be fantastic. I have a low grade temperature and the drugs cause me to sweat more than usual,” he answered.

It only took a few minutes to wash him. Bea asked if he needed anything. He did not, so she left the room.

Nancy asked, “Do you want to talk to your mother? I have got Jackie's cell phone you can use.”

“Yea, but tell her I can only talk for a few seconds because my throat really hurts with this damn tube stuck in my throat.” David replied.

It had been almost two weeks since he had talked to her. Before all the surgeries, he would call her at least every other day since his father and brother passed away four years ago. His mother lost her firstborn son and husband in less than a year apart. They talked for quite a while each time he called her because she was lonely.

“Hi, Dot. It is Nancy. I am in David's hospital room. He wants to talk to you but he can only say a few words. He still has the NG tube in his throat, so it hurts him to talk,” she said. She could hear her mother-in-law crying and asked if she was all right.

Dot collected herself and said anxiously “Yes, I will be as soon as I hear my son's voice.”

“Hi, Mom, I made it again. Billy is watching over me.” David said with tears in his eyes.

“I love you, son. You take care and get lots of sleep. Nancy said you cannot talk very much, so I will make this quick. You must get better. We all need you. Billy sent you back last time and it is still not your time to go. I prayed and prayed that you would make it through the operation. Finally, you can talk to me again. I miss hearing your voice, even if it is just over the phone. I love you very much, David. We all do.” She rambled on for about ten minutes with a

quiver in her voice as she spoke. She was so happy she could talk to him and hear his voice again.

“I have to go now, Mom. I am very tired. I love you!” he said

“All right, put Nancy on again. I love you.” Dot said crying.

“Hi Dot! Do you feel better now?” she asked her mother-in-law.

“Nancy, thank you so much for taking care of David. I was so frightened I would have to bury another son. I do not think I could take it. Thank you for calling from the hospital today so I could talk to him. It was great to hear his voice. Please call anytime of day or night. I am here waiting for any news about him.”

“All right, Dot. I will talk to you tonight. I love you. Bye.” Nancy said.

“I love you, too, Nancy.” Dot replied before she hung up the phone crying.

“My throat and mouth are so dry. Could you sneak me some ice chips?” David asked.

“Not this time, Honey. I came too close to losing you too many times in the past few months. You need to do what the doctor tells you. Do not ask the nurses either. They all feel bad for you. So you behave, please,” she pleaded.

“All right, I will try to be good, but just for you. I am exhausted, so I need to go back to sleep,” David said with a yawn.

“You go to sleep and I will see you in the morning. Goodnight. I love you, David,” Nancy said.

“Goodnight. I love you, too. Thank you for being here for me, Honey,” David said.

And he was asleep before he heard her say, “I would not be anywhere else in the world. I love you very much.”

She kissed him on the cheek and walked out the door to go home and do her nightly chores before going to bed.

Through the night, Bea gave him his meds. He did not even wake up when they drew blood at two o’clock in the morning.

Day Three

David woke up at quarter to six on his third day in step-down. He was in excruciating pain. His whole body hurt and was very uncomfortable. Bea clipped the call button to the sheet right by his hand so it would not fall on the floor when he stirred in his sleep. Bea was already on the way in with pain medication when the call light went on over his door. As soon as she entered, she administered it.

“Your body sure knows when the next dose of medication is due,” she said.

“It is because of the damn hooks in my stomach. I am in pain all of the time. When the medication starts to wear off, it feels like someone is ripping my guts out. My throat is sore and my mouth is dry, too. My arms and legs feel like they were beaten with a baseball bat. As far as I am concerned, you can give me more every five minutes. It hurts that badly,” he said.

She gave him nausea, pain and blood pressure medications. Then Dr. Emanuel walked in the room.

“Good morning, David. How are you feeling this morning?” Dr. Emanuel asked.

“I am in a lot of pain this morning. Bea just gave me some pain medication, so in a few minutes I will feel better for a while.”

“It is good that the meds work quickly on you.”

“Yes, it is. I would not be able to stand it if it took too long to work.”

“I have some good news for you. Today we are putting a PICC line in your arm.”

Before he could explain what it was, David asked in a panic, “What is a pick line?”

The doctor explained, “It is *P-I-C-C*. A PICC line is a long, flexible tube that goes into a vein in your arm. It will be threaded up into a large vein just above your heart. We are putting a dual line in your arm. We will use the first line to get fluids and drugs into your bloodstream. The second line will be used to draw blood. How does that sound?”

As sick as he was feeling, David got a big smile on his face and said, “That means I will not have to be stuck with a needle every six hours to draw blood, doesn’t it?”

“It sure does.” the doctor said, smiling back at his very unique patient. It was good to see a smile on his face. It had been a long time since the doctor had seen him smile. Both, the patient and the doctor felt very good at that moment.

The doctor explained they had to do the procedure in the X-ray lab. They had to be sure the line was inserted in the right place. “You will be able to stay in your bed. The technicians have orders to take you down to X-ray in this bed. I do not want you moving out of this bed for any reason whatsoever. The retention sutures are already causing a great deal of pain. Moving you from the bed to a gurney would only cause you unnecessary pain. Do you have any questions or concerns?” the doctor asked him.

“No, I don’t, but I do want to thank you for treating me so kindly. I am a little scared though,” David said with tears in his eyes.

His doctor said, “I would be worried about you if you were not scared. But it will probably make you feel better because they will not have to stick you with any more needles.

“Bea, please get him washed up as soon as possible. X-ray will be here at six-thirty to take him downstairs. It would be best to change his clean linens while he in X-ray. He will probably be pretty tired when he returns,” he said.

“Yes, Doctor. I will have him ready,” Bea said.

“Give him another dose of morphine just before he leaves,” he ordered.

She had a smile on her face as she told the doctor she would take care of him. David knew from the look on Bea’s face. The PICC line was a good thing.

The doctor took a quick look at the wound and said, “Looks good! I will talk to you later today, David.”

Bea had Jeanne, one of the technicians, help her wash him and change the linens. She wanted him to be ready when the X-ray technicians came for him. Bea forgot to tell the X-ray techs that he did not have a gown on under the sheet before they took him downstairs.

As David was going through the hall, he was talking to some of the other patients telepathically. Some of them understood what he was saying. They could see the colorful springs, objects flying around, spirits and angels he was seeing. The hall was filled with spirits as the techs rolled his bed down the hall. All the prayers people were saying in the hospital for their loved ones were bringing many angels. It looked like the halls were empty to the medical staff. The severely ill patients could see their spirit guides and angels in them. They were seeing the same things David had been seeing since his first near death experience.

The X-ray techs stopped his bed just outside one of the X-ray lab. He saw another patient with his spirit guide and an angel. The man could not see them yet, but he would very soon. David told the man everything would be fine. They would take very good care of him. Of course, the man thought David meant the medical staff, but he was talking about the spirits and beautiful angels he was seeing since his first near death experience.

David’s bed was pushed into the X-ray room by two technicians. They told him that Dr. Marcus would be in shortly. Then they left talking about what they were going to have for lunch.

David waited for Dr. Marcus to come in to do the procedure. He was squirming around in the bed when the sheet fell onto the floor. It was very cold in the room and he was getting colder by the second. He was lying on the bed naked.

A cleaning person came in, picked up the sheet, threw it in the laundry and proceeded to mop the floor. She must have worked at the hospital a very long time because she was oblivious to him lying there naked. He thought he was asking her for a blanket, but nothing came out of his mouth. It was dry, his lips were cracked and the tube in his throat made it hard for him to talk with the little strength he had left. The trip down to the X-ray lab took a toll on him.

Finally, one of the techs walked into the room. “Mr. Brundage what happened to your blankets? You do not even have a gown. Let me get you one.”

David shook his head, trying to tell him he did not want a gown. The technician understood him and said, “I will get you a sheet and blanket to cover you. You must be freezing.” He covered David with a sheet and a blanket.

He looked at the tech and smiled.

The tech said, “You are welcome.”

“Hello, Mr. Brundage. I am Doctor Franklin Marcus. I will be putting a dual PICC line in your arm today. You will not need to get poked anymore after today. Dr. Emanuel said he was going to give you pain meds before you came down here. Did he?”

David nodded.

“Good, we can get started right away. I will numb the area where the PICC line will be inserted. I will also give you something to relax. It might even put you to sleep for a little while.” Two technicians and a nurse assisted him.

The procedure was completed in fifteen minutes. David slept threw the whole thing, including he ride back to his room.

He woke up while Ann was changing his bandage. It was already noon. If anyone took blood or his vital signs, he did not know it. The trip downstairs and the procedure wore him out.

With the central line in his neck, a regular IV in his arm and the PICC line in his other arm, he was able to get all the medications he needed without getting stuck. He was also getting a daily bag of nutrients through the new PICC line.

Finally, he was improving.

Nancy came in that afternoon. She looked exhausted. Trying to take care of the house, dog, visiting David at least twice a day and make the calls to the family was taking a toll on her.

She had a job in the semiconductor industry, but was laid off a few months earlier because they closed her building. She worked there for thirteen years. At the time, they thought it was a bad thing. But now, she was thankful for the time off. She needed to take care of her husband. She would never have been able to do all she was doing and go to work every day, too. They still had health insurance from her old job, so the medical bills were being paid. God works in mysterious ways!

She was amazed when she walked into his room. He had some of the color back in his face. “Hi, Handsome, you are looking better,” Nancy said cheerfully.

“Hi, Honey. You look tired. Are you all right? You know, you do not have to come here so often. Most of the time I am either in pain or sleeping anyway.”

“Don’t be silly. I am a little tired, but I will catch up on my sleep tonight when I leave here. I know I do not have to come here so much, but I miss you and worry about you. It really does do me good to visit you as much as I can. I will make you a promise. If I feel like I am too tired to come sometime, I will call to let you know. I will stay home to get some extra sleep. You have to make me a promise. You will not worry about me. You need all your strength to get better. Do we have a deal?”

David said, “We have a deal.”

“How did things go this morning?”

“I still hurt like hell, but I do feel a little better,” he whispered. It was hard for him to talk because of the NG tube and his lips were cracked and dry.

“Please ask the doctor when I can have some ice chips. I would give anything for an orange Popsicle. I think that would be better than sex right now,” he teased. Despite his condition, he could still make jokes.

“You have got a few more days to go before you can have anything to eat or drink. Let me swab your mouth with one of those lemon swabs,” Nancy said, trying to help him.

“I do not want more cotton in mouth. I have had enough of that junk already,” he snapped at her. He quickly realized he was taking things out on her and apologized.

She said, “I understand. Don’t to worry about it. If you cannot vent to me, who can you vent to?”

“They put a dual PICC line in my arm this morning. I will not have to be stuck with anymore needles. They can draw blood from the line. I can have my pain medication without having to wait until my antibiotics are finished. There are enough lines going into me now to take care of everything I need,” he said.

“I know. Your nurse explained what it is used for and the procedure to get it in your arm. Maybe your arms can start healing now. They are so bruised,” she said.

Both of his arms were black and blue with needle marks up and down them. Most of the veins had collapsed from drawing blood.

“Eliminating the pain is helping me feel better. I am tired, Honey. I have to go back to sleep for a while. Why not go home and take a nap. Please do not stay here and watch me sleep. You need your sleep, too. I love you,” he said pressing a button and settled in to go back to sleep.

“What is that button you just pushed?” she asked before he could go to sleep.

“Oh, they gave me my own drug store. All I have to do is press this button and I get some pain medication,” he explained.

“That should help you a lot. Now you can get relief whenever you need it without waiting for someone to give you some. I am going home for a while so you can sleep. I love you.” She kissed him on the cheek. She was afraid to kiss him on the lips. They were so chapped and looked very painful.

The button David was pushed is a patient-controlled analgesia or PCA, which means a patient can push a button and get a small dose of medication. It is a machine that regulates the dosage and amount of medicine the patient gets when the button is pushed. If the button is pushed too soon, no medication will be administered. It is set to administer a small dose every ten minutes. David medicated himself each time he woke up and was able to go right back to sleep. Finally, he had something that would help him to get some sleep without waiting for the nurse to give him an injection. He slept through the night, only waking to push the PCA. He did not even wake up when Bea changed his bandage. He was exhausted from the busy day.

Day Four

David woke up at five-thirty and pushed the call button. He was nauseous and extremely hot. Bea answered over the speaker, “Can I help you, Mr. Brundage?”

David whispered, “Help me, please!”

Bea ran to the room with the night technician, Jeannie behind her. He was soaking wet with sweat. Bea took his vitals while Jeannie got a cold washcloth for his forehead. His temperature was 103.1 and his blood pressure was 209 over 134. Bea went out to get some blood pressure medication for him. When his pain was as severe as it was, his blood pressure went up causing everything in his system to go out of whack.

He was as white as a ghost when Bea returned with the medication. She gave it to him as quickly as possible

“Jeannie, please wash him down with alcohol to bring his temperature down. I am going to call the doctor,” Bea said quickly.

Just as she was getting back to the nurses’ station, Dr. Emanuel arrived to check on him. “Good timing, doctor. There is something wrong with Mr. Brundage. He has taken a turn for the worse.” She gave him David’s vitals as they rushed to the room.

“Call the lab and have them do a full work-up on him. It looks like he has an infection again. Push the antibiotics wide open. I will get a stronger antibiotic from the pharmacy. Put him back on the critical list. Get the lab here stat. I want X-rays to check on the retention sutures. They may have shifted and nicked his bowel. I know it is early, but wake this place up,” he said. “His wife said he would have unusual problems after surgery. I am a believer now.”

It was six-forty on his fourth day step-down. The day shift was coming in for the pass down. Bea told Ann how their other three patients did through the night. Then told her what was going on with David. When they were through, Ann knew what she had to do. She went right to David’s room. Bea followed her to check on him one last time before she went home.

An isolation sign was put on his hospital room door. Anyone entering the room had to wear a gown, facemask and latex gloves. David did have a serious staph infection. The medical name of the type of infection he had is called Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus. It is the long name for a stubborn staph infection that can cause fever, pain and swelling. It does not respond to penicillin-based antibiotic.

“Has anyone notified David’s wife that he is back on the critical list?” asked Ann.

“No, this just happened within the last hour or two,” Bea replied.

“I will contact her in a few minutes. I do not want her to come to his door and panic when she sees the isolation sign,” Ann said.

She finished taking David’s vital signs, then left to call his wife.

“Hello, Mrs. Brundage, this is Ann, David’s nurse. Please do not be scared. David is stable, but has been put back on the critical list due to a severe staph infection. He is being given large doses of antibiotics. You will have to wear a gown, facemask and gloves when you visit him for a while. Are you all right, Mrs. Brundage?” Ann asked when Nancy did not respond.

Nancy finally answered her with a quivering voice saying, “Yes, I am just very concerned about him. Is the infection causing him even more pain than he was in before?”

Ann answered, “No, I do not believe so. He is very uncomfortable though.”

“Thank you very much for telling me about the change before I got there. Seeing the sign on his door would have scared me to death. I will be there in a few minutes. I was ready to walk out the door when you called. Thank you again, Ann. I will see you shortly,” said Nancy.

She hung up the phone and finished getting ready. Nancy walked quickly down the hall to David’s room. Just outside the door, there was a table with sterile gowns, facemasks and gloves. She gowned up and opened the door.

She was horrified when she saw him. He was as pale as a ghost. She stood there a second to let it sink in, then said, “Hi there, Cutie, I hear you are giving these nice nurses more work.”

David smiled, even though he did not feel like it.

He told her he felt terrible and just wanted to sleep. Nancy understood that sleeping was his way of dealing with the pain. She told him she would run errands she needed to do and would be back later. He blew her a kiss, not wanting her to kiss him and catch the infection. He did not know that she was already told by Ann not to kiss him or even get too close to him. She blew a kiss back to him through the facemask and told him she loved him. By the time she left the room, he was back to sleep.

Outside his room, Ann told her more about his condition. “He is on an extremely strong antibiotic plus nausea and pain medications. He will probably sleep for most of the day. We

will know how he responds to the new treatment in twenty-four to forty-eight hours. We need to keep his fever and blood pressure down. He is my only patient today. The three other nurses have volunteered to each take one of my other patients for today. David is our most seriously ill patient in the unit right now.”

Dr. Emanuel walked up to them and said, “You are right, Nancy. Your husband is a tough one. With his will to live and our medicine, we will get him through this. Please, try not to worry too much. That Agent Orange stuff was real dangerous, but he is a strong man. He has proven that over and over again. Keep saying your prayers. They will help him, too. This additional antibiotic should help. We were able to find an antibiotic to give him through his IV that should get rid of the infection in a few weeks. It is the strongest available to treat this type of infection. Do you have any questions?”

Nancy said, “No, thanks to Ann. She answered all of them for me just a few minutes ago.”

She was visibly shaken. The seriousness of the infection was sinking in and taking a toll on her nerves.

“Thank you both for taking so much time to help me understand what has happened. I need to call our children to let them know what is going on with their father. They will want to see him and I need to see them,” she said and left to go call them.

She called Jackie and John at their jobs and Susie and Nolo on his cell phone. They said they would be there as soon as possible.

After talking to them, she went to get some coffee. She drank it in the visitor’s waiting room just down the hall from her husband’s room. Ann had one of the volunteer’s get her some eggs and toast from the cafeteria and took it to the waiting room.

She said, “Mrs. Brundage, please try to eat this food. You have to keep up your strength because he is going to need you well when you take him home.”

Nancy thanked her and Ann went back to sit with David. Nancy picked at the food and drank the coffee.

After finishing her coffee, she tried to watch some television, but could not sit still. She wanted to be with David. She finally gave up and went back to his room to watch him sleep. Ann took his vital signs every fifteen minutes. She kept a cold compress on his forehead to keep him as comfortable as possible. Nancy usually helped the nurses take care of him, but she was too upset and nervous to help. She was mentally and physically exhausted.

It was very difficult dealing with the ups and downs of David’s condition. He was supposed to have a simple operation to remove eighteen inches of his colon, but he died on the table for thirty-eight seconds. Then he eviscerated. His intestines came out of his wound and that required an emergency operation and ended up with the dreaded colostomy bag. He was just starting to feel better, but now he could die again. Thinking about all of these things, Nancy burst into tears. It was too much for her to process. She was feeling overwhelmed.

Ann gave her a wet washcloth so she could wipe her face and regain her composure. She said very firmly, “Mr. Brundage will get better and you will be taking him home before you know it. Please try not to worry so much. We do not need to have you as a patient here, too.”

Ann seemed to know just what Nancy needed to hear. Hearing that her husband would be well again, made all the difference to her. It comforted her enough so she could calm down.

John and Jackie came into the room. Jackie had tears running down her face. Her floodgates were opened and it would take more power than Ann had to stop them.

John said, “Susie and Nolo are outside the door waiting to get gowned up to come in the room.”

Nancy motioned to Jackie and John to go back out in the hall for a minute.

Outside the room, she asked them if they would go somewhere with her. It was someplace they needed to go for David. Confused, they looked at each other, but trusted her enough to go with her. They walked to the elevator and went down to the first floor.

Jackie said, "We do not want to get anything to eat now," thinking they were going to the cafeteria.

"We are not going to the cafeteria. Please trust me! You will feel better in a few minutes," Nancy said.

They got to the end of the hall and Nancy opened a door and they walked into the hospital chapel. She looked at their faces and knew she made the right decision. They all had tears in their eyes, but smiles on their faces.

The chapel was empty. They sat down in the front pew together.

First, Nancy explained what was going on with him. She told them he was seriously ill and on the critical list, but was already getting treated for a staph infection. She told them everything the doctor and Ann told her about the infection and what they were doing to treat it. They sat there very quietly listening to every word. They told her they were very scared for him. She admitted she was scared, too, but God would see him through. They all joined hands and said a prayer to God to help the man they loved get well soon. After they prayed together, they sat there for a while in their own thoughts and said their own silent prayers.

They were in the chapel for almost an hour before they decided they were feeling better. They thought they could go into the room now without crying. Before they left the chapel, they all thanked her for knowing exactly what they needed. She smiled at them and said, "Let's go see Daddy!"

When they got back to his room, Ann heard them in the hall. She came to the door and told them he was just waking up. She told them that because he was on the critical list again, their visit would have to be short. She would give them as much time as she could.

John and Jackie got dressed in isolation gowns and went in the room first. Ann helped Nolo put his gown on while Nancy put Susie's on as she sat in her wheelchair. They could not get gloves on Susie's hands because of the affect the cerebral palsy had on them. Ann told her to put them under the gown so they were not exposed. Nancy quickly put a gown on and they went into the room.

David was awake and talking to the other two. Ann excused herself and told Nancy to push the call button if they needed anything. David finally saw Susie sitting in her chair and blew her a kiss. She smiled at him through her tears and told him she loved him.

They talked to him trying to cheer him up, but it was impossible. He was too sick. Nancy took his hand in hers. She needed to touch him even if it was through the gloves. When she looked at his fingers, she noticed the ripples in his fingernails were extremely prominent. It gave her comfort to know that God was with him to help him through this ordeal.

When she looked back at him, she noticed him wince in pain and asked if he needed anything. He said, "I hate to say it, but I am exhausted and need to go back to sleep. I wish I could stay awake, especially for Susie. I know how hard it is for you and Nolo to get here. But my eyes will not stay opened anymore. I want to kiss all of you, but telling each of you that I love you will have to do for now. Nancy, I do not want you to come back here tonight. You must be tired too after all I have put you through. You guys take care of your mother because she needs your help. I love you all very much. Good night."

Ann saw them leaving and helped them get out of the gowns.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon and no one had eaten lunch. They went to the house and order a pizza so they could be together a while longer. They talked about David and what he was going through. They reminisced about some of the good times they had as a family. It was a good afternoon considering what they all had on their minds.

Jackie and John had plans to go out with friends, so they went to get ready. Jackie was going out with friends from work and John was going to the movies with some of his church friends. Susie and Nolo were going to a Round Rock Express baseball game. They had to leave about four-thirty. Each of them invited Nancy to go with them, but she turned them down graciously saying she was exhausted and was going to stay home like her husband told her to do. It made them laugh. They understood how tired she must be worrying about the man she had been married to for more than half her life.

When she left her alone, she sat down and cried. She held the tears back all day for her children's sake, even though they were adults now. Being alone, she could let them flow.

When she was all cried out, she took a shower. She called the hospital after her shower to check on David. Tyler, his night nurse answered the phone. He was at the nurses' station getting David's meds so she did not have to wait.

He told her that he had a peaceful evening so far and should sleep through the night.

Nancy thanked him and hung up the phone. She was so tired, but she still had to call Dot and Gail to let them know what happened to David. They were both upset and Nancy talked to each of them until they felt better and understood everything she had told them. As soon as she hung up the phone, she took something for the headache she felt coming on and went to bed.

Back at the hospital, Tyler was in and out of David's room all night taking his vital signs. David stirred when he was in the room, but he never completely woke up. His temperature and blood pressure were still high. Tyler gave him his medication through the PICC line so he did not have to wake him. A lab technician came in once to take blood. Thanks to the PICC line, David did not even know he was in the room.

Day Five

Dr. Emanuel turned on the lights as he entered David's room. "Good morning, Tyler said you had a good night's sleep. Your vital signs are much better this morning. I am going to put you on some nutrients to help you recover a little faster. You will get it through the IV. Let me take a look at the wound. I want to make sure it is not infected." He peeled back the bandages fast.

"Ouch," David yelled which made his throat hurt even more. His pain medication had worn off during the night. Tyler came running in when he heard David yell.

"I did not realize the doctor was in here with you. I thought something happened. While I am here, let me give you your meds, Mr. Brundage. They should make you feel more comfortable," said Tyler.

"The wound looks good. No sign of infection. The meds you are on are working, so I will not change anything for now. I do not want to mess with success. I will increase your diet supplement. The increase should cause some activity in your colostomy bag," he said.

"You mean I get something to eat?" David asked with a smile.

"No food yet, David. We have to take it slowly. It will be given to you through the IV for right now. It will be a few more days, at least, before you can start on a liquid diet. I know you are hungry, but I do not want to take any chances with you getting sick again. Be patience! I am going to take you off the critical list. I will see you again tomorrow," he said.

Tyler changed the bandage the doctor had removed. He got a huge bag of what looked like a coffee milk shake and hung it up to go into David's body intravenously.

David looked at the bag and thought how great it would be to drink it. He imagined drinking it ice cold with a straw. He had not had anything to eat or drink in five days.

His lips were cracked and sore and his throat was on fire because of the NG tube. Every time he swallowed, it was painful.

Focusing on the bag of nutrients, David started daydreaming. He imagined he had a second throat, nose and stomach in his body. The new body parts he created in his mind did not hurt. Each imagined body part was next to the real one. Using the imagined parts, he did not feel any pain. With the fabricated parts, he could breathe better because they did not have an NG tube stuck in them.

David envisioned himself getting out of bed, taking down the coffee milk shake and sticking a straw in it. It tasted good. It was a creamy, smooth, ice cold drink. It felt so good going down.

The doc was right, this will make me better but I bet he did not think I could drink it. But I fooled him, David thought. David was lying on his bed with a grin on his face when Katie, the day nurse came in to get him bathed.

“Good morning, Mr. Brundage. You look like you were having a nice dream,” she said to him smiling. She never saw him smile before.

David looked up and saw the bag was half gone. “Yes, I drank that coffee milk shake hanging up there.”

Nancy stopped to put a gown and the other gear on and then went in and saw how cheerful he was for once. “You look much better today. That looks like a coffee milk shake hanging up there. Is it good?” Nancy asked, jokingly.

“It was real good in my dreams. But I cannot taste a thing now.” David replied.

Tyler changed his bandage and put clean linens on the bed just before Katie started her shift. He asked her to see if David wanted a gown because he did not get a chance. Then he left to go home.

“Would you like a gown yet, Mr. Brundage?” Katie asked.

“Not until I get this central line removed. The gown keeps hitting it and hurts. I have got enough places that are killing me without adding to it.” David answered.

Nancy told him everyone sent their love, especially his mom and sister. He asked how they were doing. They were doing all right, but wished they could be with him.

David said, “I bet you had a hard time last night telling Mom and Gail about the staph infection. It is so hard on them being so far away. When you talk to them today, please tell them I love them both very much. Tell them I understand why they cannot be here, too.”

“It was difficult telling your mother, but she needs to know everything that is going on with you. If I keep anything from her, she will kill me,” Nancy replied. She was only half joking. Dot had told her that she wanted to know all the news about her son, good or bad.

It made him smile because he knew it was true.

He was tired again and was dozing off. Nancy noticed how tired he was getting and said, “I love you. I will come back later so you can sleep now.” She blew him a kiss and left the room.

About two o’clock that afternoon, Michelle, the physical therapist, went into his room. She had to wake him up. “Good afternoon, Mr. Brundage. My name is Michelle and I am here to get you out of bed and maybe take a couple of steps. Do you think you can do it?”

David opened his eyes and he thought he saw an angel. She was a beautiful brunette. Half asleep, he said, “All right, I will give it a try.” Being a man, he was willing to do what ever this beautiful woman wanted him to do. He thought he was dreaming, so it could not hurt.

“I will help you get up and sit on the edge of the bed,” Michelle said as she pulled the sheet off of him. “First I need to get a gown on you.” Without hesitation, she got a gown and wrapped it around him the best she could. He had tubes coming out of his neck, both arms and a urinary catheter coming out of his penis. The gown would not stay on him without unhooking everything. Michelle asked, “Do you mind if we do this without a gown today?”

David replied, “Nope, I do not mind at all.”

“Are you ready?”

David nodded.

“Take it slow and easy. Roll over on your side and try to sit up on the edge of the bed.”

He rolled over. Katie had given him a dose of pain medication twenty minutes before Michelle came upstairs to work with him, but he was still in pain. He hung onto the side rail of the bed just above his head. He swung his feet over the side of the bed. Michelle was holding him up. She wrapped a belt around his chest and pulled him upright with it. He started moaning, louder and louder as he sat up. Tears were streaming down his face from pain, but he was sitting up.

Michelle praised him, “Great job, Mr. Brundage. You are sitting up. Is there anything you want while you are in a sitting position?”

“I would love my back scratched. It is the first time I have been up to get one in over a week.” She heard about the horrific time he had over the past two weeks. She felt bad for him and scratched it for almost five minutes.

“That is better than drugs right now,” David said, purring like a kitten.

After scratching his back, Michelle asked, “Do you want to stand up?”

“Yes, but I do not think I can.”

“I will be right here to hold you. When I tell you to get up, do the best you can and I will help you.” While holding him steady, she told him to get up.

He slowly stood up. He was in excruciating pain from head to toe, but he felt alive again. Michelle held him by the strap around his chest and her arm around his back.

“Have you had enough for now?”

“Yes, please help me sit back down. I am going to fall. My legs are very shaky.”

“That was good, Mr. Brundage. You stood for seven seconds. I know it does not sound like much, but it is better than I thought you would do on your first try. You are a very determined man.”

Sitting down was a lot easier, but far more painful. David screeched as he sat down. She adjusted the catheter and lifted his legs back onto the bed. She got him centered in the bed and covered him back up. He was sweating profusely after the work out and in extreme pain. She pressed the call button and asked for some pain medication for him. “That was a good first work out, Mr. Brundage.”

“Thank you for the back scratch. It made it all worth it.” He said as tears rolled down his face from the pain. He still felt better because he got out of bed.

“I am glad. We will do it again tomorrow. Maybe you will be able to take a step or two. Get some rest and I will see you tomorrow afternoon,” Michelle said as she walked out of the room.

Katie came in as Michelle was leaving to give David his pain medication. It started working almost immediately. He was asleep before Katie left the room.

After putting a gown, gloves and mask on, Nancy silently went into David’s room about six o’clock and watched him sleep for about half an hour.

Tyler came in to change his bandage. As soon as he turned the lights on, David woke up and groaned in pain. The work out with Michelle had been extremely painful. Tyler gave him an injection of pain medication before he changed the bandage. He got the supplies ready while giving the medication time to work.

The retention sutures on both sides of the main wound had cut deep into his stomach. All the movement of the day had caused them to bleed more than normal.

The wound was thirty-eight centimeters vertically down his stomach and six lateral sutures about fifteen centimeters long on each side of it. It looked worse than it did when the bandage was changed that morning.

“Should there be so much blood?” Nancy asked him.

“The blood is a good sign. It means it is starting to heal. The excess blood was from him moving around today. Do not worry. Everything is fine, even though it looks scary,” Tyler replied with a smile.

“Do you want to help me give him a bath?”

“Sure, I always help when I can. I need the training for when he comes home.”

“Thanks and you are right, you will be very important to him when he goes home. He needs to have a bath. He worked up a sweat during his physical therapy session. It will help him feel more comfortable tonight.” Tyler said.

David slept through the whole thing. The work out had exhausted him. After they finished with his bath, Tyler went back to the nurses’ station.

Nancy went home to get some sleep while he was sleeping. He never even knew she visited him that night. She kissed him on the forehead through the facemask and went home to do her nightly ritual of calling everyone with the update on his condition. The conversation will be easier to deliver to them because the news was not as bad as the night before.

“He looks a lot better. He got out of bed and stood on his own two feet for seven seconds,” was how she started each call.

At the hospital, he slept through the night dreaming of orange Popsicles and coffee milk shakes using the fabricated throat to swallow.

Day Six

David had not had anything to eat or drink for six days. His lips were dry and cracked, making him look older everyday. The nurses tried to keep his mouth greased with lemon swabs. His tongue was pasty and cracked in a couple of places. Even though he was getting nutrients intravenously, he still looked pale and washed out. He was depressed and loosing the will to live. The pain was overwhelming. The retention sutures were digging into him deeper everyday. The pain was so intense he had to be knocked out so his body could not feel it. The pain medication helped some, but it numbed his mind.

Tricking his body into thinking he had a second throat and stomach was not working anymore. The NG tube had rubbed his throat raw. He could hardly swallow. His temperature was always slightly elevated due to the staph infection. He sweated profusely at night. His body was getting rid of the toxins in his system. He could not stand the way he smelled in the morning from sweating so much at night. The odor in the room smelled like death.

It was six forty-five in the morning of the sixth day after the emergency operation, when Dr. Emanuel came into the room to check on him. He noticed David was extremely pale.

“How are you feeling this morning, David?” the doctor asked.

David tried to answer, but nothing would come out of his mouth. He tried to speak again and managed to get a whisper out, “Hurts too much. Whole body hurts.”

“Do not try to talk. I know it hurts, but you are over the worst part. Your blood work is showing positive signs. We are winning the battle against the infection.

“I am going to check the wound. You have some output in the colostomy bag. That is a good sign, too. Your system is starting to wake up and work again. In another day or two you will be able to start getting ice chips,” he said trying to boost David’s moral, but nothing seemed to help.

David was at an extremely low point. He was not whimpering or crying anymore. Tears rolled down his face from the extreme pain, but he had no expression on his face. The doctor realized the depression David was feeling was serious and ordered an anti-depressant.

Dr. Emanuel continued to give him positive information. “The wound is healing with no infection. You are getting better, David. I will stop by later this afternoon to check on you again. Try to get some rest.”

The doctor was really worried about David's attitude. He needed the will to live to overcome the massive infection in his body.

The doctor saw Katie coming down the hall to start her shift. He explained that David had to be kept as pain free as possible. The pain was more than likely the cause of the depression. He informed her he was starting David on an anti-depressant. He wanted David to get them as soon as possible. His condition was getting critical again because of the deep depression. He needed a strong will to live to survive the ordeal.

Katie checked in with Tyler at the front desk. She gave him the update from Dr. Emanuel. She went down to the pharmacy to get the anti-depressants. It takes too long for the pharmacy to deliver medications. Tyler went to his room to check on the antibiotics and his other meds he was receiving through the IV. They were getting low. He would get more hung before he left for the day. He got clean linens and supplies to change the bandage. Tyler stayed passed his shift to help Katie get him washed, hoping to make him feel better.

David had a blank stare on his face while they changed the bandage and gave him a bath. His nurses were concerned. They were praying he was not giving up on life.

When Nancy came in at ten to nine that morning, David still had a blank stare.

"Good morning, Sweetheart. How are you feeling today?" she asked.

In a whisper, David responded, "Hurts really badly. Please go home. I do not want you to see me like this." There were tears running down his face.

She did not know what to think. She said, "I love you," then left the room. He had never said anything like that to her before. She was very concerned.

As soon as she got out of the door, she started crying. She went to the nurses' station to find out what was happening to her husband.

Katie told her about the depression and he was getting medication for it. She suggested that Nancy come back later in the evening. He could rest and give the medication for the depression time to work. Maybe by the evening he would be feeling better.

She sat in one of the chairs in the waiting room until she gained her composure enough to drive home. She was exhausted from the ups and downs of his condition. She never knew what condition he was going to be in when she walked through his door.

During the course of the day, Katie washed him to keep him from getting too sticky and smelly from all the sweat. He still had that dead stare. All he would say was "Hurt" without any emotion.

Michelle walked in with a cheery disposition and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Brundage. Are you ready to get up and try to stand again?"

"No, go away. I hurt too much," David whispered.

Michelle talked to Katie and realized he was not about to do any therapy.

They left him alone the rest of the day. They only went in when it was absolutely necessary. It was obvious he wanted no visitor or anyone bothering him unnecessarily.

Nancy and Dr. Emanuel arrived at the same time that evening. The doctor said he was just about to examine David. He asked her to wait outside the room. He would talk to her when he was done examining him.

She told him she would wait at the nurses' station for him to come back out.

"Hi, David" was all he would have a chance to say.

As soon as he saw the doctor, he said, "Hurt" and stared at the doctor with a blank stare, which concerned him.

"I am going to order a CAT scan for you in the morning to see if the retention sutures have shifted. They have probably loosened. I will be able to see the position they are in with the scan. If the sutures have moved that could be causing the pain you are experiencing. I will increase your pain medication so you can get through the night," he said, trying to get some kind of a response from his patient.

“I need to look at the wound,” he said removing the bandages. The wound was clean and not quite as bloody.

“It looks good. It should not be very much longer. You are a fighter, David. Please hang in there until the CAT scan tomorrow. I will see you after I get the results. Goodnight.”

David did not say anything. He just stared into space.

Dr. Emanuel told Nancy about the scan he ordered for the morning and what he was looking for on it. He told her not to take the things David was saying personally. It was the pain talking. She thanked him and went into her husband’s room.

Tyler started his shift and went right into David’s room to change his bandage. The room was very quiet. Nancy watched in silence as Tyler changed it.

When Tyler left, Nancy said sadly, “I am going home now so you can sleep. I will see you in the morning. I love you.”

David was looking at her with that eerie, dead stare. She left the room in tears again. She knew he was not angry at her, but it was hard to see him in that condition.

It was a hard day for her, watching him stare at nothing. When his day was hard, hers was, too.

David noticed a spirit in the corner of his room. It was watching over him, but could not help him. David thought it was the drugs causing him to hallucinate. He pushed the PCA all night long.

His room was very cold. He could see dark shadows throughout the night. He prayed for help as he fell into a fitful sleep.

Day Seven

Tyler walked into the room at six-thirty to get David ready for the CAT scan. He gave him a dose of pain medication before he changed the bandage, washed him and straightened the room. Tyler put a gown on him to go to X-ray. David was exhausted by the time Tyler finished bathing him. He slept through most of the bandage change. After Tyler was done, he left the room to give Ann a report of the night.

Dr. Emanuel had written an order for dilaudid, a stronger pain medication, to be given to David prior to his CAT scan. He knew David would be in severe pain as he was transferred to a gurney and wheeled down to X-ray where the CAT scan was kept. He could not stay in his bed for the scan. He had to be moved to the platform of the machine.

Ann went in to greet David. “Good morning, Mr. Brundage. You are getting a CAT scan this morning. I am giving you dilaudid for the pain. It should be strong enough to get you through the X-ray and back into bed,” she told him.

After she gave it to him, the X-ray technician arrived with a gurney. With Ann’s help, they got David onto it using a slide board. The slide board was placed under him and they pulled him onto the gurney by pulling the bed sheet he was lying on.

Ann was right, the dilaudid was powerful. He fell asleep almost immediately.

The technician wheeled him to the X-ray lab. The motion woke him up because of the pain. It felt like someone was stabbing him in the stomach. He could see spirits and angels in the hall on the way to X-ray lab. Some of them were trying to say something to him. He could see their mouths move, but could not hear any sounds.

I wish I could read lips, he thought.

Most of the spirits looked like holograms. He mumbled to the spirits and angels “Go to the light,” as he moved down the hall. The technician was sure it was a reaction to the drugs.

He parked David outside CAT Scan Room 2. He watched all the people busy at work. The other patients in the hall waiting for their CAT scan were watching David. They seemed to know something was about to happen to him.

The X-ray technician came out and took David into the CAT scan room.

The radiologist said, "Good morning, Mr. Brundage. We are going to take some pictures of your abdomen to check the retention sutures. They are helping you heal internally. If they have shifted, we may be able to readjust them to reduce the amount of pain you are having. Are you allergic to the dye associated with this procedure?" the doctor asked.

"I am not sure," David managed to say in a whisper. He was extremely weak and barely conscious. The radiologist checked his chart to make sure.

While the doctor was talking to him, the technicians were moving him onto the bed of the CAT scan machine. Once again, they used the sliding board. While they were sliding him, the abdominal bandage came loose and the technicians saw the horrific gashes caused by the retention sutures. They were starting to bleed again. They called a nurse to check it. She said he was fine after looking at the wound. Then she put a new bandage on it and went about her business.

The movement from his bed to the gurney and from the gurney to the machine had caused him considerable pain.

"Are you all right?" asked the nurse.

"Yes, but it hurts like hell," he answered.

"We are ready to start the test, if you are, Mr. Brundage," said the radiologist.

David nodded because he was in too much pain to talk.

The procedure went well. They got the pictures they needed. The sutures had moved, but they could not tell David. The radiologist told him Dr. Emanuel would give him the results later on that after noon.

While the technicians were moving David back onto the gurney, he became extremely sick. He was choking and got the dry heaves. Just as they got him onto the gurney, he turned as white as a ghost. He gasped for air a few times then stopped breathing.

"Code Blue in CAT Scan Room 2," blared through the hospital. An emergency team came running in from all directions.

"What happened?" the first doctor on the scene asked.

"We just finished a CAT scan of his abdomen. When we were transferring him back on the gurney, he crashed," the radiologist said.

"Get the crash cart, STAT!" the lead doctor yelled.

A full team of emergency care personnel were there in a matter of seconds.

While they worked on him, David went on another journey to the other side. His life's events flashed by him like a speeding train. Good events were on the right side and bad on the left side. He could see everything very clearly.

On the right side of the train he saw his wedding to Nancy and special times they shared, the birth of his daughter, his graduations from high school and college, getting his two fishing net patents approved and playing with all the his dogs he had in his life.

On the left side was his time spent in Vietnam, the deaths of many of his friends, his brother's and father's funerals, and the vision of his brother sending him back to earth the first time his heart stopped. The events span over the fifty-four years of his life. They were a variety of the happiest and saddest moments in his life. The journey was over in the blink of an eye.

At the end of the incredible journey an angel was waiting for him. She reached out her hand and took him to the most beautiful place he had ever seen. When she touched him, all his fears and pains were gone. He was flying over the most beautiful countryside he had ever seen in his life. The closer they came to their final destination, the more David understood why he had lived. He knew all of his questions would be answered soon.

They arrived in the most exquisite place. They were definitely not on earth anymore. David knew that for a fact. The angel turned to him and said, "He will be here to give you your mission soon." Then she flew away.

Something very warm and comforting is surrounding me. I feel a sense of peace and love I never thought possible. No worries! No pain! No hate! No anger! And no words that cause harm. I love you! He thought, finally realizing that he was surrounded by God.

He heard a soft, smooth, hypnotic voice.

“I have chosen you for a mission. When you go back to your earthly form, you will tell people about this experience. Some people will not believe you. Some will try to make you believe I do not exist. Others will say you are not worthy. There are evil ones that will try to harm you. You must believe in yourself and not let any individual or group change your mind. You have been given the test of strength to endure, the worst earthly pain and always called My name for help. You did not give into the promise of false love and freedom of pain. You believed in My angels and went back into your earthly body to endure terrible pain.

“I have chosen many people to convey My words throughout the life cycle of humanity. Many times they were not believed and were ridiculed for passing on My words. Some of My messengers were harmed while performing their services. Many did not pass on My message and failed their mission. They all walk with Me in My home and they are subservient only to themselves. My words are written despite what evils may try to prevent them from being heard. Write these words as they will clarify to many souls the true meaning of being in My service.

“Let it be written when you hear about love, compassion, joy, happiness, kindness, pleasure and respect. These are My words. If death, pain, suffering, misery and anguish are used to achieve My words by any individual, they shall not walk with Me. Using any words that will dishonor My name are tools of the unholy. Do not listen to them. Forgiveness shall only be offered to the confused or ill individual if My policy is violated. Ask for My guidance and I will show you the way. You may ask for My help in your pursuit of caring and providing for your family. Listen for My words in your heart and you shall attain your goals while in My service.

“Let it be known that when you accept Me into your inner being, you shall experience My love and you may accomplish this any where, any time and any place. Use your knowledge to spread My words with the tools of your day.

“For the ones that walk in pain while they are on Earth, they will experience ten times the joy and happiness when they walk with Me, but they must not inflict pain on themselves.

“Pay heed to My policies.

“Learn the many ways mortals honor Me. Seek the varieties of truth and you shall share the joys of many heavens.

“Let none of My flock be injured or harmed in any way in My name.

“When harm befalls any of My children in My name, it is done as the mark of the unholy and an attempt to disgrace My Name.

“Let it be known that all of humanity are My children.

“Never use My Name or the word Holy to justify war. It is only the result of free will and humanity’s greed that will cause flocks to fight and kill.

“Do not use war to defend a piece of Earth in My name claiming it is hallowed ground. As it is known, all of Earth is My hallowed ground. Holy events do not make a place special, they confirm My existence.

“Learn now what you will take with you when you leave your earthly body. Pray for total peace and love. The end of Earth will come when all of humanity disregards My doctrine. Let it be known, if mortals cause death, pain, suffering or misery to another, they will not be brought forth into My kingdom. They shall end.

“My wrath will be felt if My policies are broken.

“You have My words. Go back and let them be written so they may be heard. It will come to pass that *The Revelation of David* will be written into My doctrines,” God said.

Then there was silence.

The angel came and took David back to his earthly body. The whole magnificent journey ended with him slipping back into his body.

“He is back!” the doctor said, “and we have a good strong heart beat.”

“David! David! Can you hear me? Do you know what happened?” the doctor asked.

“Yes, I died again and this time God sent me back,” David replied. All of the medical emergency team looked shocked at his statement.

The emergency team checked him for a few more minutes and then they escorted him back up to step-down to give the medical report to his nurse.

Ann was shocked to find that it had stopped again. She had seen the medical reports. They showed nothing was wrong with his heart. She could not understand why it happened again. She got the details of the code from the emergency team leader. She called Dr. Emanuel to give him the latest on David’s condition.

He said, “When it comes to David, nothing shocks me anymore. He sure is tough and he wants to stay here. I will be in to see him in as soon as I can make it. Thank you for the update, nurse.”

As soon as Ann hung up the phone, she rushed back to David’s room to check on him. He was awake and smiling.

“Good morning, Mr. Brundage, you did not have much fun while having the CAT scan. You look like you are feeling much better,” Ann said.

“Yes, I am. I am not as nauseous, but the pain is still there,” David whispered because his throat was still sore from the NG tube.

“Are you ready to get all of that sticky stuff off of you?” Ann asked.

David was covered with glue from the patches they used to hold the leads on for the EEG and EKG they did after his heart stopped.

“Yes, I feel like I am sticking to myself from all those sticky things they used,” David replied in a whisper.

“Great, we will get a fresh bandage on that wound after I get you cleaned up. How does that sound?” Ann asked.

“It sounds good to me, but I need more pain medication before you start poking and prodding. The pain is getting bad again,” David said.

“Push the PCA. That should be enough medication while I give you a bath,” Ann replied.

She used alcohol to remove the residual glue from the patches before she started his bath. He was getting tired as Ann washed him and changed his colostomy bag. When she was finished, she said, “There, you should feel a lot better now with all that glue off you.”

“Yes, I do. Thank you, Ann,” he replied with a little smile.

Just as Ann finished taking care of him, Dr. Emanuel walked into the room. “You look like you are feeling better, David. You left us again for a little while. I am certainly glad you are back. When your wife told me you could have a lot of problems, I thought she was exaggerating. I never dreamed you would be breaking all the records. Can I get anything for you?” he asked.

“Yes, you can make the pain stop, please,” he said half joking.

“I wish I could do that for you. I am giving you all the medication your body can tolerate. I need to take a look at the wound now,” the doctor said as he peeled the tape off it. It looked good and pink, just the way it should for healthy, healing tissue. “This looks great. You are on the way to recovery, David.”

Just then Nancy walked into the room in an isolation gown. The hospital personnel did not have enough time to notify her of the incident after the CAT scan.

“Good morning. It looks like David has a room full of visitors today,” she said. She was in a good mood because she saw that David appeared to be better than the day before.”

“Perhaps you should sit down, Nancy,” the doctor said in a very serious tone.

She looked at him with a scared look as she sat down on the chair beside David’s bed.

“David had another incident while he was in X-ray having the CAT scan. His heart stopped for fifty-one seconds, but as you can see, he is fine now. The tests came back negative for any brain damage.

Before he went down for the CAT scan, I prescribed a stronger pain medication for him called dilaudid. He had a severe allergic reaction to it. The medical team does not feel there is any reason to think it was a problem with his heart, and I agree,” Dr. Emanuel explained.

Nancy was visibly shaken as she stood up next to David. She gave him a hug and kisses through the mask and said, “You have to stop scaring me like this.” Tears of frustration and joy were streaming down her cheeks.

“I am sorry, Honey. I did not do it on purpose,” he said trying to laugh.

They all began to laugh with him. They were relieved that he was doing better. Just a short while ago, they thought he was gone.

“I will be back to check on you this evening, David. You are doing fine. Bye,” the doctor said and left the room.

“Mrs. Brundage, would you like to help me change his bandage?” asked Ann.

“No thanks. I am just going to sit here and hold David hand while you change it. I do not think I have the strength right now,” Nancy said.

“That sounds good to me. I think it is about time you enjoyed a visit without helping us,” agreed Ann.

“Honey, this time God sent me back. He said I have to tell people about the experience. I feel good now, but a little scared,” David said to his wife.

Ann thought he was a little delirious, but did not say anything to him. She continued to get the clean bandage on his wound.

After it was changed, Ann said, “I will be back later to check on you.” She walked out and closed the door behind her to give David and Nancy some much needed privacy.

“I believe you talked to God, Honey. I am glad He sent you back to me. Now try to get some sleep. I will stay and watch television with you until you fall asleep,” Nancy said. Before she could get the whole sentence out, David was snoring. She left a few minutes later.

Ann checked on him during the day. She let him sleep as much as he wanted. She saw Michelle and caught her before she went into his room. Ann explained the latest incident and said he would not be doing any physical therapy.

“He is such a strong willed man. He knows how to fight to stay alive. I will come to see how he is doing tomorrow even if he still is not up for therapy,” Michelle said.

“All right,” Ann said, “I will keep you posted.”

The day went by quickly without any more incidents. It was time for the night shift to take over.

Ann told Bea about David’s latest incident. He was becoming some kind of folk hero in the hospital. He kept going to the other side and coming back. Both nurses really care about their patients, but David was one of their favorites. They were both extremely worried about him.

Nancy came back to check on him in the evening. She met Bea at the nurses’ station. They walked to his room together.

“Hi there, Hon,” David said quietly with a smile. “I feel much better now. I still have the pain, but I am not as sick. I got this dying and coming back thing down. I am ready for anything.”

Shortly after Bea gave him a shot of pain medication before the bandage change, he went to sleep again. Bea and Nancy changed the bandage together.

“It is nice and pink with no signs of infection. I think we are winning the infection battle, finally,” Bea said, offering words of encouragement. She could see tears in Nancy eyes as she helped change the bandage on the love of her life.

They talked quietly as they changed it. They could hardly hear each other over David’s snoring. When they finished with the bandage, Nancy kissed him on the forehead and said, “I love you with all my heart, so do not leave again. I need you too much.”

She told Bea she was going home to get some sleep while he was asleep.

“I will see you tomorrow night,” Bea said as they waved to each other.

Bea made sure David got his medications during the night to keep him resting comfortably. He slept through dreaming about how much he loved his wife and children.

Chapter 8

Day Eight

On David's eighth day in the step-down, Dr. Emanuel flipped the light switch on as he walked into the room saying, "Good morning, David, I have some good news for you. Your white blood count is coming down. It is like a miracle. With all the problems you had yesterday, I thought it would go sky high. Even greater news, you can have ice chips." He surprised David as he pulled a cup of ice from behind his back. He put a chip on a spoon and fed it to him.

"Take it easy. Do not over do it. You have not had anything for over eight days, so take it very slowly," warned the doctor.

David was not paying any attention to what his doctor was saying. He was overjoyed with being able to have ice chips. He savored every second they were in his mouth. The ice was cooling the fire in his throat. Finally, David had something to ease the pain caused by the NG tube. As soon as one melted, he opened his mouth for another and motioned to the doctor to give him more. It was dangerous to give him very much all at once. He could start the dry heaves again, which would be disastrous. The doctor gave him three more chips and then told him that he had to wait a while before eating any more. He wanted to make sure David's stomach could handle the ice he had already eaten.

"You can have more in a half hour. Do not try to eat too many too soon or you will get sick. For now, I am only allowing the nurses to feed you the ice chips. I am afraid all the drugs you are taking will affect your judgment and you will overdo it. I cannot express enough how important it is for you to take it very slowly, please," the doctor pleaded.

"I will, but it will be hard. It feels so good on my throat. When can I get this NG tube out?" he asked.

"By eating ice chips and getting the nutrients through the IV, you should start having a stronger out-put in the colostomy bag. When there is no more bile in the NG tube canister and your stool is a brown color, I will have the tube removed. It should only be another day or two at the most," the doctor explained.

While the doctor was talking, he was removing the bandage. "The wound looks good. It will still have to be changed twice a day until the retention sutures are removed. How is your pain level today on a scale of one to ten, ten being more painful?" the doctor asked.

"It is about twelve today, but it sure beats the thirty it was yesterday," David answered. "I think the ice will help a lot. At least, it will stop my throat from hurting so much."

"I am leaving you on the same amount of pain medication for today, but we are going to start cutting it back soon. Make sure you push the PCA when you need to for the pain. Do not let it get unmanageable before you push it. We need to keep the pain under control. Any questions before I leave?" the doctor asked.

David shook his head. Dr. Emanuel waved and walked out of the room.

Katie came in shortly after the doctor left to change the bandage.

"Good morning, Mr. Brundage. I am going to give you a shot for pain so I can get the bandage changed. I will give it a few minutes to work while I get the pass down from your night nurse," Katie said after giving him the shot in his IV.

David was feeling good. He was surprised he was doing so well. He peeled the tape back on the wound so he could look at it while he waited for Katie to come back. He looked at it for the first time. When he saw it he thought, *Now, I know why people have been making faces when they look at it. It looks like I was chopped up.*

He did not realize it was so deep. It sure was ugly. One suture was pulling at the stoma. It was stretching it causing a trench from the stoma to the main wound. It was like a subway for feces to go into the main wound, which was very serious.

“That is the one that is causing me so much pain. It is amazing I am still alive,” David said out loud.

Katie came back and David said, “I just looked at my wound for the first time. I know what everyone looks weird when they see it. I can’t believe my wife looks at it every day and does not make disgusting faces. Now I am nauseous.”

Katie responded, “I can give you a shot for nausea. Would you like a few ice chips, too? I can get a fresh cup of ice on my way back with the nausea medication.”

“Oh, yes,

She was back in no time with the shot and the ice chips.

“Here you go. Take it slowly. Only one piece at a time,” Katie said.

While David was sucking on the ice, she changed the bandage. The wound had to be swabbed and cleaned with sterile water. The swabbing hurt because the dried blood had to be cleaned off allowing the wound to heal. She pushed wet sponges under the retention sutures to clean them, which caused him severe pain. When it was clean, she bandaged it with the wet-to-dry method.

She emptied the colostomy bag. She was oblivious to the odor, but David could not stand it. Nancy brought some vanilla scented room spray to mask the odor. Katie always sprayed it for him before she changed it, but she forgot to spray it.

“Marjorie, the technician, will be in a minute to give you a bath,” Katie said as she finished emptying the bag.

The nausea and pain medications made him tired so he went back to sleep. When he woke up, Marjorie was in the middle of giving him his bath.

“Good morning, Mr. Brundage. I am sorry I woke you, but I have to clean the dried on secretions off your penis. It can cause an infection and you have had enough of them to last you a while.”

David started thinking as Marjorie continued cleaning him, *Wow, a woman has my penis in her hands and I am not the least bit exited. Maybe I am dead.*

She washed his privates and his buttocks. The urinary catheter pulled on his penis when he moved. It hurt when it bumped on his testicles, too. Marjorie was as gentle as possible, but it still caused him pain. When she finished his bath, she put baby powder and deodorant on him.

“Your beard is getting very long. Would you like a shave today?” she asked.

“Yes, I would love a shave, but could I have a few ice chips before you start?” David pleaded.

“Sure, let me get some fresh ice.” Katie went out and came right back with a cup. She gave him two big pieces, one at a time, per doctor’s orders. He savored every swallow. It felt so good on his throat.

He had not had a shave in over two weeks and his beard was very thick. Marjorie got some razors and started.

“We have plenty of razors, so we will get through this beard, eventually.” She continued working on it. It took almost forty-five minutes and several razors to shave it completely off.

“I will put some of your *Old Spice* on after the shave. There, you look great. Your wife will be surprised when she visits today,” Marjorie said as she cleaned the room. Before she left, she took his vital signs. They were good, so she left his room to check on her other patients.

Totally exhausted and in considerable pain from the morning’s activities, David pushed the PCA and went to sleep.

Nancy arrived about quarter after ten. When she walked into the room after putting a gown on, it smelled like David's aftershave lotion. The room smelled better than it had in a long time. He must be getting better. She studied his face for a second. He looked much better.

"You look great. I love you," she said as he opened his eyes and smiled.

"I love you, too. I have great news. I can have ice chips. Would you get me some, please? I feel much better. I still have some pain, but it is not too bad right now," he said cheerfully.

"I will be back in a minute with a cup of ice," she said. Nancy left the room to check with Katie to make sure he could have the ice. Katie assured her it was all right, but cautioned her not to give him too much at one time.

She thanked Katie and went to get the ice. When she walked into the room, he had his hand out. She put a piece in his mouth.

"This feels so good on my throat. I am very tired today, but I am sleeping better. It is a restful sleep, not fitful like it was before the CAT scan."

"It will be good to talk to your mom and sister tonight. I can finally give them some good news. Do you think you can talk to your mom yet? It sure would help her to hear your voice," Nancy said.

"Maybe I will be able to talk more tomorrow. My throat is still too sore. I am hoping the ice will soothe it enough today so I can talk without scaring her tomorrow or the next day," he replied.

"I will not mention it to her until I know for sure you will be able to talk to her. I do not want to get her hopes up too soon. She will be very happy knowing that you are finally getting better even if she cannot talk to you yet," she told him.

"Can I have more ice chips, please?" he begged.

"I will give you two more pieces. Then you will have to wait a while before you can have anymore. I do not want you to get sick again. Things are going too great now for you to have a relapse," she said.

She sat by his bed holding his hand, telling him the news about their families and friends. He listened to her intently. When she ran out of news to tell him, he turned on the television. They watched a rerun of *I Love Lucy*. It was the episode when Lucy and Ethel worked in the chocolate candy factory. It felt good to laugh together again. It had been such a long time. Shortly after the show was over, the pain got worse and he pushed the PCA. Within ten minutes, he had drifted off to sleep.

Nancy went home and called his mom to give her the good news. When she walked in, Lucky met her at the door. She told the dog that her daddy was doing better then started to cry. They were tears of relief. She let Lucky outside for a while as she tried to stop crying. When the dog was back inside, she called her mother-in-law.

Nancy told her how well David was doing and Dot cried, too. She was so happy her son was feeling better. When Nancy finished giving her the details, Dot asked if she could call the hospital to talk to him. Nancy told her that she was sorry, but he could not talk on the phone yet. But she promised, as soon as he could talk, she would be the first person he called. They ended the call saying "I love you" to each other.

Back at the hospital, David slept most of the afternoon.

Michelle went to check on him, but he was fast asleep. She decided to do therapy with another patient. She would try to make it back later to work with David.

Jackie stopped by on her lunch break for a visit. She sat in the room for a few minutes while he slept, then she kissed him on the forehead through her facemask and left. She had to get something to eat and get back to work.

His nurse took his vital signs every two hours. He slept through it all.

It was early evening before he woke up. He saw the spirit in the room watching over him. He felt safe when he could see it. The first thing he did was pressed the PCA. It had been hours since his last dose. He was in pain, but still not as bad as it was the day before.

Don, his night nurse, had been working for about an hour before he went into David's room to change his bandage.

"Good evening, Mr. Brundage. You had a restful day today, huh?" Without waiting for an answer he continued, "I need to change your bandage and get you washed. After that, if you want, you can go back to sleep."

Just as Don gave David the pain shot for changing his bandage, Nancy came in for a visit. "Hi Babe, I love you and miss you. It looks like I came just in time to help change your bandage."

"Hi, I love you, too," David said with a smile, happy to see his wife. It was just barely a whisper. "Can I have some ice chips, please?" he asked.

"Yes, Dear, I brought a fresh cup in with me," she said as she fed him a couple of chips with a spoon.

David pressed the PCA quite a few times while Nancy and Don were cleaning the wound. He knew it would take ten minutes before he could get another dose out of the machine, but he pushed it anyway. It hurt so much when they cleaned the wound. Just as they put the tape on top of the wound, he started getting groggy. Don slipped out of the room to let them have some time alone.

"I love you, Hon, but I cannot stay awake," David said.

"That is fine, Honey. I will go home and get some sleep, too. You have a good night and stay well please," she said as she kissed him on the lips, but through the mask.

David slept through the night. The only times he woke was when someone came in his room to take his vital signs or blood.

Day Nine

The day started off great. Dr. Emanuel came in at ten minutes to seven.

"Good morning, David. How are you feeling this morning? Your white count is continuing to drop. We are finally beating the infection. I am having the nurse remove the central line from your neck this morning. The PICC line and the one IV in your arm should be enough for all of your needs.

"Now for the news you have been waiting to hear. You can have a Popsicle. If it does not make you sick and I hope it does not, you can have another one later this afternoon," his doctor said happily.

"That is about the best news you could give me right now," David replied.

While he was talking to David, he was removing the bandage. "It looks like you are on the road to recovery. Everything looks great. I will check on you again tomorrow. Have a good day!" he said.

"Thanks, Doc. I have one question before you leave. When can I have the Popsicle?" he asked impatiently.

"As soon as the nurse can bring you one," responded the doctor.

He stepped aside when he saw Katie. She was holding a Popsicle in her hand as a surprise for him. The doctor wanted to see his expression when he finally got to eat one.

He had the biggest grin on his face with his outstretched hand trying to get the Popsicle as fast as he could. The doctor and nurse were laughing as he was tearing off the wrapper. It was one of the hospital Popsicles. They were extremely sweet, but he did not care. He started sucking on it as soon as he removed the wrapper.

"I will see you tomorrow. Take it slowly with that Popsicle," the doctor said.

“Sure, Doc and thank you. It tastes so good. You have a good day because I will now that I have another Popsicle to look forward to later,” David said as he took another lick of the Popsicle.

“I will be back in a few minutes. Enjoy the Popsicle,” Katie said. All of the nurses were hoping he could have something to eat today. His lips were still cracked and he was extremely pale. Getting nutrients from an IV does not get the digestive track operating normally. This was the first step to getting back to normal.

He could not believe it, but he had to stop eating it. He was full and he had only eaten about a quarter of it. His throat felt better, but he was full. He was tired and the pain was coming back again. He pushed the PCA and went to sleep with a smile.

About a half hour later Katie returned to change his bandage. She gave him a pain shot before changing it.

“Let me put that Popsicle in the trash. You can have a fresh one later. I will mark on the chart you only had a quarter of this one,” she told him.

She threw the Popsicle away and went to the desk to write a note in his chart, then went back in to change the bandage.

“Would you call my wife and ask her to bring some orange Popsicles? The ones in the hospital are much too sweet,” David asked.

“Sure, I will call when I am done changing your bandage,” Katie said.

David felt like he was on an assembly line. Right after Katie finished with the wound care, Judy, an IV nurse, walked into the room. She removed the central line from his neck.

“It will only take a minute or two to take this out. You must be glad to be getting rid of it,” Judy said.

“Yes, it hurt every time I turned my head,” he replied.

She was done in about five minutes. Immediately after she removed the needle, he felt relief. That line was causing him more pain than he thought.

He still had the PICC line, the regular IV in his arm, the urinary catheter, the NG tube and oxygen connected to him.

Marjorie came to give him a bath. She had clean linens and hospital gown in her arms as she walked in the room. Finally, he could wear a gown and his neck would not hurt.

She checked his catheter. It was seeping some fluid. “I would like Katie to check your catheter before I start your bath,” Marjorie said as she pushed the call button for a nurse.

“Can I help you?” a voice said.

“This is Marjorie. I am in with Mr. Brundage. Would you have Katie come here for a minute, please?”

“I will tell her,” the voice said.

Katie came in and Marjorie explained the problem. Katie took David’s penis gently in her hand and examined it for any problem. She explained what she was doing to Marjorie. She was a technician, but was going to school to become a nurse.

“You see, there is no pus or redness around the head of the penis. And no sign of bruising either,” Katie explained.

She examined his testicles for any sign of bruising, but there was none.

To Marjorie, she explained, “Look over the entire area for bruising. Make sure the testicles are not sensitive to the touch. If there is no sign of bruising or pus, then it is secretion from the penis. It is not unusual to see some when a catheter has been in for as long as his. It is a must to keep it clean to prevent him from getting an infection.

“While I am here, I will help you bathe him so he can get some rest before his wife comes in for her morning visit,” Katie said.

They worked as a team and even got him shaved again. Katie unhooked the IV in his arm for a second to get the gown on him. He was starting to feel like a man again. Marjorie gave him a couple of ice chips before she and Katie left him alone.

Nancy saw them coming out of David's room. She got frightened until Katie said, "Nothing to worry about, Mrs. Brundage. Your husband is fine. We just finished getting him washed and shaved so you could enjoy your visit this morning without us running in and out of the room," Katie said.

"Thank you for telling me. I never know what to expect when I come here. When you came out of his room at the same time, I thought something was wrong. Thank goodness he is all right.

"I brought some orange Popsicles for him. Is there any place we can keep them so he can have one whenever he is allowed?" she asked them.

"I will put them in the freezer at the nurses' station. His name and room number will be on the box so nobody else will eat them. You can take one in the room with you. He is always ready for something cold to sooth his throat," Marjorie said.

"Thanks, I will," Nancy said with a smile.

She walked into the room smiling, holding the orange Popsicle up. "Hello, Handsome. Look what I brought for you," she said.

He saw her with the Popsicle and his eyes opened wide. He had a huge smile on his face when he said, "Hi, Hon. Is that for me? Thank you for remembering to bring them. You did bring more than one, didn't you?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes, to both questions."

"Are they all orange flavored?"

"Yes, Dear, they are all orange."

"I love you," he said as loud as he could, which was hardly louder than a whisper. He opened the Popsicle and started sucking on it.

"Take it slowly. You will freeze your throat if you eat it too fast," Nancy said, laughing.

"This feels so good on my throat, I do not care if it does freeze it," he said with pure happiness.

"I am tired. I have been up since six o'clock this morning. I have been awake for a whole four hours. That is a record for me," he said.

They talked and laughed for about a half hour. It was good for them to enjoy themselves. It had been such a long time since they could just enjoy each other. She noticed that he was getting tired and pushed the PCA.

"I need to go to sleep for a while. When you come back tonight, will you bring me another Popsicle, please?" he begged.

"I brought a whole box in today and left them with the nurses. They have a freezer behind the desk they put them in. The box has your name and room number on it so one else will eat them. Do not forget to eat them slowly though. I do not want to come back here and find you sick again because you ate a Popsicle too fast. Do you understand me?" she said jokingly.

"I understand and I will remember because I do not want to get sick again. But right now I am ready for sleep. I love you. See you tonight," he said blowing her a kiss.

"Bye, I love you, too," Nancy said as she left the room.

David slept for three hours before he woke up in pain. He medicated himself with the PCA. He was trying to turn the television on when Michelle came in for a physical therapy session.

"Hi Michelle, am I allowed to get up today?" he asked enthusiastically.

“You sure are. We are going to work on your arms and legs. You need to get the circulation going in your limbs. I see they took the central line out of your neck. You should feel better with it gone,” she said.

“Yes, I do feel much better. The doctor is letting me have Popsicles. And I even have a gown on so I will not embarrass you anymore,” David laughed.

“That is great. I bet the Popsicle feels good on your throat. I was not embarrassed seeing you without a gown so do not give it another thought. Let’s get moving those legs of yours,” Michelle said as she removed the sheet and adjusted his gown.

“First, stretch your toes out ten times,” she commanded.

He did as he was told.

“Now, move one leg from left to right five times. Then do the same with the other leg,” she instructed.

He did the exercise with his right leg first. When he started with his left leg, he winced in pain.

“Let me help you. I do not want you to cause yourself any pain on your first day of therapy. Let me know as soon as you feel any pain,” she said as she assisted him with his left leg. He completed a set of leg exercises without any other problems.

His left leg was hurting because when he was a young man, he was in a scooter accident and broke it. When he does not use it for any length of time, it gets stiff and causes him some pain until he works the stiffness out of it.

He did a couple arm exercises, but could not finish because he was too tired. That was the most work he had done in a very long time.

“That was a good session,” Michelle said.

“Yes, but I missed my back scratch,” David whined, jokingly.

“I forgot. I can do it now, but you will have to roll over on your side,” she replied pleasantly.

David grabbed the handrail on the bed and pulled himself over to one side. He was in excruciating pain, but he kept it to himself. He really wanted his back scratched. It felt good. He wished she would never stop, but he knew she had other patients. After lying on his back for nine days, it was well worth every bit of the pain he had to endure. He held the rail for as long as he could and then had to let go. When he did, he rolled on his back. She did not expect him to roll back over, so he rolled right on her arm.

“I am sorry. I hope you can get your arm out from under me,” David said apologetically.

“Yes, I can. It did not hurt me. Try some of the easy exercises you can do by yourself in bed if you get bored later on today. Good job and I will see you tomorrow,” she said.

After she walked out, he pressed the PCA to alleviate the pain and fell asleep until his wife came in a five-thirty that evening.

David was waking up when she came in with another Popsicle.

“Hi, I found out you did not have your second Popsicle yet today. Do you want it now? I can put it back in the freezer if you don’t,” she said teasing him.

“No, please let me have it,” he said reaching his hand out for it.

She gave it to him. He started eating it so fast she had to remind him to slow down. His lips were getting better. They were not as cracked as they were three days ago. He was not quite as pale as he was then either. They talked for about twenty minutes before Dan came in to change his bandage. They were so use to it now, they continued to talk as Nancy and Dan changed it. The pain medication Dan gave him before changing the bandage, made him sleepy again. They had a nice visit, so Nancy kissed him through the stupid mask and went home to make her nightly phone calls.

Day Ten

David woke up about five-thirty on his tenth after the emergency surgery. The light was shining underneath the bathroom door. He felt different somehow. He looked down at the colostomy bag. There was a brown colored stool in it. He grabbed the call button and pressed it.

“Can I help you?” a voice said.

“Yes, tell Dr. Emanuel when he comes in that my stool is finally brown. I can get the NG tube out now.”

Everyone at the nurses’ station laughed when they heard his comment and the joy in his voice. It was so important to him to get that tube out. His throat was raw and sore from it being in for ten days.

Dan went to his room and cleaned the colostomy bag. As soon as he opened it, the odor made David gag. Dan sprayed some of the vanilla scented room spray to mask the odor.

“How can you stand that odor?” he asked Dan.

“I have been doing this for so long, I do not even notice it anymore,” Dan said.

It only took him a minute to clean the bag. David did not watch him. He got very tense and depressed whenever he had to think about it. He was not accepting the fact that he had a colostomy bag hanging on the side of his stomach.

When Dr. Emanuel stopped to read David’s chart, Dan told him the comment David made to over the intercom about his bowel movement and getting the NG tube removed.

The doctor laughed and said, “We better get to his room and remove it then.”

They walked into his room together.

“Good morning, David. Good news, we are going to remove the NG tube right now,” the doctor said.

Before he could say anything, Dan disconnected the tube from the pump. “Please, exhale through your nose as I pull it out. All right, breathe,” Dan instructed. It had all kinds of disgusting stuff attached to it from being in David’s body for the past ten days.

“Your throat will start getting better quickly now. While I am here, I need to check the wound” the doctor said as he peeled back the tape on the bandage.

“This is looking good. Your white blood count is going down. We are definitely making progress,” he informed David.

“When can I get the retention sutures out?” David questioned the doctor.

“That will be at least another four weeks,” Dr. Emanuel answered.

“Dan, before you change the bandage, would you please get him a Popsicle? That will help his throat and ease some of the pain while you change it. He can have up to five Popsicles a day now. I will check in on you tomorrow, David,” he said.

“Thanks, Doc. See you tomorrow,” David said with a big grin as Dr. Emanuel rushed out. He was late for his office hours, but he wanted to get the NG tube out for David.

Dan gave pain medication to give to David then went to get a Popsicle. He was lying comfortably sucking on the Popsicle, enjoying every second of it while Dan changed the bandage. The cold orange flavored ice was soothing on his throat. For the first time in ten days, it did not hurt when he swallowed. He finished it the same time Dan finished putting on the clean bandage.

“That tasted good. Is it possible for me to be loosing the feeling on the skin around the wound and the retention sutures? I hardly even felt you cleaning it,” David asked.

“After you have been opened and closed as many times as you have, the nerves can get cut and it takes a while for them to reconnect. The feeling will come back in time. You need to give yourself time to recover,” Dan said. “Try to get some rest before the day shift nurse comes in to take your vital signs and bathe you. Have a good day and I will see you tonight,” Dan said before he left.

Marjorie came in to give him a bath. He was so tired and relieved to have the NG tube out that he almost fell asleep while she was bathing him.

Nancy came in for her morning visit around nine o'clock and immediately noticed the NG tube was gone.

"Hi, Sweetie, I bet you feel better now. How does your throat feel now?" she asked.

"It feels much better. It feels so good already that you can have my mother call me today. But tell her I will only be able to talk to her for a few minutes. She is probably really worried. After Billy and Dad passing away, she does not want to lose me. I worry about her, too. All she does is sit at home and worry about me all day long," he told his wife.

"I will call her when I get home. Before I leave, I will put the phone on the bed close to you so you can reach it," Nancy said.

"That sounds like a plan. Now, can I have a Popsicle? My throat is starting to hurt again," David asked.

"I will get you one," she said as she went out to get one from his private stash at the nurses' station. It was a pain for her to remove the isolation gear for a few seconds, but she did not say anything to him. She just did it. At this point she was thankful she could still do things for him.

"The nurse just told me you can have five of these a day now. You might even be starting on a clear diet tomorrow," she said as she walked into the room.

They talked for while as he enjoyed the Popsicle. He got tired after a while and the pain was getting worse. The retention sutures were really digging in when he had something in his stomach. He had to push the PCA.

"Please put the phone as close to me as you can so I can get it when my mother calls. The ring is probably loud enough to wake me. I love you, but I need to shut my eyes for a few minutes."

Nancy knew he was tired, so she got ready to go home. "I love you and I will see you later," she said.

On the way home, she stopped to get something to eat for lunch. When she walked in the door, Lucky was there as always to greet her. She put Lucky outside and started eating her lunch. After she was done eating, she let the dog in and played with her for a little while. She was stalling before calling her mother-in-law, giving David time for a little nap. About forty-five minutes after walking in the house, she dialed Dot's phone number.

"Hello," said Dot when she answered the telephone.

"Hi Dot, it's me. Good news today. David got the NG tube out and ..." was all Nancy could get out.

Before she could finish the sentence, Dot asked, "Can I call him now?"

"Yes, he is waiting for your call. You can call him as soon as we hang up," Nancy told her.

"Thank you so much for taking such good care of my son, Nancy. I love you. You will call me again tonight, please," Dot asked.

"Of course I will. Now hang up so you can talk to your son. Love you. Enjoy talking to him. I will call you tonight. Bye," Nancy said and hung up.

For the first time, the phone rang in David's room. The ringer was loud. He pulled himself over and picked up the receiver. He knew his mother would be on the other end of the line, so he hid the pain in his voice when he answered.

"Hi, Mom, how are you?" David said. His voice was still raspy from the NG tube, but it did not hurt as much to speak.

"How am I? How are you, is what I need to know? I was so worried about you. I thought I was going to lose you, too. I want to be there with you, but I am having a hard time breathing when I walk. Nancy has been wonderful keeping me informed about your condition.

It sounds like you are on the mend now,” his mother said, crying and laughing at the same time. She had not talked to her son in ten long days.

“I really miss your daily calls. It is very lonely here with Dad gone. Gail comes when she can, but she is very busy with her job. It is a long drive for her to visit too often.” She had a lot bottled up and talked continuously for at least five minutes.

“Do you know when you will be getting out of that special room you are in?” she asked. She had never heard of a Step Down Unit, so she did not understand the concept of it.

“I will have to stay here until the retention sutures are removed, which will be about four more weeks. The doctor wants to make sure it is healed enough so I do not eviscerate again. At least I got that stupid tube out of my nose and I can have Popsicles,” he replied.

“You are definitely on the mend because they are letting you have something to eat,” Dot said, trying to convince David, as well as herself, the worst was over.

“Yes, I am much better, but my throat is still sore. I hope you don’t mind, but I need to get some rest now. I will talk to you soon. I love you, Mom,” David said.

“I love you, son. Please have Nancy tell me when I can call you again. I miss you. Get some rest and I will talk to you soon,” she said through her sobs

They both hung up the phone at the same time. He felt relieved after talking to his mom. He knew she would not worry quite so much now that she had talked to him.

He was so exhausted, he fell right to sleep, but not before pushing the PCA one more time.

Jackie stopped in about one o’clock that afternoon for a visit. He had just opened his eyes to find the PCA when he saw her in a gown, facemask and gloves. At first he thought she was an angel. Then he realized who she was. She still looked like an angel to him. She was his living, breathing angel. She was his daughter.

“Hi, Dad, the tube is out of your nose. I bet you feel much better with it out.” Jackie said in tears. They were tears of joy because her dad was finally turning the corner.

“Honey, don’t cry. You will make me start and it will hurt,” he said.

She started laughing. He laughed, too. They were laughing so hard tears were rolling down their cheeks. But they were happy tears.

When they stopped laughing enough to talk again, Jackie said, “The nurse said you could have another Popsicle, so I brought one in with me. It will taste better than that bag of stuff going into your arm,” Jackie said, happy to see her father feeling so good.

“Thank you, I just woke up and my mouth is very dry,” he said as he took the Popsicle and started eating it.

Jackie could see how much he was improving. “You look so much better, Dad. I talked to Nana this morning after you and she said you were ‘on the mend’. I call her more often since you have been in the hospital. It helps her to hear how you are doing from me and Nancy.”

They had a good talk. It was more relaxed than any they had since the surgery. It looked like the crisis was over. They watched some television together and talked for a while. Then Jackie said, “I have to go back to work, but I will see you again tomorrow afternoon. I love you, Dad.”

“I love you, too, Jackie. Bye,” David said.

As she was leaving the room, David turned off the television and slept for a few hours.

Mid afternoon, Michelle came in to get him up and walk around the room. She knew it would be hard for him. She had seen the retention sutures and the cuts they caused. She approached him feeling very confident that he could handle a short session.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Brundage. Today the doctor would like you to get out of bed and walk around the room at least once with the aide of a walker. I see you no longer have the NG tube. I bet that feels good. Your throat will feel better now, too. Katie will be in to unhook the

IV so you can be free to walk around the room without worrying about it. Push the PCA now while you are still connected to the machine,” Michelle suggested.

Katie came in and said, “I will give you a pain injection then disconnect you from the IV and your PCA. It will be easier to get out of bed without them,” Katie said.

Both Katie and Michelle got him ready for the walk. Michelle put a harness around him so she could hold him if it was necessary. Katie hooked the catheter bag to the walker.

“First roll over on your side then push yourself to a sitting position. You are doing great,” said Michelle enthusiastically.

When he pushed up, the retention sutures dug into him as he put pressure on his abdomen. He continued until he was sitting up on the bed. Michelle helped him get his legs over the edge. The pain was unbelievable in a sitting position. Michelle rewarded him by scratching his back. She remembered how much he enjoyed it the last time she worked with him.

“That makes the pain worth it. I think a good back scratch could replace drugs,” he said relaxing slightly.

“With one hand on the bedrail and the other on the walker, stand up,” commanded Michelle when she finished scratching his back.

It only took one push and he was standing.

“Get your balance and try to take a few steps, but take it very slowly,” she said. He walked around the room very slowly. He was in extreme pain, but he still felt good because he was walking. Maybe he was getting better after all.

He sat down on the bed. Michelle helped him lift his legs up onto the bed.

“I need to lay down now. Please, I need my pain medication hooked up again,” David said in severe pain. He was out of breath and turning pale. Katie got the equipment hooked up as quickly as possible.

“All right, Mr. Brundage, you can push the PCA now,” Katie told him.

“You did a good job, Mr. Brundage. Remember, to do the leg and arm exercises you can do by yourself. We will do a little more walking tomorrow,” Michelle said.

“Thank you,” David said and closed his eyes.

Nancy came in for her evening visit, but only stayed for a few minutes. David was worn out and in quite a bit of pain from the therapy. The retention sutures dug into him while he was walking.

Bea met her in the hall and told her David got up and walked around the room, so he would probably be very tired for her visit. She knew how emotional Nancy had been since her husband had been the hospital. She wanted to prepare her before she saw her husband. They got in the isolation gear and went into his room together.

“Hi, Honey. Bea was telling me you were up today. That is great news,” said Nancy.

“Yes, but now I am in pain and very tired tonight,” he said wincing.

Bea gave him a shot for the pain before she changed the bandage. That was all he needed. He went back to sleep. Nancy and Bea talked quietly while they changed his bandage. Nancy felt better knowing he was able to get out of bed and walk even if it was just around his room. Bea left quietly. Nancy left, too, after giving her husband a goodnight kiss.

Bea checked his vital signs during the night, but David slept through it. The day’s activity was good for him, but it had worn him out.

Day Eleven

There was a knock on the door. “Dietary,” the person called out. A man in the isolation gear walked in and put a tray down on the table next to David. He could not believe it. He was finally getting real food.

He pushed the button to raise his bed and pulled the tray over close to him. His mouth was watering. He thought it was going to be bacon and eggs. Big mistake! It was apple juice, beef broth and black coffee. He drank all of the juice and coffee, but could only get down a couple of sips of the broth before he was stuffed.

Shortly after eating, he had a bowel movement in his colostomy bag. It was still normal in color.

He would get tired so quickly. He was already tired from just eating liquids. He went back to sleep. He thought his nurse forgot about him because he had not seen anyone since he woke up, except the man who brought his breakfast.

Ann finally walked in a few minutes later and said, "Good Morning, Mr. Brundage. The doctor has put you on a liquid diet finally, but you already know that. I see you ate everything except the broth. That is pretty good for the first meal in eleven days." She took the tray and put it outside his room. Then she came back in to clean the colostomy bag and give him his bath.

"You must feel better. You had something to eat and no NG tube in your nose. You are getting better ever day now.

"A colostomy nurse will be in about ten-thirty to talk to you about the various options you will have to take care of the colostomy. I am sorry, did I hurt you?" Ann asked as he winced from pain.

"When you pulled the bag off, the tape was rubbing against an open cut," David said.

"I see the problem. I will cover it before I replace the bag. That should help it the next time it is changed," Ann said feeling sorry she had caused him more pain.

"The colostomy nurse will look at that when she arrives. She will have a better idea how to take care of it. I would leave the bag off until she gets here, but I cannot take the chance that you will not have another movement. That would be a real mess to clean up. It would probably embarrass you unnecessarily, too," she said.

"Thank you for thinking of that. I am embarrassed enough with this stupid thing," David said to her with gratitude.

After she put the bag on, she started his bath. She shaved him, too. It had been a few days since his last shave and he needed one badly. She put his favorite aftershave and deodorant on him. His room smelled like *Old Spice*. All ninety plus pounds of her rolled him around like a rag doll when she bathed him. He was amazed at how strong she was for such a small women.

Right after Ann got him into a fresh gown and put clean linens on his bed, she said she had to go check on her other patients.

Nancy walked in about ten o'clock for the appointment with the colostomy nurse. She and David talked about everything, but what was on their minds. They were both thinking about what the colostomy nurse was doing to tell them.

Ann returned to his room about three minutes before the nurse arrived.

The colostomy nurse knocked on the door at exactly ten-thirty.

"Good morning. My name is Susan Garvey and I am a colostomy nurse," she said introducing herself.

Ann and Nancy greeted her, but David did not acknowledge her in any way. He did not want any part of the conversation. It was depressing for him to listen to talk about it. He was still trying to accept the fact that he had one.

Susan opened the bag of colostomy products. She had different types of bags and products for caring for the stoma. She also had products to control the odor, which interested David, but he still did not say anything.

She told them the advantages and disadvantages of each type of bag. Nancy was listening intently, but David looked disgusted.

Susan removed the bag, but this time it did not hurt as much as it did earlier. Ann showed her the sore that was causing him pain when the bag was removed. Susan told them she

had a product that was like plastic skin. They would use it to fill the trench from the stoma to the main wound. It would eliminate the pain it was causing him and would prevent feces from getting into the wound.

All the talk about bags and stomas was depressing him. The three women continued to talk while he pushed the PCA to escape the disgusting conversation. He really did not want to live with a bag attached to the side of his belly that filled up with crap.

David looked at the spirits outside the room. They were looking back at him. They were shaking their heads disapprovingly. He did not care. All they had to do was go to the light and it would be great for them. He had to stay here on earth and wear a stupid bag. It was the first time since the operation that he realized the full impact of the colostomy.

Nancy was listening to every word Susan was saying because her husband was alive and she intended to keep him that way. She was willing to do anything to keep him alive.

Susan wrapped up the conversation by saying, "I will be back daily to check on your progress, David. If either of you have any questions, leave them at the nurses' station and I will get back to you as soon as possible. Be patient, Nancy, he will come around eventually."

"Thank you for everything, Susan," Nancy said as Susan and Ann left her and David alone in his room.

"David, Dr. Emanuel told you this was only temporary. We need to know how to take care of it until you can get it removed," Nancy said, trying to snap him out of his mood.

"All right, we will do it, but right now I am going to sleep," he said. He was angry and depressed as he closed his eyes, blocking out everything, including his wife.

She left the hospital worried that he would get sick again because he was depressed. She did not know what to do or say to him. She was not sure how to tell his mother about it. She decided the truth was the best way to go. She hoped she could put a good spin on it when she did tell her, but that seemed almost impossible. She only had one good thing to tell her. He was finally on a liquid diet.

David slept until two o'clock when Michelle came to do his physical therapy. She greeted him in her usual cheery way, but he did not respond.

"Let's get this over with," he groaned. She tried to cheer him up by scratching his back, but that did not even help. He made no comment whatsoever.

He got up and walked around the room in extreme pain and then flopped back down on the bed. He pulled his own legs back onto the bed. The pain was so severe tears were streaming down his face. To make matters worse, he was feeling sorry for himself. He did not care if he hurt himself. He was hoping he would die.

"You did very well today, Mr. Brundage. If you keep up the good work, you should be able to go home soon," she continued to be upbeat, but David was just a grumpy, bitter man.

Ann went in the room to hook up the IV and PCA. As soon as they were hooked up, he pushed the PCA and went to sleep without saying another word to Michelle or Ann.

They walked out of the room together. They were concerned about his depression. Ann said she would talk to his doctor about it. Michelle told her to keep her informed on how he was doing. Ann promised she would. They left each other to go help other patients.

Nancy came back around six o'clock that evening and brought David a Popsicle, hoping he was not quite as depressed as he was that afternoon. He ate half of it, but only because his throat hurt and he could not tolerate the pain. For dinner, he ate some pudding and did not even try to eat anything else.

They talked, but the tension in the room could be cut with a knife. He was depressed and did not want to talk about his illness, so they talked about things at home, their children and dog. They watched television in silence for a while. Nancy did not know how to help him and it was killing her. She was not angry with him, but she was frustrated with the situation. She tried to

put herself in his place and knew she would probably feel the way. But it still did not help her to help him deal with it. He had to find a way to deal with it himself.

She needed to get away from the depression for a while and was relieved when he said, “I love you, but I am tired and not in any mood for visitors, not even you. I do not mean to hurt you, but I have to find a way to deal with this and you cannot help me do it. So please go home and get some sleep. I will try to be in a better frame of mind in the morning. I do love you, Nancy and I am sorry for hurting you.”

“I love you, too and I understand what you are saying about finding your own answer to this awful situation. Do not worry about me, I will be all right. You just work on finding a way to deal with this, please, for my sake, if not your own. Goodnight,” she said and left his room.

When she got home she called the family to tell them about the depression and that he was on a liquid diet. They took the news as well as could be expected. His mom was the most upset, of course. But Nancy was tired of dealing with everything and trying to help everyone else deal with it. She was supportive for her mother-in-law, but could not wait to get off the phone. She wanted to go out and get something to eat with a friend and try to forget about everything for a night. She called Milli. Nancy had been calling her every two or three days to keep her informed on David’s condition. Milli told her if she ever needed to get away for a while, to call her and they would go out and do something for an evening.

Milli answered the phone on the second ring when she saw Nancy’s name on the caller ID. Nancy told her how awful things were for David and asked her if she could go out to get something to eat and talk about anything but hospitals and the people in them. Milli told her she would be over as soon as she slipped on some decent clothes.

Twenty minutes later, Milli rang the doorbell. Nancy opened the door and almost fell into Milli’s arms crying. Milli held her in the doorway consoling her until she stopped crying. Nancy apologized for her break down.

Milli said, “I do not want you to apologize for showing me your feelings. I cannot even image how hard this is for you. I told you before, when you need me, all you have to do is call and I will be here. I love you. You know that, so you can cry all you want. And after you are done, we can go out and forget all this for the evening.”

Nancy was laughing and crying at the same time. She was never so happy to have a true friend. And that was what Milli was to her. She thanked her for her love and friendship and told her she felt the same way. She had Milli crying, too. They cried themselves out then went out to dinner.

Nancy could not help talking about David. He was all that was on her mind. Milli just listened. It felt good for Nancy to talk to someone about him and not have to worry about how it would affect her.

They had a nice dinner. When Nancy was all talked out, Milli told her things that were happening in her life. It was nothing special, just every day things, but Nancy was interested. They sat there talking and drinking coffee for almost two hours after they had finished eating. It was a weeknight, so the restaurant was not busy and that suited them just fine.

Nancy finally admitted that she was tired and needed to go home to get some sleep. She wanted to go back to the hospital early the next morning.

Milli asked if she was sure she wanted to go home. Milli did not want her to go home and cry herself to sleep. Nancy told her she would be fine thanks to her and the evening away from it all. Milli drove her home and asked if she wanted her to come in for a while. Nancy told her that it was not necessary. She would be all right alone. She promised not to cry herself to sleep. They hugged and kissed each other and Nancy thanked her again for spending the evening with her.

Back at the hospital, Ann told Bea about David's depression when she came in for her shift. The doctor had ordered an antidepressant for him. His depression was not going to be fixed by any drug. He had to find a way to except his situation.

Later that night, Bea told David about her husband. He had a colostomy, too. It had since been reversed, but he went through the same thing David was going through. She talked to him about taking care of it and getting better. The stronger he got, the less time he would have the bag

He asked if she would scratch his back while she talked. She did and it helped him relax. The talk seemed to alleviate some of the depression, but not much. It did give him something to think about though.

"Thank you, Bea. Telling me about your husband gave me some hope. This thing really sucks. The pain is excruciating all day long and I can hardly walk. I cannot go to the bathroom like a regular person. I cannot even clean myself. I pee in a bag. I crap in a bag. I keep dying and coming back. My belly is split right up the center and there are wires holding me together that hurt like hell. This was my third operation for the same thing. And I am not done yet. I need a fourth one to reverse this stupid bag.

"How much more can I take? How much more can my poor wife take? She has had her hands inside my belly and seen my guts coming out of me. Now she is expected to change my bandage when I go home. She has to put gauze inside me as part of the bandage change twice a day. She will have to change this stupid bag and give me a bath. I am use to helping her, but she has had to be a nurse to me for the past four months and it looks like it could go on for a year or more.

"If I could die, it would be all over. I would not cause such anguish to everyone. It would be a lot easier on them. I am so tired and hurt so much everyday. It is worse when I have to get up and walk around this dismal room. The hooks from the retention sutures move and stab me in my gut constantly with every step I take. The drugs are not helping that much anymore. I am either immune to them or the pain is so bad now, it just is not strong enough. It is not getting better. It feels like it is getting worse. I have been on the drugs for so long now that I am probably addicted to them. If that is the case, I am going to have a whole new pain when this round is done. Just as I beat the addiction for the drugs, I will need another operation, which will bring the addiction back and who knows what I may need after that operation.

"My sister went in for a gall bladder removal and wound up having a heart by-pass operation because of blood clots. That could be me during the next operation. Cutting on my family is a very dangerous thing. I made it through a lot of tough things in my life, including Vietnam, but this one is beating me," he said finally breaking down and pouring his heart out to Bea.

He did not know it, but his wife was doing the same thing with Milli at the restaurant. They were probably venting there troubles at the exact same time.

He pushed the PCA, as he lied there sobbing. He finally got out his deepest fears and started to feel better.

Bea listened to every word he said without saying a word. David had been through the mill. His fears were justified and she was amazed at how much he had endured. She felt helpless. He was exhausted from putting his fears into words and finally fell asleep.

Bea turned out the light in the room, leaving the bathroom light on, in case he woke up. She quietly left the room. She had tears in her eyes as she walked out. His out pouring of pain and agony touched her profoundly.

About an hour later, she went back to change his bandage. She did not want to bother him, but she had her orders and had to follow them. He was still sleeping. She gave him a shot for pain and changed the bandage.

“Thank you for listening to me ramble on, Bea. It helped me immensely,” David said still half asleep.

“You should tell your wife everything you told me tonight. She feels lost right now and she wants to help you, but does not know how. Let her know what you are feeling. She will be able to help much more than I can and you will be helping her at the same time,” Be said.

“Thank you, I will think about telling her, but I do not want to put more on her. She has been so strong for me,” he said again as the medication began to work. He went back to sleep before she even finished changing the bandage.

Day Twelve

The day started off the same as any other day. David woke up and drank his liquid breakfast. Then he had his bath and linens changed. The talk with Bea helped him tremendously. He just needed to get everything he was feeling out and Bea happened to be the person he trusted enough to talk to about it. She did not have a vested interest in him, other than as her patient. The things he needed to say would not hurt her like they would hurt the people he loved.

Something strange was happening at home with his wife that morning.

Nancy was greeted by Lucky with her paws on the side of the bed. That precious dog had a toy in her mouth. It was a red heart shaped toy with a recording built into it that repeated the words “I love you” when it was squeezed. They called it her *I love you heart*. Nancy bought it for her on Valentine’s Day that year.

Lucky was squeezing her toy constantly to make it talk. She had several talking and squeaky toys she played with all the time. That day was different though. She followed Nancy wherever she went with the heart in her mouth. She kept it in her mouth even when Nancy put her dog food in the bowl.

After Nancy had her coffee, she went upstairs to take a shower to get ready to visit David. When she got out of the shower, Lucky was standing in front of her with the toy heart in her mouth, wagging her tail. Nancy played with her for a few minutes, then got dressed and went back down stairs. Lucky followed her like a shadow. She let the dog outside for a minute and checked the other doors to make sure they were locked. She let her back in and locked that door.

She was about to leave when she noticed Lucky still had the red heart back in her mouth. She had never played with a toy more than a few minutes at a time. She had it in her mouth since she woke Nancy up that morning. Nancy sat in the chair and talked to her.

“Mommy has to go to the hospital to see Daddy. You be a good girl,” she told the dog.

Lucky would usually lie down on the floor by the front door when Nancy told her she was going out. She stayed right in front of her with that toy heart in her mouth. Finally she put it down at Nancy’s feet.

Lucky did a thing that was the equivalent to saying “please”. Instead of barking, she whispered a sound like *yulp*. She would make the sound every time she wanted something, like a doggie bone or treat. She would repeat it over and over until she got what she wanted.

With all the attention she paid to the toy heart that morning, Nancy asked, “Do you want me to take the *I love you heart* to Daddy?”

Lucky dropped the heart and wagged her tail and saying *yulp, yulp, yulp* in a whisper.

David was still in isolation so Nancy put the toy heart in a plastic baggie and asked Lucky again, “Are you sure you want me to give this to Daddy?”

Her response was *yulp*.

It was the first time Nancy ever left the house and the dog was wagging her tail. She watched Nancy leave with the toy from the front window.

By the time Nancy arrived at the hospital, David was depressed because the colostomy bag had to be changed again. The whole process was humiliating and embarrassing for him. She was anxious to see him, but had to stop to get the gown on before she could go in the room. She walked in and said, "I brought a gift for you from Lucky. She chose it and made me bring it to you."

She gave him the plastic bag with the toy heart in it and told him the whole story of why she had to take it to the hospital. The story was so cute, it perked David up. He took the heart and squeezed it. "I love you" came out of it.

He opened the bag before Nancy could stop him. "I want to hold my hand in the bag for a minute or two so she can smell my scent when you give it back to her. You can wash my hand off when I take it out."

"That was a good idea," Nancy agreed because she saw how much it was helping him with his depression. The risk of infection would be kept to a minimum.

They talked while he held the heart getting his scent deep into the fabric.

"All right, take it and wash my hands, please," he said.

Nancy washed his hand and asked if he would like a Popsicle.

"Yes, I would. That would be great," he replied.

Nancy was amazed at the transformation. What the love of a dog can do to cheer a person up even from miles away. It was amazing!

She stayed for another half hour. David was tired and needed to go back to sleep. He asked his wife to sit with him while he was falling asleep. Of course, she did.

When he started snoring, she quietly left the room to go back home to see how Lucky would react when she smelled his scent on the toy heart.

Lucky was at the window when she turned into the driveway. She was barking like crazy by the time Nancy drove into the garage. When she opened the door, Lucky started jumping and wagging her tail more than usual.

She always got a doggie bone when Nancy returned home. That day, Lucky took the bone and dropped it on the kitchen floor. She did not want it, which was very unusual. Nancy showed her the toy heart and Lucky whispered *yulp*. As Nancy opened the plastic bag, Lucky had her paws up on the counter so she could get it. At last, Lucky got the red heart in her mouth. She took it into the living room walking over the doggie treat. She put the heart on the floor and sniffed it for a ten minutes. Her tail was wagging tail non-stop. When she stopped sniffing it, she gave her mommy a kiss. Then she went over to her treat and happily ate it.

David told the dog story to anyone who walked into his room that day. Lucky must have felt the tension Nancy was feeling about David. It was the perfect day for Lucky to miss her daddy. David and Nancy really needed the distraction. It kept David's mind off the colostomy for a while.

The rest of the day was routine. He had his liquid lunch and dinner. Even that did not bother him as much as it did the day before. His bandage was changed and he walked around the room again. It was comforting, a routine day with no major problems.

Nancy went back that night and told David how Lucky reacted when she gave her the heart. They talked about how amazing their family pet was and how she helped David get through the day happier than he thought possible.

That night David went to sleep feeling much better about his chances for a complete recovery. He put his thoughts into getting better and getting rid of the stupid colostomy bag. He felt confident for the first time that he could get his life back all because of a special dog and her little red heart!

Day Thirteen

Things changed for David at the drop of a hat. He woke up around five o'clock feeling nauseous. He pushed the call button

"Can I help you?" a voice asked.

"I need some nausea medicine as soon as possible, please," he replied.

Bea came in and gave David an injection for nausea. She took his vital signs. His blood pressure was high and he had a temperature again. It was 100.2 degrees.

"I am giving you the some pain medication, too. I will be back in a few minutes to change your bandage," Bea said. She wanted to make sure that there was no infection in his wound. That could account for his increase in temperature and the nausea. It was his thirteenth day in step-down and they were still being very cautious with him.

David was sweating when Bea returned. She took his temperature again and it was 101.4 degrees. It was climbing again.

When Bea peeled back the bandage she was relieved to see it was still clean, pink and not infected. She took some extra time cleaning it to make sure all of the dried blood was removed. He was more susceptible to infection with a fever.

After she changed the bandage and cleaned the colostomy bag, she gave him a bath. His gown and bed linens were soaking wet from him sweating so badly.

He was tired after his bath. The pain and nausea medicine helped him go back to sleep almost immediately after Bea was finished changing his linens.

Dr. Emanuel came in to check on him, but stopped by the desk first to talk to his nurse. Bea told him that David had a temperature and his blood pressure was on the rise again.

"Yes, his temperature would be elevated. Sometime during the night his white blood count went through the roof again. We may have to put the NG tube back in if things get any worse. I am taking him off the liquid diet and no Popsicles until this is under control. He can have ice chips, but only a couple of pieces per hour. Since you just finished changing his bandage, I will not remove it. Was there any sign of infection?" he asked Bea.

"No, Doctor. The wound was clean and had good color," she answered.

They walked into David's room together.

"Good morning, David. I have decided to take some precautionary steps. I am taking you back off the liquid diet and Popsicles today. You can have ice chips, but only a couple every hour. When your system starts passing normal stools again you can go back on the liquid diet. This is to prevent you from vomiting. If you vomit, you will have to have the NG tube put back in to clean out your stomach. It would have to be in for at least twenty-four hours. That is why I want to be cautious. We cannot risk you eviscerating again," Dr. Emanuel explained.

"I do not want another surgery either. I hope not eating will work," David said.

"I will check back with you tonight before I go home. Try to sleep as much as you can. That will be the best medicine for you today. See you later," said the doctor before he left.

"I have to pass down my patients to the day shift nurse. Lisa will be your nurse today," Bea said.

When she left the room, David went to sleep for a while.

"Good morning, Mr. Brundage. My name is Lisa and I will be your nurse today. I will start by getting you washed," said his nurse.

She was going to give him another bath. Bea did not tell her he just had a bath. Well, he was not about to tell her he had just had one. He enjoyed them too much. With all the sweating he was doing because of the fever, it would not hurt anyway.

"I am getting nauseous again," David said.

"You are not due for another dose of medication for another hour and a half. Try to think about something nice to take your mind off it and maybe it will go away," Lisa said.

Lisa and Mary, the technician, were wearing their protective gowns, but both of them were untied in the back. When they moved around, the gown would fall off their shoulders.

They worked on him getting the front side of him washed and then rolled him on his side to clean his back.

“Do you think you can stand while we can wash your backside? You can sit in the chair while we changed the linens,” Lisa said.

David said it would feel good to sit in a chair for a couple of minutes, so they covered him with a towel and helped him stand up. As soon as he was on his feet he vomited all over the front of Lisa. Because her gown was so loose, it went behind it and down her blouse. As soon as he started vomiting, the towel dropped, exposing him. He vomited three more times. It went all over the room. The green bile bounced off Lisa’s dress and back onto David’s stomach contaminating the wound areas, colostomy and catheter. It splashed on Mary’s head and hair while she was leaning over the bed removing the sheets. Lisa got the worst of it. She was covered from head to toe. But through it all, she hung onto David and did not let him fall.

Mary hit the emergency call button.

“We have a contamination issue in room 2. We need a clean up crew, but make sure they dress appropriately before coming into the room,” Lisa said loudly.

He was a big man, but they managed to get him back on the bed. He was slippery because he was nude and covered in vomit. Mary and Lisa did not try to get cleaned up until help arrived. Their only concern was for David. They wiped their hands off and started to clean David. It looked like a sewerage pipe had backed up and exploded in the room. They were only able to wipe some the mess off David with the towels they had left from his bath. The vomit had started soaking into the bandage. If it seeped through and got in the wound, it could be a catastrophe.

Three more people arrived. They were properly gowned and had facemasks on because the room was still an isolation room. Judy, one of the hazard team members, told Lisa to get into the shower and put on some clean scrubs. When she saw David was being taken care of, she striped and jumped into the shower. It did not take her long to get cleaned up and Mary was right behind her getting the vomit off her body and hair. Their clothes were put in plastic bags for special contamination treatment.

The room had to be completely wiped down with alcohol.

David was extremely pale. “I am so sorry. I could not stop it. It was out before I even knew it was going to happen,” he said embarrassed and humiliated. He was lying on the bed with five women working around him. His bandage and colostomy bag were removed and his body was washed. A clean bandage and bag were put on. One of them cleaned his groin area to make sure the catheter was not contaminated.

Lisa felt so bad. If only she had given him the nausea medicine.

“It is not your fault Mr. Brundage, it was mine. I did not give you the medication when you asked for it. I will have you comfortable as soon as humanly possible,” Lisa promised.

“It was not your fault, Lisa. You were only following the doctor’s orders. I was not due for another hour and a half. You would have gotten in trouble if you gave it to me too soon. I will make a deal with you. If you will not feel bad, I will try not to feel bad that I vomited all over you and Mary,” said David.

They both looked at each other and smiled for a second before Lisa got back to cleaning him up and making him more comfortable.

It was a dangerous situation. The nurses and technicians had him and his room cleaned up and under control in less than an hour. It seemed to take much longer to David. The retention sutures were digging into his stomach muscles, so he pushed the PCA every ten minutes.

“I have to call the doctor and tell him what happened. I am sorry, but he will probably order the NG tube be put back,” Lisa said apologetically.

“Would you ask for the maximum amount of pain med before they insert that damn thing? I do not want to puke again,” David said.

“Yes I will. I am glad you reminded me,” she said.

Dr. Emanuel could not believe it. David was doing so well the day before. He was going backwards. His condition constantly baffled Dr. Emanuel.

David’s blood pressure was extremely high. They were working to keep it under control. Every incident caused his blood pressure to shoot up. When it did, the meds had to be changed. Unfortunately, Lisa was right. The doctor ordered the NG tube to be put back. David was given more antibiotics to fight the infection through the IV. Lisa would have to put the tube in soon. With the wound exposed to David’s vomit, the doctor ordered a massive dose of antibiotics. David could die from another infection in the wound. He ordered the pain medication before Lisa put in the NG tube.

Dr. Emanuel never had a patient go through so much.

It had only been five minutes when Lisa was back to insert the NG tube. She administered the pain medication. She waited a few minutes for it to take effect.

She was good at putting the NG tube down his throat. He was so medicated he could hardly feel or notice anything except the spirits in the room.

“All right, I am done. You try to get some rest.” Lisa said.

Lisa did not catch Nancy at home to tell her that David had been put back on the critical list. Nancy walked passed the desk and noticed a lot of people in hospital greens, but did not think too much of it. She just went right to David’s room.

Nancy was shocked when she opened the door and saw him. He was as white as the sheets with five bags of medicines hooked up to his IV and PICC lines. It startled her when she saw the NG tube hooked back up.

He looked dead. She screamed and her legs buckled. When she screamed, David opened his eyes, but did not see anyone. She had fallen to the floor. The nurses ran into the room.

“What happened to my husband?” Nancy asked, from a sitting position on the floor.

Lisa ran over to her and helped her up. She walked her out of the room and asked if she was all right.

Nancy replied, sobbing, “Yes, but what happened to my husband. When I left yesterday, he was feeling better and in good spirits. What could have happened in the course of one night?”

As Nancy was talking, Lisa was guiding her toward the waiting room a couple doors down from David’s room. When they reached the room, Lisa told her to sit down. Lisa told her the whole story, leaving nothing out.

Nancy cried, “This is too much. I never know how I am going to find him when I go into that room. When I saw him today, I thought he was dead. He looks so pale and he was not moving. It did not even look like he was breathing. Did his heart stop again?”

“No, but he was very sick this morning. He woke up nauseous and vomited while Mary and I were washing him and changing the linens.

I think he saw us naked. We were covered with his vomit and had to strip and shower in his room. We could not take a chance on contaminating the whole floor,” Lisa explained.

After Lisa told Nancy the whole story, Nancy felt a little bit better.

“Seeing you two naked probably kept him alive. He is one hundred per cent man,” Nancy proudly said.

“Glad we could help,” Lisa said with a smile.

“I am, too,” Nancy said, smiling back at the nurse.

“You can go in and see him now. He is depressed again, but that is to be expected after going through what he did this morning. It is not the same deep depression he was in the other day,” Lisa said, trying to give her patient’s wife some hope.

“Thank you, Lisa, for being there to help him,” Nancy said as she stood up to go back into David’s room.

“Good morning, Love. I understand you had some excitement here this morning. You and two naked women in here, huh?” she said trying to get him out of the depression.

“What? I was as sick as a dog this morning. What nude women are you talking about?” he asked.

She told him what Lisa told her, but did not even get a reaction from him. He was still very sick.

“I am exhausted Hon. It is been a long day for me all ready. Would you mind if I went back to sleep?” he asked with his eyes already starting to close.

“No, I do not mind at all. Sleep is probably the best thing for you right now. Would it bother you if I stayed here until you fall asleep?” she asked him. Much to her surprise, he said he would feel safer if she did stay with him. He did not want to be alone and he trusted her with his life.

She sat in the room watching him sleep for a long time. She was praying to God to spare her husband from any more ordeals like the one he went through that morning.

David was snoring, so she decided to go home for a while and try to take a nap. She was pretty exhausted herself.

As she walked passed the nurses’ station, she stopped and told Lisa that David did not remember seeing them nude. She asked her to do whatever it took to keep him alive.

“Thank you and would you thank Mary for me, too? I will see you later this evening,” Nancy said.

The rest of the day was relatively quiet. Lisa gave him his meds and checked his vital signs throughout the day while he slept. The doctor ordered a sedative for him. He needed to rest and stay quiet and the sedative would help him.

Lisa called Michelle in physical therapy to cancel his session for the day. She told her how bad he was feeling and what had happened that morning. Michelle felt so bad for him, but knew she could not do anything to help him. She thanked Lisa for keeping her informed.

A few minutes before Lisa’s shift ended, she checked one last time on David. She wiped his forehead with a clean, moist face cloth. He had been sweating and needed a bath, but he needed rest more than a bath so she let him sleep.

She told the night nurse, Larry the things that happened during her shift. She asked him to try to find the time to give him a sponge bath. He said he would make sure he found a few minutes for it.

Nancy arrived shortly after seven o’clock that evening. David was awake, but understandably depressed. He was not in the mood to talk because the NG tube was hurting his throat again. They watched television quietly for about a half hour then David fell asleep. She thought about staying with him all that night, but she was no spring chicken. Sleeping in a chair all night would probably break her back. She kissed her husband and went home to sleep in their bed alone.

After she left the hospital, she started getting depressed not knowing how she would find him in the morning. When she got home, she made all the necessary phone calls and went to bed without even eating any supper. She was exhausted and fell asleep right away.

Larry kept his word to Lisa, before he changed David’s bandage, he gave him a sponge bath. David barely moved the whole time. Larry checked in on him more often than usual that night. Everyone involved with David’s care was extremely worried about him.

Day Fourteen

Dr. Emanuel checked on David around five-thirty that morning. He would be in surgery most of the day, but wanted to see if there were any ill effects from David vomiting the day before. He read his chart and lab tests he had done during the night.

Good news, the white count was going back down. The antibiotics were working. He checked the wound to make sure there was no infection as a result of the possible contamination.

“Larry, would you come with me please? I would like to have David’s bandage changed while I am here. I need to examine the wound for infection. I cannot afford to be worrying about him while I am in surgery. He sure is the toughest man I have ever seen,” he said and Larry agreed with him.

They went to David’s room and woke him up. Larry turned on the overhead light and Dr. Emanuel said, “Good morning, David. How are you feeling today?”

“My throat hurts the most, but I still have the pain in my stomach, too,” he answered.

“Do you feel nauseous at all?” the doctor asked.

“No, I just hurt a lot,” David said as he pushed the PCA. Larry gave him a shot of pain medication because they were about to clean his wound again for the umpteenth time. After the shot had a minute to kick in, the doctor removed the bandage.

“Get some saline solution. I want to irrigate it, Larry,” the doctor commanded. Larry took him the wound care tray. It had all the necessary sterile equipment to care for the wound. The doctor was much rougher than the nurses when he cleaned the wound.

“Hey Doc, did you know I am awake and not on the operating table?” asked David.

“That sure hurts a lot for the amount of drugs you gave me.”

David was back. He was giving his doctor a hard time again. He even had his sense of humor back.

“Sorry, David, but I have to be sure it is clean. I was worried about it all last night. I know it hurts. I also know that you do not want to keep that tube in your stomach any longer than necessary. You should be able to get the tube out tomorrow if the antibiotics work,” the doctor said.

“All right, you do what you have to do. I hate this damn tube,” he said. The NG tube caused him pain all the time, but the cleaning would be over in a few minutes. The doctor finished cleaning it and asked Larry to bandage it.

“I believe it is under control again. I will check on you again tonight. Get some rest,” he said rushing to the operating room.

After bandaging it, Larry gave him a sponge bath. He cleaned around the colostomy and the catheter.

“Some of the nurses really hurt when they clean the catheter and private area on men patients. They do not realize our testicles are sensitive. That hose from the catheter beating on them hurts like hell, does not it?” Larry asked sympathetically.

“That is true, but we still have to lay here and take it,” David answered and they both started to laugh.

Larry gave him a few ice chips and talked for a couple minutes. He told David that he should try to get some rest before his visitors started coming. David pushed the PCA again and fell back to sleep within a few minutes. That was one thing David had in his favor. Even before all this surgery, he never had any trouble falling asleep.

Before Lisa went to the nurses’ station at the beginning of her shift, she checked David. She worried all night about him. He was very sick when she went home the day before. She did not usually take things home from the hospital, but David was a special case. He was lucky to be alive. Quite frankly, she did not believe he was still alive. The survival rate for what he had been through is not very good, but he made it. She was glad she was on the team that helped keep him alive.

She was relieved to see that he was not quite so pale. Larry told her Dr. Emanuel had just cleaned the wound himself. He wanted to make sure no particles were trapped under the retention sutures. It was rare for a doctor to clean a patient’s wound while a nurse stood by and watched, but Dr. Emanuel did it for David.

It was eight-fifteen on his fourteenth day in step-down. Lisa woke him up to get him cleaned up for the day. She still felt guilty for not giving him the nausea medication the day before when he was so sick.

“Would you like some ice chips before I change your linens?” she asked.

“That would be good. Thank you, Lisa,” David said.

She gave him the chips then suggested giving him a shave. He just smiled and she knew, without a doubt, that he wanted one.

It was hard to get around the NG tube in his nose, but she did the best she could then changed his sheets.

Nancy came in just before nine o'clock that morning with a cup of ice chips. She was always thinking ahead. Getting in and out of the isolation clothing was difficult for her. Therefore, she anticipated things he would want before going in for her visit.

“Honey, you look much better today. I hope you feel as good as you look,” Nancy said as she walked into his room.

The head of the bed was raised and he was watching television. They had a nice visit and Nancy felt relieved. She would be able to give the family a good report when she called them that evening. They talked and watched television for about an hour before David got tired. When she noticed him yawning, she told him she had to go to the bank, post office and had to do a couple other errands. She would let him go to sleep and go back later that evening.

They kissed on the lips before she left. It had been a long time since he had the energy to kiss her. She had the facemask on, but she finally got to kiss her husband and he even kissed her back. She was happy as she walked out, looking back at him one last time before closing the door.

Lisa took his vital signs every four hours. He was so used to people taking vitals and blood while he was sleeping, he did not even wake up anymore.

David heard Jackie walk into the room. “Hi, it has been a while,” he said.

“I have been here, but you were sleeping and I did not want to wake you,” she said.

He was much more alert and able to hold a conversation for longer than a couple of minutes. However, after about twenty minutes of talking, his voice started getting raspy. The NG tube was irritating his throat. Jackie gave him some ice chips to sooth it.

“Thank you, I think I better get some rest now,” David said.

“I will see you tomorrow, Dad. I love you,” Jackie said as she was leaving the room.

Janet, the weekend physical therapist, stopped at the nurses' station to get the details of his condition before she went into his room. Lisa explained to Janet about his relapsed and should only have therapy on his arms and legs. Janet agreed.

Janet walked into David room and said. “Hello, Mr. Brundage, my name is Janet White and I will be your therapist today. We are just going to exercise your limbs today to increase circulation. Are you ready to get started?”

David said, “It is nice to meet you. Yes, I am ready to give it a try.”

He did three different exercises on each limb with Janet's help.

“That was a pretty good work out,” David said as he pushed the PCA. The exercise caused his pain to increase.

“Try to do these exercises every couple of hours. It will reduce the chance of getting blood clots. Michelle will be in tomorrow to work with you. I will see you next weekend, if you are still here. Have a good week, Mr. Brundage,” Janet said.

David was able to sleep the rest of the afternoon after Janet finished his therapy session. He woke up about seven o'clock when Larry came in to change his bandage again. While Larry was changing it, Nancy walked in for a visit.

“Hi, David, I missed my lesson on changing your bandage,” Nancy said.

David laughed, “You have changed it hundreds of times. I think you know how to do it.

Hey, I said the names of my websites, *How-to-do-it.com* and *howtodoit.biz*. By the way, have you checked my email lately?" he asked. He was definitely getting better. That was the first mention of his website business since he had been sick.

"Yes, I have been keeping up with it. I made a folder for things you might need when you get home. I deleted all the obvious junk mail. If any of the messages sounded important, I emailed them telling of your medical problem. I told them that you would get back to them as soon as possible. All of your Internet friends hope to talk to you soon and send their prayers and wishes for you to recover soon," Nancy said.

While Nancy and David were talking, Larry finished changing the bandage and slipped out the door.

David pushed the PCA twice while Larry was changing it. That medicine combined with the injection Larry gave him prior to changing the bandage was starting to take effect. He was very drowsy.

Nancy saw his eyes starting to close and said, "I will go home and let you get some sleep, Sweetie. I love you."

"I love you, too. I will see you tomorrow," he said and kissed her before she left.

Larry took David's vital signs every four hours throughout the night. All the numbers were on the high side of normal. David woke up a few times during the night from pain, but pushed the PCA and went right back to sleep.

Chapter 9

Day Fifteen

The day started off great. David woke up at six-thirty and felt great compared to the past few days. He was still depressed because of the colostomy bag and was still in extreme pain from the retention sutures. The spirit watching over him smiled and nodded his head. He had the feeling it was acknowledgement that the worst is over. He still had a long way to go, but he felt he could handle it. It was a completely new feeling for him. He would usually think the worst. He had received the best gifts ever, a positive outlook on life and no fear of death. Now that he was feeling better, he believed what the spirits told him.

This is miraculous, Dr. Emanuel thought as he read over David's latest lab reports. His white blood count had gone down to the normal range within twenty-four hours. He had never seen antibiotics work that fast. The numbers were looking very good, including his blood pressure. He continued to read the results as he headed toward David's room.

"Good morning, David. I did not think it would happen this fast, but we are going to remove the NG tube this morning. All your numbers are back in normal range."

While he was talking, he checked the colostomy and removed the bandage. "It looks like you had a normal bowel movement. The wound is a very good color. You do have someone up there looking out for you," Dr. Emanuel said as he raised his eyes up toward the heavens.

"The highest ranking official there is said I would be all right," David replied. God told him that he was going to recover.

"You can have a couple of Popsicles today and definitely more ice chips. Everything looks great, but I am keeping you on the antibiotics for another couple of days," the doctor said.

"Good morning, Ann. David is doing much better today. Please put a clean bandage on the wound and take out the NG tube. I am sure he would like a Popsicle after you remove it," the doctor suggested.

"Yes, doctor," replied Ann.

"Thank you," David said.

"I will check on you tomorrow," the doctor said and left the room.

Ann had slipped out while the doctor was still writing orders on David's chart. She walked back in with a Popsicle and pain medication as the doctor was leaving. She gave him the pain medication. A few minutes later she removed the NG tube. Right after it was removed, she gave him the Popsicle. While he was eating it, she put a new bandage on the wound.

"Thank you, Ann. My throat was so raw. This feels great on it," he said, sucking on the Popsicle.

"I am glad it is helping you, Mr. Brundage. I need to change the colostomy bag today, but I will come back after you have finished eating," she said.

She gave him some time to eat then went back in to change the bag.

"I know you do not like thinking about the colostomy bag, but it needs to be changed. I will use a detachable bag. It allows the bag to be removed and emptied without having to remove the part that is pasted to your skin. You can tell the colostomy nurse which one you like best," Ann said.

Just talking about the colostomy depressed David, but he did not completely shut down. He said, "I will let Susan know, but right now I need to take a nap. I am very tired. You can

change it while I sleep.” He pressed the PCA and went to sleep. He slept better without the NG tube.

Ann went back in to give him a bath. He slept while she got the supplies ready for his bath and clean linens for his bed. His snoring was rocking the walls. He did not wake up even when Ann turned on the overhead light.

“Mr. Brundage, it is time for your bath,” Ann said.

“All right, go right ahead,” he said. He wanted to sleep a while longer. Sleeping was the only time he did not have to admit he had a colostomy bag. He was convinced he could sleep it away. Drugs made it possible for his mind to believe anything.

Ann took his gown off and she began washing him. About half way through the bath, Nancy walked into the room.

“All right, no more NG tube. I bet you are glad to get rid of that again. Ann, I see you are busy. Would you like me to help?” asked Nancy.

“Sure, that would be a big help. You can start on his legs, if you do not mind,” Ann told her.

“He can have Popsicles again, too. I thought, for sure, when I woke him for his bath, he would ask for one, but it took him a while to wake up. He was in a deep sleep when I walked in here,” Ann said.

In a short amount of time his bath was done. With Nancy’s help, Ann changed the linens then picked up the dirty laundry and left them alone for a while.

“Hi Honey, when did you get here?” he did not even realize she helped with his bath.

“I have been here about a half hour. I helped Ann give you a bath. You must have been tired,” she laughed.

“Ann said you can have a Popsicle and I need a cup of coffee. I will get them if you want it and be back in a minute,” she said.

“Sure, I do,” he replied.

She gave him his orange Popsicle and drank her coffee while they talked.

“The doctor told me my last test results were great. My white blood count was down in the normal range. I will be back on a liquid diet tomorrow,” he told her. He continued telling her everything the doctor told him.

Then he showed her the new detachable colostomy bag and his mood went down hill from there.

“When will Susan be back in to see you?” she asked.

“She will be back as soon as I go back on the liquid diet. There is not much that comes out of there while I get everything through the IV,” he replied.

They talked for a few more minutes and Nancy saw him push the PCA. “Are you in pain?” she asked.

“I am always in pain. The drugs only tone the pain down to about a ten, which is better than it has been in the past. At least they make me sleepy and I do not have to think about the pain and the stupid bag while I am asleep,” David said.

“I will let you go to sleep now and see you tonight. I love you,” Nancy said giving him a kiss before she left.

David went to sleep and slept until mid afternoon.

Michelle bounced into the room and David woke as she approached him.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Brundage. I heard you had a rough weekend, but you look better now. Dr. Emanuel would like you to get up and walk around the room again. You can have some pain medication before we start. I will even throw in a back scratch. After you told me it is as good as drugs, I do it for all my patients. You were right. Most of my patients get a better work out after a back scratch. Thanks for the tip. Now, are you ready to get up?” she asked.

“I will try,” he answered.

Michelle pushed the call button and asked for pain medication before his work out. Ann went in and gave him the shot.

“Would you like me to stay and help?” asked Ann.

“Of course you can stay, but I can handle it, if you are busy,” Michelle said.

“I do have paper work to do at the desk. It takes me forever to complete it. I would like to get out of here on time tonight,” Ann said and left the room.

Michelle helped him sit up. She removed the sheet and had him roll to one side and push himself up while his legs swung over the edge of the bed. She stood in front of him to support. She did not want him to fall off the bed. When his legs hit the floor, he screeched in pain.

“The catheter is pulling,” he said in pain. The urine bag got stuck in the bars of the bed. Michelle instinctively grabbed David’s penis to keep it from pulling anymore.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

She pushed the call button for Ann to help her. When she walked in, Michelle told her what happened and asked her to check it out.

“It did not pull out all the way or he would still be screaming. There is balloon in the bladder. That is what keeps the catheter in place. Does this hurt, Mr. Brundage?” asked Ann as she lightly squeezed his testicles to see if the tube hurt them.

“No, I am all right. I am ready to get up and try to walk,” he said, embarrassed because both women were looking at his gentiles.

“I will check it in a couple of hours to make sure you are not bruised. I also need to write it on your chart. Due to your extensive problems in the past, we are required to note anything that happens to you out of the ordinary. The doctor wants to know everything,” Ann said.

When Ann left, Michelle continued the therapy session. As they walked around the room, she scratched his back. He used a walker for support. They walked around the room twice and by the end of the session, David was exhausted, but pleased with himself.

“I think I better get you back into bed. That was a good work out, even if it did start out badly,” she said talking about the urine bag mishap.

She hooked the urine bag up before doing anything else. While she was getting him situated in the bed, she tried to see if he had any bruising. She felt she was responsible for the incident and did not want to cause him any additional pain.

David noticed her looking and said, “I know you are not supposed to look, but go ahead, it is all right with me. If anything is wrong, you can tell Ann. If nothing is wrong then you do not have to say anything.”

Michelle held his testicles lightly looking for any bruising. “Are you sure you are all right, Mr. Brundage?” she asked, still feeling badly.

“I am more than fine at the moment,” David said.

“Thank you, Mr. Brundage and again, I am so sorry,” Michelle apologized again.

“Michelle, accidents happen. Please do not worrying about it anymore,” he said kindly.

She felt better as she was leaving and said, “I have to bounce now so I will see you tomorrow,” she said.

David could not believe she used the new term for leaving, *bounce* because she had big boobs and when she moved they bounced. He was laughing quietly as she left the room. Even though he was laughing, he was in excruciating pain. He pushed the PCA and went to sleep.

Ann checked his groin area a couple of hours later. She thought he was still sleeping. When he asked her what she was looking for, she jumped. He startled her.

“I am sorry I scared you, Ann. But you looked so funny trying to check for bruising without waking me. I could not help myself. I had to say something,” he teased her.

“I am not usually so jumping, but you got me good. Well, now that you are awake let me do what I came in here to do,” she said.

There were no signs of bruising or swelling. She put the information in his chart. She was glad he was not hurt. He did not need any more problems.

When she left, he went back to sleep and slept peacefully for the rest of the afternoon.

Ann gave Bea the turn over was able to leave the hospital on time.

Nancy stopped by the nurses’ station before she went to David’s room and got a Popsicle for him.

“Hi Hon, how was your therapy session today?” she asked.

“It went pretty good, with one little mishap,” he answered.

She gave him the Popsicle and he started devouring it. It felt so good on his throat. It was still a bit sore from the NG tube.

“Do I want to hear what happened now?” she asked with a frown.

Before he could answer her, Bea went in to change his bandage. While she was changing the bandage, she told Nancy about the incident that afternoon with Michelle.

“Are you all right, Honey?” asked Nancy as she pulled back the sheets to inspect the family jewels. She carefully moved things around so she could see if there was any bruising. Bea checked where the catheter was inserted. There was nothing wrong at all. Luckily they averted another problem.

“I am glad I do not have any modesty. If I did, it would be gone by now, for sure,” he said jokingly.

David and Nancy talked for another hour and then she went home to make her phone calls, eat supper with John and Jackie and go to bed. She was almost as tired as her husband. Sometimes she thought she would rather be in his place. He could do all the running around from the house to the hospital and back again, making the nightly phone calls and worrying about what was going to happen next. But things were as they were and she would deal with it.

David slept through the night while Nancy cried herself to sleep.

It was her turn to feel sorry for herself. She was exhausted, worried about him and felt very alone. Sure, she had her children, but she did not want to burden them with her feelings of loneliness. She would just have to deal with things by herself.

Day Sixteen

Dr. Emanuel arrived late on David’s sixteenth day after the emergency surgery. He strolled in about seven-thirty with a smile. He read David’s chart before going to see him. Everything was looking good for his favorite, unique patient.

“Good morning, David. Your lab numbers are still looking good. I am putting you back on a liquid diet, but please take it slowly. If you feel full, stop eating. It will take a while for your stomach to expand. I am also ordering you get up at least twice a day, but only with the physical therapist with you. The increase in activity will get you back to normal more quickly. Do not get out of bed by yourself for any reason, David.

“You are going to have the retention sutures for about another four weeks. So far things are healing well. With the retention sutures in you, it is like playing a football game with the pros. I realize the hooks are digging into you and they hurt like hell, but you are doing great. Ann is busy with another patient right now, so I will not remove your bandage completely. But I do want to take a look at the wound. Do you have any questions for me?” he asked as he looked at the wound.

“No questions, I know I will recover soon. Thank you, Doc,” David said.

“The wound is still clear of infection. You take it easy with the diet and I will see you tomorrow,” he said and went out the door to get to the operating room.

David's breakfast arrived. He had juice, coffee and cream of wheat. He did not realize a liquid diet included mushy foods. He put a pat of butter and some sugar in the cream of wheat. That was the best tasting thing he had eaten in over three weeks. But after only a few bites, he was full. He did as the doctor ordered and stopped eating. It tasted good, but he did not want to have a relapse. He quit eating and pushed the tray away.

The door was left opened by the dietary technician and he could see out into the hall. He saw spirits going back and forth in front of his door. They would stare at him just outside the door. When he acknowledged their presence, about twenty of them gather around. They wanted him to tell their loved ones that they were all right. David told them that he would try. Then he told them to go to the light in the distance.

A couple of the spirits did not understand what David meant. He realized they did not know they had passed and were lost.

David explained, "You have passed on. You need to go to the other side now. That is why everything is so confusing for you. Listen and you will find the answer. Look off into the distance. You will see a bright light. As you focus on the light and listen with your heart, the light will come closer to you. As it approaches, an angel will come out from the light and escort you to the other side."

David witnessed the angels coming to get the lost spirits. One of them came into his room and touched him on the cheek then smiled at him.

"God loves you. He is watching over you," the angel's voice rang out. He watched as the lost spirits became filled with love, light and the understanding of God's love. David had experienced it himself not so long ago. Seeing the angels again and a glimpse of the other side gave David new strength to deal with his current medical problems and the pain. It was his reward for helping the lost and confused spirits.

That was the day David regained his sense of peace.

Ann got to his room at eight-thirty that morning. "I am sorry, Mr. Brundage, but I have a new patient who is as sick as you were when you first arrived in this unit. Wow, you look wonderful. You have a glow about you. I cannot explain it, but you are different," she said. He looked like a completely different person to her.

"Yes, I feel alive again," he boasted. "It is a privilege to experience life."

Ann was not sure what had happened to him, but she was seeing a changed man. It was a change for the better and she was happy for him. While she was changing his bandage, she felt warm and had the feeling of being safe.

"I have never seen a transformation like the one in you. I even feel good being around you. You have brightened my day," she told him. She noticed a calm look about him. He was not grinding his teeth in pain. That was the way she was used to seeing him. It brought tears to her eyes, but she quickly regained her composure. She did not want her patient to think she was trying to hide some bad news from him. She did not want to admit she was crying because she was happy. In her mind that was very unprofessional. She did not realize that if she told him the true reason for her tears, he would be thankful that she cared that much about his health.

David was staring off into space. He had a calm, peaceful look, but it was also frightening. He pushed the PCA again, but he looked comfortable.

"Are you all right, Mr. Brundage?" she asked, out of concerned.

"Yes, I am giving thanks to God," he replied.

"Oh, I am sorry I interrupted you. It is just that I saw a strange look on your face and wanted to make sure you were all right," she replied.

She continued changing his bandage as he continued to pray.

After his bandage was changed, she gave him his bath. During the bath, she felt an overwhelming feeling of love and comfort. It was the same way David was feeling.

She was confused by the feelings when David said, “Your feelings are real, I was just touched by an angel and I am sharing my experience with you. Do not worry or feel afraid. Please try to enjoy it.”

She had finished bathing him and felt better than she had in years. She told him, “There is no way I could describe the experience I am having. Nobody will ever believe me. What you have been through was horrific, but I can see that you have had some of the most amazing moments a person can imagine. This has opened my eyes to a world that I thought was fiction. I know now, with your help, that it is real.”

“You do not need to tell anyone of this experience. That is my job. However, if you wish to tell someone special about it, you may do so. God gave me an assignment the last time I was on the other side. Please remember, I am only a messenger,” David replied.

“Thank you, Mr. Brundage. I better let you get some rest now,” Ann said.

The experience she had in David’s hospital room was too incredible to believe. People would think she lost her mind if she told anyone about it. She decided to let David tell the story when the time came.

Shortly after she left his room, Michelle came in for his morning therapy session. “Good morning, Mr. Brundage, you look terrific today. I think we should take a walk around the room this morning,” she said in her cheerful tone.

The first thing she did was unhooked the urine bag from the bed and put it on the walker. She did not want another incident like the last one. As soon as she touched him to bring him to an upright position, a feeling of love, peace and contentment went through her whole body. The embarrassment she felt from yesterday’s ordeal was gone. All the little worries and concerns melted away the longer she was in contact with David. She felt God’s presence.

It was a new feeling for Michelle, too. She had to collect herself before she helped him get to his feet. She did not want to drop him.

“The good feelings you are having are ones I am also experiencing. I am sharing them with you. This morning an angel touched me and told me that God loves me. Enjoy the experience and let us have a nice walk together,” David said bluntly.

Michelle was speechless. She held David closely while they walked around the hospital room.

They were on the second trip around the room when Nancy walked in smiling. “You are walking again. You look like you are having a good time. I have seen that look in your eyes before. It was shortly after you said you walked with God. Did you have another near death experience?” she asked worried.

“No, I didn’t, but I was touched by an angel this morning. Give me your hand,” he ordered as he took her hand in his. All of her fears and worries were vanished the second their hands connected.

“That is amazing! I feel almost light-headed. I am so relaxed. Nothing worrisome is on my mind. It is the first time I have felt at peace since this whole ordeal started back in April,” she whispered out of reverence to the way she was feeling.

The three of them slowly walked around the room, thinking about how good they felt and thanking God for everything they had, especially the people they loved. They had walked around the room one more time, when Michelle decided they had to get him back in bed. When they got him comfortable, they looked into his eyes and saw the clarity and warmth of the Holy Spirit. Michelle was ecstatic. Nancy was euphoric as tears of joy rolled down her face.

“I will never forget this experience as long as I live,” Michelle said and left the room so David could be alone with his wife.

Michelle passed Ann in the hall. Ann saw the look on Michelle face and said, “It is true, it did happen and you experienced the touch, too, didn’t you?” said Ann.

“Yes, I did and it was sobering,” was all Michelle could manage to say.

Nancy said, "I have noticed significant changes in you since the first time your heart stopped. You are very different, but it is a good different. I love you." She was so grateful David was no longer depressed. He seemed to have an inner strength that could overcome any obstacle.

He felt more pain than he could tolerate, so he pushed the PCA. Even with spiritual help, the hooks from the retention sutures still dug deep into his stomach muscles. He had to numb the pain to his physical body.

They discussed his newfound spirituality. He did not feel much different than he did before the surgery. He did feel more at ease with himself and others. They talked for another hour or so and then David had to go to sleep. It had been a long day for him already and it was not even noon yet.

Nancy left when he fell asleep to get some lunch, do some errands and call Dot.

David's hospital door opened abruptly and someone said, "Dietary." She put a tray of food on the table and quickly left the room. David raised the head of his bed up and ate as much as he could. He was still worn out from the morning activities. After eating, he gave himself more pain medication and went back to sleep.

About an hour later, Ann came into his room and took his vital signs. She noticed when she held his wrist to get his pulse that the spiritual feeling was no longer there. She knew the feeling would not last long. In fact, she already had doubts that it ever happened.

He had been sweating quit a bit, so she wiped his forehead with a damp cloth.

Michelle came in to do a second round of therapy about two-thirty that afternoon. She was hoping his touch would still give her that special feeling. Ann saw her in the hall and told her that it was gone. Michelle was disappointed, but still felt privileged to have experienced it. She felt honored to help David with his recovery.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Brundage. Are you ready for your afternoon walk?" she asked.

"Not really, I am still tired from the morning walk, but I will do as much as I can," he responded. Ann came in and gave him more pain medication before he started the therapy.

Ann did not ask if she could help with David. She just helped until he was safely on his feet. Both women felt awkward when he sat up on the bed and swung his legs over the edge because he was a bit exposed. Michelle actually turned red. They covered him with his gown. They were feeling embarrassed because of their earlier experience with him. He was even more special in their eyes now.

Usually Michelle would scratch his back before tying his gown, but she waited until he was on his feet to scratch it.

"That feels so good," David said, purring like a kitten.

"Let me know if you need any help getting Mr. Brundage back into bed," Ann said. "I have to check on my other patients."

Ann left the door ajar when she left and the spirits started coming up to it. "Go to the light. You can see it off in the distance," David commanded. They nodded and went toward the light.

"I am sorry Mr. Brundage, but I cannot take you out in the hall yet. Perhaps tomorrow we can go out there when you are a little stronger," she told him, thinking he was telling her to take him out in the hall where the light was brighter.

They were finished walking around the room once. He did so well that Michelle wanted him to exercise with the walker before he got too tired.

"Please do five dips and raise yourself back up. Like this," and she showed him what to do and where to hold the walker so it would not tip over. "That's good. Now lift each leg five times and lower it slowly."

David did all of the exercises she told him to do and was tired by the end, but not exhausted like he was the day before. She helped him back into bed. She asked if he could do

some exercises from the bed. He said he would try so she showed him how to do a couple of them. They were basically the same ones he did using the walker, only laying on the bed as he did them. He only needed assistance lifting his left leg.

“Try to do the bed exercises by yourself two or three times a day. Great job today, Mr. Brundage,” Michelle praised.

“Do I get my reward?” he asked.

“Of course, I almost forgot your back scratch. Roll over on you side, please,” she said untying his gown. She did not feel that sense of embarrassment anymore. She was comfortable with their therapist-patient relationship again.

David was able to squeeze in another nap before his dinner arrived. He woke as the dietary technician took his tray in and put it on the table. He was able to eat most of the food. There was more cream of wheat and coffee, but the best thing was a bowl of butterscotch pudding.

Nancy came back about five-thirty. David was a lot stronger and she stayed for almost three hours talking and watching television with him.

She felt better about his condition. The experience of the morning had lifted a huge burden from her heart.

After she left, Bea went in to change his bandage again. She purposely waited for his wife to leave. She wanted to give her a break from all the medical things David was going through and just enjoy her visit for a change.

“You are looking better. Your vital signs are looking good tonight,” Bea said.

No one told her about the spirits and the feelings of peace he felt along with Ann, Michelle and his wife. Ann was the only one that saw her, but she did not say anything. She was hoping that Bea would be able to feel it for herself.

David had a true feeling of accomplishment for the day. He felt much better. This new attitude helped him sleep more peacefully. Bea took his vital signs throughout the night. David did not even stir.

Day Seventeen

“Dietary,” a person said as the door swung open. It was eight-fifteen on David’s seventeenth day in step-down. To his surprise, he slept through the night without waking one time. He had not had any pain medication in nine hours. The doctor did not check in on him prior to his day surgeries like he usually did. David took that as a good sign. Then he tried to move, but the pain was so bad, he screamed. It was louder than he thought he could scream. It was so loud, Ann ran into the room.

“What is wrong Mr. Brundage?” she asked as she looked for something that could have caused him to scream.

“I am sorry, Ann. I just woke up a minute ago and when I moved the retention sutures jabbed me. It hurt more than normal because I did not push the PCA at all night,” David said apologetically.

“Did you push it since you screamed?” she asked.

“That is why I was trying to move. I wanted to find it so I could. I just pushed it as you ran into the room,” he answered.

“Do you want me to get you an injection? You are over due for a shot,” Ann asked.

“I think I will be all right for now. Let me eat my breakfast and see how I feel after that,” he said.

“I will be back in a little while to change your bandage,” she told him and left the room while he ate.

David settled into a routine. He ate his breakfast. Ann returned to change the bandage and give him a bath and shave. Everything was done within an hour without incident. It looked like his bad luck streak he had was finally over.

Susan, the colostomy nurse arrived at ten-thirty as scheduled. Ann thought it might send David into a depression again when they started talking about the colostomy. She went in with Susan to see how he was going to react. He was doing so well, she did not want to see David regress because of the bag.

“Good morning, Mr. Brundage. How did that detachable bag work for you?” asked Susan.

“It pulls a lot on the stoma when it has to be changed. Pressing it back on hurts where the retention sutures have cut through my skin near the stoma,” he replied.

She took it off along with the fixture to put a new one in its place. When she removed the old bag, feces had collected in the trench. It pulled part of the skin from the stoma causing an opening between the stoma and the surround skin. When Susan saw the damage, she wanted a wound care nurse and his doctor to look at it. They needed to come up with a plan of action to fill in the trench so feces would not get in the main wound.

“Ann, would you get Pat, the wound care nurse to check on this. We may need some plastic skin to cover the hole between the two wounds. Dr. Emanuel will also need to be notified. This can cause a serious infection if we are not careful,” Susan said calmly. She did not want to get David upset, but the situation could become serious if not treated promptly

David could read Ann’s facial expressions and from the look on her face, he thought he would have another problem to overcome. He knew he could do it because there was an angel in the room with them, smiling at him when she saw his frightened look.

Pat walked in ten minutes after Ann called her. When she saw the retention sutures holding him together, David caught her expression. She looked shocked. The sutures had torn through his flesh on both sides of the wound. His stomach looked like hamburger meat with a hole on the left side where the colostomy was located and the main wound was not closed. A layman would wonder how he could be alive with a wound like that. With that much of his insides exposed and he did not bleed to death was amazing

“Hi Mr. Brundage, let me see what I can do to fix this.” The three women were discussing the possible fixes when Nancy walked into the room in her gown. She was shocked to see the bandage and colostomy bag off him and all the people in the room. They were standing around talking and pointing toward the wound.

“What is the matter with him?” she asked in a panic.

“He has another problem with the stoma. When we removed the colostomy bag, we noticed the trench from the stoma to the main wound was getting deeper. We are worried that particles of feces could make their way to the main wound, which could cause a severe infection. We are discussing ways to fix it. We should be able to use a material like plastic skin to fill in the trench until the retention sutures are removed and the skin heals. We have called his doctor to look at it and see if he agrees with our decision,” Susan explained.

“Good morning,” Dr. Emanuel said. He did not have a surgery scheduled early so he was able to go over to the hospital from his office.

He looked at the trench and agreed that plastic skin could be used to protect the wound. The retention sutures would be in for at least another three and a half weeks. They had to do anything and everything they could to prevent another infection.

Pat would have to change the bag until she could train the other nurses on how to use the plastic skin. The process of covering that large of a trench required special training.

“I am sorry David, but I cannot remove the retention sutures. Your wound has not healed enough yet. I can only imagine the amount of pain you are in, not only from the retention sutures, but also with this latest problem. I will increase the dosage of your pain medication.

You will go back to sleeping most of the day and night and feel sluggish. You can get it every four hours if necessary. You still have the PCA if you need a little extra in between the injections. They will be administered through the PICC line.

“I want you to keep up with the physical therapy. We cannot afford for you to develop blood clots from not moving around. You can stay on the liquid diet, but do not overdo it. When you start to feel full, stop eating. That will help to prevent you from becoming nauseous again. Try to stay tough for another few weeks.

“Not to change the subject, but I do have some news. We found out the staph infection was coming for the central line in your neck. I am glad I decided to remove it when I did. But I am going to keep you in isolation until the retention sutures are removed because the risk for an infection is extremely high.

“All right, fill the trench with the plastic skin and get his wounds bandaged. Let me know if he has any extreme pain or unusual complaints. The fact that he did not complain about this has me a little worried.

“David, I want you to tell the nurse if you feel anything out of the ordinary, no matter how insignificant it seems to you,” he told his patient.

Nancy was sitting in the chair listening to everything being said. Tears were falling, but she was not making a sound.

Ann noticed and took Nancy out of the room to calm her down. “He will be fine, Mrs. Brundage. Everything the doctor ordered is precautionary. It does not mean he will get an infection. We want to do everything possible to avoid it. I know how special he is, not everyone is touched by an angel and then able to share the experience. He has to be fine so he can tell his story,” Ann explained.

Everything Ann said made sense. An angel did touch David and he was sent back by God. She started to feel better. “It must be another test of his strength,” Nancy told Ann as they went back into David’s room.

“Nancy, I will never question a wife’s knowledge about her husband’s condition again. You said he could run into some unique complications. Some were possibly caused by his exposure to Agent Orange while in Viet Nam. Others were definitely because of his genes. One thing is for sure. He is tough and has a tremendous will to live. I will be back this evening to check on him. If you need anything, call my office and I will get back to you as soon as possible,” said the doctor.

“Thank you, Dr. Emanuel,” Nancy said.

“I will be right back. I am going to get some supplies from the pharmacy,” Pat said.

Susan cleaned David’s wound while Ann clean the catheter.

“He had secretion coming from the catheter again. I want all of his nurses to make notes in his chart if anything out of the ordinary happens to him. Anything we do for him needs to be charted. Dr. Emanuel needs to be able to look at his chart and know right away how he has been feeling and what we have been doing for him,” Ann told Nancy as she was cleaning his penis.

By the time they finished, Pat was back from the pharmacy with the wound care supplies. They watched Pat fill the trench in with the plastic skin. It looked like silly putty. She stretched it over the open area. After the trench was filled in, she put on a new colostomy bag. When she was finished, Ann put a clean wet-to-dry bandage on the wounds. They left the room when they were done, leaving David and Nancy alone so they could talk while he ate his lunch.

“Do not worry Hon. I will be all right. I got it straight from Him. He even sent an angel to confirm it this morning,” David said after noticing that his wife was not in her normal good mood. She was usually the one trying to cheer him up.

David had definitely changed. After the amount of pain he was in and hearing the additional bad news, the old David would have started giving up. She was glad he was confident that he was going to live. It would help him recover faster, but she was still worried.

“I think the pain medication is making me sleepy again,” he told his wife.

“All right, I will go home. If it is all right with you, I think I will stay home tonight and do some house cleaning and get to bed early. If you want me to come back later this evening, just call and I will,” Nancy said.

“I am tired and will most likely go to sleep for the night after you leave. I do not mind at all if you stay home and get some rest. Do not do any more housework than absolutely necessary. You must be exhausted. Do not worry about missing one night here with me. I sleep most the time you are here anyway. I know you love me and I love you, so take the night for yourself,” replied David.

“All right, you have a good night and no more surprises please. If you want to, call me before you go to sleep for the night. I love you,” she said, kissed him and went home. He was snoring quietly by the time she got to the door, which made he smile.

Ann gave David his meds as scheduled, so he slept for most of the afternoon. When Michelle arrived for the therapy session, he was ready to start moving around again. He told her that he was groggy, so she would have to help him more than she did last time.

“I do not care if I have to carry you on my back, Ill get you out of bed so you can get some exercise. You helped me get back in touch with God and I feel fantastic. I am not going to let you get a blood clot in your leg from not moving around. Do not worry, I will not let you fall, I promise,” Michelle told him.

Michelle got him ready by attaching the catheter bag to the walker, fixing his gown and then placed a heavy strap around his chest so she would be able to catch him if he started to fall.

“Mr. Brundage, roll over on your side and push yourself up,” Michelle commanded. As he pushed up, she pulled the strap to help him. When he was in a sitting position on the side of the bed, Ann stepped up in to help get him to his feet.

“Put one hand on the bed and one on the walker. Now stand up,” Michelle instructed him. He was standing, but his legs were shaking. Michelle was practically carrying him around the room, but his legs were moving and that was the point of the session.

“I think one trip around the room will be enough for today. We will do some bed exercises instead,” Michelle said.

Ann and Michelle got him back into bed. Michelle helped him with the leg and arm exercises to ensure good circulation.

“Perhaps you could cut down on the amount of drugs for his next therapy session. I think he slept through this one,” Michelle was laughing as she said it.

Even though Michelle did most of the work, David worked up a good sweat. Ann took his temperature. It was only 99.1 degrees. They wiped him down. He was getting special treatment because they were convinced he was an angel.

Dietary dropped off his supper tray about five-fifteen, but David did not touch it. He slept right through it. Ann checked on him a half hour later and tried to get him to eat something.

“Come on Mr. Brundage, you need your strength. Have a sip of juice,” David was thirsty and chugged down the juice. Ann raised the head of his bed so he could eat without making a mess. He ate the pudding and a little of the broth.

“That is better. How do you feeling now?” asked Ann.

“Very tired,” he answered.

You are on some pretty heavy medication. “How does your pain level on a scale from 1 to 10?” she asked.

“Oh, it is a sleepy 10 instead of an awake 10, sleepy 10 is better,” he babbled. He was hardly making any sense because of the drugs he was taking.

He went back to sleep and did not even feel Bea change his bandage that night. He did not remember Dr. Emanuel looking in on him either. After Bea told the doctor how the stronger

medication was affecting David, he said he would cut the dosage back in the morning after talking to David.

He did not call his wife because he could not stay awake long enough to talk to her. She needed her sleep as much as he did anyway. He slept through the night. He did not even dream because of the drugs.

Day Eighteen

David woke up about five-forty with a dry mouth. He pushed the call button.

“Can I help you?” a voice said.

“Would you have someone bring me a Popsicle, please? My mouth is dry,” he answered.

“Sure, David, I will bring one right down to you,” Bea said.

“Do you need anything else before I get gowned up?” she asked.

“No, I am good, thank you,” David replied.

True to her word, she walked in his room two minutes late with an orange Popsicle. He thanked her, ate the Popsicle and went right back to sleep.

Dietary woke him at eight-fifteen with his breakfast tray. He raised the bed and ate everything on the plate. He was hungry. Then he drank the coffee, which tasted extra good.

His eighteenth day in step down was progressing like one of those normal days people are supposed to have. Things were finally routine again. Marjorie got him cleaned up for the day, including a shave. His bowel movement in the colostomy bag was normal. Marjorie cleaned the bag as quickly as possible knowing how much he hated it.

Dr. Emanuel went in to check on David’s pain level. He needed to cut back on the pain medication. David’s pain was still a 10 and would probably stay that way until the retention sutures were removed. There was nothing more the doctor could do to make him comfortable. With a lower dose of the pain medication he would be a little more alert.

When Nancy arrived that morning, David was bathed and shaved and smelling like *Old Spice* aftershave lotion. He had the head of the bed raised and was watching television.

“Hi, you are looking pretty good this morning. I hope you feel as good as you look,” she said.

“I still hurt a lot, but that will go on until I get these stupid retention sutures out. I ate all my breakfast. I felt like I gorged myself compared to what I have eaten in the past three weeks,” he laughed. “I had cream of wheat, apple juice and a cup of coffee.”

“That should help build your strength and I bet it tastes better than that stuff going in your arm,” Nancy said.

“Today I should be able to get out of bed. I had a dream that Michelle dragged me around the room yesterday. I was totally out of it,” David said.

“That was not a dream. She did drag you around the room. She made sure you got your exercise,” Nancy said.

“Everyone is making such a big deal out of that trench between the wound and the stoma. Most of the time, I do not even notice it. The only times I do is when the bag or the fixture is removed,” he said.

They talked for almost an hour before he pushed the PCA.

“It is time for me to take a nap before Michelle drags me around the room again. I love you,” David said and closed his eyes.

“I will see you later. I am so glad you are doing better. I love you, too,” she said as she kissed him goodbye.

He was snoring so loud that Ann had to close his door. The patient in the next room complained. David slept peacefully until Michelle woke him up just before noon.

“Good morning, Mr. Brundage. Let us take a walk before lunch. Your medication has been reduced today so I will not have to drag you. How would you like to take a stroll down the hall?” she asked.

“It would be great to get out of this room for a while, but what about the isolation sign?” he asked her.

“That is to keep outside germs away from you, like the ones on visitors. The nurses still wear them because they are in and out of their other patient’s rooms. The protective gear is to protect you, not other people. We will not go too far and no one will be touching you except me,” Michelle explained.

Ann disconnected the tubes so he would not have to drag the pole with him. The PICC line was still in his arm, so Ann put dead end covers on both ports. They put his slippers on and then got him out of the bed. They tied his gown and put the urine bag on the walker.

“I need to get out of this room, so please start walking ladies,” he said eagerly.

They started toward the door. As soon as they were in the doorway, David saw quite a few spirits. Ann went to the nurses’ station to get some paper work done while Michelle escorted David down the hall. All of the spirits were following them. Some of them were motioning to him while others tried to verbally contact him. There was a buzzing in the hall, but Michelle could not hear it.

“I hear you and I see most of you. Look into the distance and you will see a light. Go toward the light as fast as you can. As you get closer to the light, it will get brighter. Angels will come out from the light and lead you to the other side,” David said to the spirits.

Most of them went to the light and were gone in a flash. The ones that did not realize they had crossed over took a little more convincing. The people in the hall were looking at him like he was crazy. Michelle was walking beside him proudly because she thought he was an angel.

During his walk, he was able to get all of the spirits to go to the light. There were two ghosts there that he did not know how to deal with them. They were trying to take care of unfinished business and David could not understand what they wanted. “I will try to help you tomorrow. I am too tired to do any more today. Michelle, please take me back to the room now,” he said.

Michelle was fascinated with the entire walk. She could feel the energy while she held on to him as they walked. When she looked into his eyes, they were a deep blue with a sparkle of light. In a split second, the look in his eyes changed from contentment to severe pain.

“I have got to get back to my room now. I need some pain medication,” he said.

Ann noticed his legs shaking as he walked past the desk and ran over to help Michelle get him back into bed. As soon as they got him situated, Ann hooked up the IV and PCA then gave him an injection for the pain. He pushed the PCA to get more. That helped to alleviate the pain enough so he could go to sleep. Whenever he was in that much pain, all he wanted to do was sleep.

“Do you know what happened?” asked Ann.

“No, he was doing fine. Then all of a sudden he was in severe pain. All I can think of is that one of the retention sutures must have shifted,” Michelle replied.

“All right, thanks. I will put that in his chart. Dr. Emanuel wants to know about any major pain attacks he has while in step-down,” Ann said.

Dietary brought his lunch tray in and put it on the table. He did not wake up. In fact, did not even move.

Marjorie woke him about forty-five minutes later. She wanted to make sure he ate some of his lunch. He only ate the pudding and then went back to sleep until Michelle came in for his afternoon therapy session.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Brundage. Are you ready for another walk?” she asked.

“Can I just do the exercises in bed this afternoon? I am still in pain from this morning’s walk,” David asked.

“Sure, we will get those limbs moving one way or the other. Maybe after we get done, you will be able to stand up for a back scratch,” she said.

“You sure know how to motivate a person,” David laughed in spite of the pain.

They did the exercises and they talked while Michelle scratched his back. She had to leave a short time later to go to another appointment up on the fourth floor.

A loud knock on the door woke David up. “Dietary!” the voice said. A young man brought in his dinner and sat it down on the table next to him. *Is that ice cream on the tray?* David thought as he looked on the tray to see if it was worth raising the bed.

“It is ice cream,” he said out loud. He raised the bed immediately and took the ice cream. *This is more like it*, he thought. He ate the ice cream and pudding and drank the coffee and juice, but he could not tolerate the broth. It made him gag. Even without eating it, he was full.

He was still feeling full when Nancy visited that evening. He was wide awake when she walked in the room

“Hi, they let me have ice cream for dessert and it tasted so good. Could you go see if you can get me another one? By the way, did you get a good night’s sleep? I was worried about you.” he asked.

“Hello, I love you, too. I did get some sleep and I feel better now. I will go check with the nurse. I could use a cup of coffee, anyway,” Nancy laughed.

She would have to get out of the isolation gear then put it back on when she returned, but he was in such a good mood, she did not mind. He was awake and happy. That is all that mattered to her.

“I will be right back,” she told him. The nurse said it would be all right, so she went to the refreshment room. She made a cup of coffee and took an ice cream cup out of the freezer. She walked back in the room after putting on another isolation gown. She could see him salivating as she gave him the ice cream.

“Take it easy, you do not want to get sick again,” she warned him. He slowed down. He did not want to get sick to his stomach again.

“Is everything all right at home? How is the puppy? You can have my mother call me tomorrow. I can talk now and it does not hurt my throat,” he said without taking a breath. It was amazing. He was finally getting back to his old self.

They talked for a while and then watched some television. It was almost nine o’clock and visiting hours were over. It was the first time he was able to stay awake that late and Nancy was taking advantage of it. She missed him at night, so this was a treat for her. She was going to enjoy telling his mother about his progress when she called. He was doing so well all of a sudden.

They announced that visiting hours were over. So they kissed and she left for the night. She was smiling as she removed the gown and walked to the elevator.

The rest of the night was uneventful for David. He watched a little more television before Dan came in to give him an injection for pain. A few minutes later he went to sleep.

Dan changed his bandage about midnight. David opened his eyes, but was still partially asleep while Dan worked on him. After Dan finished, David went back to sleep and slept peacefully until morning.

Day Nineteen

Marjorie woke David up early the next day to get him washed before breakfast. The hospital staff was attempting to get him back on a regular routine now that he was doing better. His blood tests showed no sign of staph infection and his vital signs were good. They were

trying to get him well enough to be transferred to a regular room. They started waking him for meals and getting him cleaned up first thing in the morning.

Breakfast arrived as Marjorie was putting clean sheets on the bed. He was hungry. His breakfast consisted of cream of wheat, canned peaches, juice and coffee.

Nancy called him as he was eating to see if he still wanted his mother to call him.

He wanted her to call him in fifteen minutes. That would give him enough time to finish his breakfast.

She called him exactly fifteen minutes after hanging up the phone with Nancy. She was very emotional and scared for her son. She had not talked to him in quite a while and starting crying when she heard his voice.

“Don’t cry, Mom. I am doing much better now,” he said trying to calm her down.

“You sound much better, but I miss you so much. I am sorry I cannot be with you, but my doctor will not let me travel such a long distance,” she cried.

“I understand that, Mom. Do not feel bad about it. We should be able to talk on the phone more often now that I am finally getting back to normal. When I get the retention sutures out, I will be able to go home. That is still a few weeks away yet,” David said.

He talked to her for about ten minutes and then got tired. He told her Nancy would let her know when to call him again which would probably be in a day or two.

“I have to hang up now, Mom. I am getting tired,” he said.

“I love you, David,” she said, crying again.

“I love you, Mom. Please stop crying. We will talk soon, I promise,” David said sadly as he hung up the phone.

Finally he had a normal, boring day. Nancy came for her visits. He had his physical therapy and watched television most of the day instead of sleeping it away.

Dan changed his bandage that evening with Nancy’s help. It was more like she changed the bandage and Dan watched. She took it upon herself to learn how to do it because she would be doing it when he went home. The nurses were amazed at how well she changed it. She took care of the wound just as good as any of the nurses.

David’s pain level was still high. It was about an eight, so it was starting to decrease. The retention sutures were loosening as he lost weight, but the one that caused the trench was still extremely painful.

Dan left the room after the bandage was changed leaving Nancy and David alone for a while. They talked about him getting out of the hospital. She told him she had already changed the office around so he could sleep downstairs. He admitted that her he was getting anxious to go home.

They watched television when David got tired of talking. It was the first relaxing visits they spent together in a long time. Nancy left that night feeling like he was going to make it through his ordeal.

Later that night, an apparition appeared in the hallway. David did his usual thing telling it to go to the light. It refused to leave and kept on trying to communicate with him.

“I do not understand what you are saying to me. Mary, Martha, Margaret! Which one is it? Oh, Martha,” David said. The apparition acknowledged that Martha was the name.

“I am supposed to tell Martha that it is all right. Ted will meet her with the angels. Who’s Martha?”

One third of the people here think I am nuts, a third of them think I am an angel and the other third thinks it is the drugs I am taking. Who do I tell?” he asked.

“You just did,” the spirit confirmed with a motion.

“Code blue in Room 3,” bellowed through the hospital.

Martha was in the room across the hall from him. She heard David's conversation with the apparition. An angel and Martha's spirit came into David's room to thank him for his help. Martha would be with her beloved husband, Ted again.

After witnessing it David thought, *I am not even sure which group I belong in. Am I crazy, an angel or is it the drugs?*

He pushed the PCA and went to sleep for the night hoping he was an angel. He knew he had to be dead to be an angel, but he thought anything was possible with all he had been through and was still alive to talk about it. He never mentioned the incident to anyone because he knew no one would believe him.

Day Twenty

David was getting use to the pain caused by twelve hooks digging into his stomach muscles. People in pain can learn how live with it despite the severity. He realized, for the first time, how many people all over the world were in just as much or more pain than he was at that moment. Cancer patients, people with severe arthritis and so many other reasons why people were in constant pain. He prayed they had an out of body experience or felt the touch of an angel to help them get through it. Thinking of others was new for David. Before his experiences, he thought only about the pain he was in every minute of the day.

After helping Martha earlier that morning, his day was routine. It was his twentieth day in step-down.

When he walked in the hall with Michelle during his therapy session, he helped more spirits go to the light. Now he knew why psychics did not like hospitals. The halls were filled with spirits. He could hear the whispers of the many lost spirits wandering around. They were trying to understand what was happening to them. Many did not understand that they were on their way to the other side. Perhaps they did not believe in the after world while they were living.

David would help as many as he could on his short walks. The retention sutures would dig into him more when he walked. Therefore, he could not walk for very long.

Michelle would watch him as he told the spirits how to get to heaven. She beamed with pride as she escorted him down the hall.

Unfortunately, all of the walks ended in extreme pain for him. Michelle would get him back into bed and the nurse would medicate him as quickly as possible. His face would get distorted sometimes when the retention sutures pulled on his abdomen or jabbed him. It would not take long for the pain medication to work. As soon as it did, he fell asleep. Sometimes he would snore so loudly they would have to shut the door.

That evening Nancy went to visit him she brought a thirty-two ounce chocolate milk shake for him. David's eyes lit up when he saw it.

"Hi! I brought a surprise for you. Drink as much as you want, but do not force yourself to drink more than you can handle. I bought the large one for you because you love them so much. But now that I think about it, I should have gotten a smaller one. Oh well, we can throw away what you do not drink," Nancy said.

David took the shake and started drinking it. "It tastes so good. Thank you, Hon. Do you want to watch some television while I drink it?" he suggested.

She just nodded watching him drink the shake. She was hoping she did not make a mistake buying him the large one.

They watched television, talking as they watched for quite a while. David seemed to be happy and having a good time for once. Then Nancy heard a noise. Oh no, it was the sound of an empty container.

“I do not think you should have done that. I knew I should have bought a smaller one. I have a bad feeling about this,” Nancy said with a frown.

“I will be fine. It took almost two hours to drink it all,” David said proudly.

“I did not know it was so late. I have to get home and call your mom and Gail before it gets too late. I will see you tomorrow and you better not be sick! I will feel so guilty for buying that large shake for you. I love you,” Nancy said.

“I love you, too and don’t worry, I will be fine,” David said.

They kissed and Nancy went home to make the nightly calls. After talking to the family, she decided to call Milli to give her another update. They talked for quite a while until Nancy was so tired, she could not concentrate on what she was saying. They hung up and Nancy went to bed.

Dan went into David’s room shortly after Nancy left and changed his bandage. He did not seem to have any ill effects from the oversized milk shake. He slept all night without incident.

Day Twenty-one

The twenty-first day started out good, but turned bad quickly. The colostomy bag had a sixteen-ounce capacity, but thirty-two ounces were about to come out. The bag was only a thin plastic bag taped to his body to cover the stoma.

Ann woke him up after she got the turnover from Dan.

“Good morning, Mr. Brundage. I need to get your vital signs for my report this morning,” Ann said.

“All right, but I think I am having a bowel movement right now. Would you empty it when you get through taking my blood pressure?” he asked.

“Sure, I will check it in a minute,” Ann said as she was checking his blood pressure.

“Oh no, I think we have a problem. The bag is full and I am still going!” David shouted. The chocolate milk shake was going through his system and there was no stopping it.

Ann looked down at the bag. It was about to burst. Then they heard a popping noise. The bag burst and it went everywhere! It was in the wound, on the bed and all over the bottom half of his body. But the worst part of the whole mess was that it was covering the top part of Ann’s body. It was on her shirt, in her hair and covering her face. Lucky for her she was wearing a facemask over her mouth and nose and her eyeglasses to cover her eyes.

There was no time for her to worry about it. She immediately went into emergency nursing mode. She hit the nurses emergency call button.

“What do you need, Ann?” the voice said.

“HELP, STAT! We have a potential contamination problem. It must get cleaned up fast. Send someone in to help me and call the wound care and colostomy nurses. I need some clean hospital scrubs and a contamination bag for my clothes,” Ann yelled into the speaker.

She wiped her face enough so she could see what she was doing. Then she started cleaning David. She was rushing around like a crazy person. If any of the feces got into his wound, he would probably get another serious infection. She had to do everything possible to avoid that.

David was in total distress. The incident was embarrassing to him. He was not even thinking about the danger. Anything associated with the colostomy bag always depressed him. This incident was major to him. He would probably go into a deep depression for some time over this one.

Maggie arrived a few minutes later with clean towels, linens and scrubs. She started running warm water in the sink. Ann removed his gown and took the dirty sheets and blankets off his bed as quickly as possible without hurting him. It had gotten all over his groin and

around the catheter. Ann and Maggie worked frantically to remove the threat of infection. They finally got the majority of it off him. Pat, the wound care nurse, arrived as they were working on the wound.

Pat and Ann started cleaning the wound.

“Maggie, please clean up his groin area with warm soap and water. Make sure you clean well around the catheter. We cannot afford to have him get a urinary track infection on top of everything else. We need to get this wound cleaned fast,” Ann said to Pat.

While all three nurses were working on David, the colostomy nurse, Susan arrived. She sprayed the room to reduce the odor. It was mostly for David’s benefit, they were all use to offensive odors from working in hospitals for so long.

Ann explained to Susan what happened, although she could tell from looking at the room.

Ann medicated David with a dose of pain medication. She also gave him an anti-depressant the doctor had previously prescribed in case he got depressed or anxious. It was going to be extremely painful for him when they cleaned under the retention sutures.

“Ann, go get cleaned up while we start cleaning the retention sutures. You are still covered with it and will contaminate the clean field once we get one,” Pat said.

David saw Ann covered in feces and was distressed because he caused it. Tears were rolling down his face.

“This is not your fault, Mr. Brundage. It will wash off and I will be fine. Worse things have happened to me since I have been a nurse. Push the PCA before they start cleaning under the retention sutures,” Ann said before going into the bathroom.

Ann had to use the shower in David’s room because of the contamination factor. She could not go into the hall contaminated and take a chance contaminating anything or anyone else. She grabbed a fresh towel and washcloth and went into the bathroom. After she closed the door, she stripped off her clothes, put them in a contamination bag and got into the shower.

Maggie was cleaning the catheter with rubbing alcohol to sterilize the tube when she spilled some of it. It spilled on his testicles.

David was heavily medicated, but blurted out, “My balls are on fire!”

Maggie wiped it off with a fresh wet cloth apologizing while she worked.

While Maggie was cleaning the catheter, Pat and Susan were using cotton swabs to remove particles from the retention sutures when David started screeching in pain. When Ann heard the scream, she rushed out of the bathroom dressed in fresh scrubs to see what happened.

Susan explained that they were cleaning the retention sutures. If he had to scream to get through the ordeal, it was all right with them.

“All right, Mr. Brundage, I am going to get the doctor to look at the wound. He will be able to order more pain medication for you while we get all of this cleaned up,” Ann said and left the room.

Fortunately, Dr. Wells was in the hall and went immediately into the room to access the situation.

“You are all doing everything correctly. Give him another injection of morphine. That should get him through the clean up,” the doctor said. He wrote the order for the medication in the chart. Ann gave David the injection through the PICC line.

David could still feel the nurses working on him but he did not care anymore. He was heavily medicated while the four women finished cleaning his wound. It took another half hour of intense cleaning, but they finally got it all. The cleaning was so painful for him. He could not even go to sleep while they worked on him. They had to bring in a new bed with fresh linens. The old bed had to be sanitized before it could be used again. Housekeeping came in to wash the floor.

They were just finishing with the clean up when the door opened and a man said, “Your breakfast is here, Mr. Brundage.”

The four nurses looked at each other and then at David. He started to laugh and said, "Just what I need, more food that will eventually come back out and into the bag." He was still laughing so the nurses started laughing, too. The poor man delivering the food looked at them like they were all crazy. He put the tray down and left the room shaking his head. They were laughing so hard, they could not explain to him why they were laughing.

David was not about to go through that again, so he decided he was not going to eat anything. He did not even look at it, but it smelled like eggs and toast. It was a regular breakfast. He was finally getting real food, but was afraid to eat it.

Ann came back in to check on him and noticed he did not eat anything.

"Mr. Brundage, you are getting strong enough for real food. Do not let today's accident bother you. Now you know you have to limit your intake so that will not happen again," Ann said. She was trying to make him feel better so he would eat a little bit of the food.

"Ann, you are truly dedicated to your profession," David complimented her.

"Thank you, Mr. Brundage. Now, would you please eat a little for this dedicated nurse?" she begged.

Finally, she convinced him. He ate the eggs and drank the juice and coffee. After he finished, he went to sleep without even pushing the PCA. He was exhausted from the busy morning.

Nancy got to his room about nine o'clock. While she was putting a gown on, Ann explained about the exploding colostomy bag. She told Nancy that he was extremely upset, but thought he would bounce back quickly. He was a strong man.

"This is all my fault. I brought him a large milk shake last night. I wasn't to help him feel better. He loves chocolate milk shakes, so I brought him one. He is going to be so mad at me for causing this," she told Ann.

Ann told her that it was a mistake and they would learn from it. He would have the bag on for a while and they had to learn just how much it could handle. A thirty-two ounce milk shake is too much. They found that out the hard way. Ann told her she did not think he was blaming her and she should not worry about it. She needed to help him if he was going to get depressed over it.

Nancy thanked her for being so understanding. She also thanked her for the update and warning of what she might be facing when she walked in the room.

He woke up when he heard someone walk up to the bed. He did not look upset. She could not even tell anything happened in the room.

"Honey, Ann told me what happened this morning. I am so sorry you had to go through that. It was my fault for bring you that stupid chocolate milk shake. Are you all right?" she said.

"First of all, it was not your fault. You did not make me drink the whole thing. In fact, you warned me against it. Secondly, I thought about it and decided I did not have the right to be upset. Those women risked their lives cleaning me up. I am thankful they worked so quickly. They were all a mess by the time they were finished. They were all great. They did not give a thought about themselves. They were just worried about me," David said.

Nancy was so proud of him for the conclusion he came to in so short a time and told him so. He was pretty proud of himself, too. She was thankful to the nurses, too, for taking such good care of him. She wanted to remember to thank them.

They watched more television and talked until his lunch arrived. It was a grilled chicken fillet, green beans, skim milk and a small cup of ice cream. He ate every bite. It is a good thing the hospital does not over feed their patients.

He usually got tired after her ate and this day was no exception. He needed to take a nap. She kissed him and went home for a while to relax, then do some housework. He was getting better and would be going home soon. She wanted things perfect for when that happened. She did a little each day so she did not exhaust herself.

On the way out, she stopped to tell Ann that he came to terms with the morning's incident and thanked her for helping him. She asked her to thank the rest of the nurses for helping him, too.

The rest of the day was routine. David got his afternoon therapy and had a full dinner, which he ate. He was getting better.

They watched television and talked during Nancy's visit that night. She caught him up on the news about their family and friends. A couple of hours after she arrived, he started getting tired again. He asked her not to tell anyone about what happened to him that morning and she promised she would not tell a soul. He motioned for her to come close to him. He removed her facemask and kissed her. It was a passionate kiss, not a peck like all the other kisses since he had been in step-down. She looked surprised and scared.

He removed my mask. What if he gets an infection from kissing me? She thought.

"Thank you for being my wife and putting up with me," he said lovingly.

"I would not have it any other way. I love you very much, David," she replied. She went to the door, turned around to say goodnight but did not say a word. At that moment, they did not need words. The look in their eyes said it all.

That night when Bea changed the bandage, it did not hurt as much as he thought it would. The deep cleaning must have killed a lot of the nerve endings in his abdomen. He still took the pain medication so he could sleep. He slept through the night dreaming about his beloved wife, Nancy.

Chapter 10

Day Twenty-two

David woke up at six-thirty and asked for a cup of coffee.

He was drinking his second cup when Dr. Emanuel walked into his room saying, “Good morning, David. I hear you had another tough day yesterday. The nurses got everything cleaned up and there are no ill effects, as far as I can see. Make sure you limit your intake so that does not happen again. Your digestive system is working, but you are limited to the amount you can eat. I am sure you realize that now.

“I am going to get a CAT scan of the retention sutures this morning to see how well you are healing. If it looks good, I will take the one suture out that is causing you so much pain. Maybe that will give you some relief,” the doctor informed David.

Just then Ann walked in the room.

“Good morning, Doctor Emanuel. I hope you are feeling better this morning, Mr. Brundage. Here’s your injection for pain. It will only take a minute to work then I need to start changing your bandage,” she said.

Ann let David and the doctor finish their discussion giving the pain medication time to work. When the doctor left, she pulled the sheet back and removed his gown.

“Let me see if the alcohol that was spilled on you yesterday caused any problems. You seem to be allergic to almost everything,” Ann said. She checked carefully for any problem in his private area. He told her he did not think the alcohol caused any damage and she agreed with him.

She removed the bandage and cleaned the wound. She wiped each of the retention sutures with a cotton swab. The one suture causing the most of the pain was about three centimeters deep. She was as gentle as possible, but the distortion on his face and the tears in his eyes told her he was still in a great deal of pain.

“All right, Mr. Brundage, I am done. Push your PCA for the pain. Some time today Dr. Emanuel wants to lower the dosage you receive from the PCA. Right now, let me get your bath done before breakfast arrives. Maybe you can take a nap before your wife comes in for her visit,” she suggested to him.

The worst was finally over for the day. He hated it when they cleaned the retention sutures. It caused him a tremendous amount of pain, but he might be getting some relief if the doctor can remove that one suture causing him the most pain. The doctor was going to reduce his pain medication, but maybe it would not be so bad after that suture was removed. He could not wait for his wife to get there. He wanted to tell her about getting it removed.

After the doctor left, Ann got him washed, shaved and a clean gown on him. She helped him get out of bed and sit in a chair while she changed the linens. About ten minutes later, his breakfast arrived. It was French toast and sausage. It was a great breakfast because he loved French toast. He enjoyed every bite and topped it off with a cup of coffee.

Nancy arrived later that morning. “You look like you are feeling much better this morning. It will not be too much longer before I can take you home,” she said with a smile.

“I am having a CAT scan today and if things look good enough, the doctor is going to remove the suture that is causing me so much pain,” he told her with tears in his eyes.

“Honey that is the best news you have gotten in a very long time. When will he remove it?” she asked. She was crying happy tears, too.

“He said tomorrow. I cannot wait. I have had enough of this place. I am so ready to go home with you.

“I am eating solid foods again. They should give us a discount because I sure do not eat much here,” he laughed making Nancy to laugh. It felt good to both of them to be laughing again. They did not have much to laugh about lately. They were both as happy as they could be considering what was happening in their lives.

She said, “David, I need to go grocery shopping and get some laundry done today. There is nothing in the house to eat, Lucky needs food and this is the last set of clean clothes I have to wear, so it cannot wait another day. I will stay with you until you get tired, but then I will have to get some chores done.”

“You can get them done now. I will watch a little television and then take a nap. I was up early today anyway, so it will not be too long before I will need a nap,” he told her.

“All right, I will see you tonight. David, I am so happy you are getting better, but most of all that you are feeling better. I love you,” she said, kissed him and left the hospital to do her errands.

“Thanks, Hon, I love you, too. See you tonight,” he said.

Shortly after she left, he pushed the PCA and went to sleep. While he was sleeping, Ann reduced the dosage on the PCA machine without him knowing it was done.

He slept for about an hour before Susan came in the room to change his colostomy bag. “How are you today, Mr. Brundage? I know we changed the bag yesterday, but I need to check that trench. I want to make sure we used enough plastic skin to fill it completely.”

Susan removed the fixture that held the bag on him and inspected it. She used enough to do the job so she used the same amount and put a new fixture and bag on him.

While she was working on him, he told her about possibly getting the suture removed. She told him that was good news. It would help the trench heal faster.

When she left the room, he turned the television on, but could not find anything to hold his interest. He turned it off and went to sleep until lunchtime.

He had a grilled cheese sandwich and skim milk. It was fantastic to be eating regular food again. When he finished, he fell right back to sleep. The good news he got that morning helped him relax, so he was sleeping a lot. Ann checked in on him about an hour after lunch, but he did not even hear her in his room.

Michelle came about two-thirty for his afternoon walk just as he was waking up from his nap. They walked up and down the hall. After the first few steps, Michelle told him he had a spring in his step that was not there before. He told her it was probably because of some good news he received that morning. He proceeded to tell her about the removal of the suture.

She was glad to hear it. She hoped it would alleviate some of the pain he was living with every day.

It is strange. I did not see any spirits while I was in the hall today. Maybe they did not want to bother me because I was in such a good mood, David thought as they reached his room.

When they got back into the room, she had him do some standing exercises using his walker for support.

From the time Michelle left to the time Nancy arrived, he watched television.

Nancy came back around five-fifteen looking tired. After talking a little while, David told her he was tired.

He said, “I want to go to sleep early. If I sleep, the morning will get here faster. The faster morning gets here, the quicker I can get the suture removed.”

None of it was true. He was making things up for her benefit. He wanted her to go home early and get some sleep. He was worried because she looked so exhausted. She fell for his act and said she was tired herself. She said she would take advantage of the early night and go to bed when she got home. His fib worked, but he had mixed feeling about the fib. He was relieved because she would get some sleep, but he did not like lying to her.

They kissed, said they loved each other and Nancy walked to the car. She went home, made a few calls and went to bed.

After she left, he turned on the television and watched it until he fell asleep about midnight. He was so anxious about the morning he could not sleep. He was glad when sleep did finally come to him because he had a dream about making love to his wife that night. He had not even thought about sex in so long, he surprised himself.

Day Twenty-three

Dr. Emanuel turned on all of the lights in David's room. It was about six o'clock in the morning.

"Are you ready to get the retention sutures out?" he asked as David was waking up.

"Yes, I cannot wait, but did you say 'sutures' meaning more than one?" he asked anxiously.

"You are not completely healed yet, but things look good enough on the CAT scan to remove them all. You will have to wear an elastic waist belt for quite a while, but the sutures are coming out today. So, are you ready?" the doctor asked again smiling at his patient.

"You are going to doing it right now?" he asked excitedly.

The doctor did not answer him. In stead, he held up a pair of tiny wire cutters and lifted David's gown. He reached down and snipped the first one. There was a snapping and popping noise, but no pain. He took one end of the suture and pushed it in a tiny bit to release the hook from the muscle. The doctor twisted it so it would not hook back into the muscle. Finally, he slowly pulled it out of David's body. He continued removing them in the same manner until he got to the last one. It was the one that was causing him some much pain. When he cut it, a small piece of flesh shot up into the air. David looked at the doctor and saw a surprised look on his face.

The doctor said, "Are you all right? That one was tight. No wonder you were in so much pain. It did not loosen like the others did as they healed."

David answered, "I am fine. It hardly hurt at all. I felt a pinch when you removed the last one, but that was probably when the skin came off. Does that happen all the time when you remove retention sutures?"

"It is never happened before, but almost everything you have been through is a first for me. You are a very unique man, Mr. Brundage!" the doctor told David.

The retention sutures were like a killer grip on his guts. The grip was released for the first time in twenty-three days when the doctor cut the last suture. That gut wrenching pain was finally gone. For the first time in over three weeks, David felt free of the gripping pain.

"I have some more good news for you. I am going to have the nurse take the catheter out this morning then you will be going to a regular room. It was a long haul, but you made it," the doctor said proudly.

The HMO had been pressuring the doctor for the past week to get David to a regular room. He put them off for as long as possible. A major wound change twice a day and colostomy care was too much work for the nurses on a regular floor. They had too many patients to attend to at one time. It would be impossible to give one patient so much extra care. That is why he was in the Step Down Unit for so long. The nurses had the time to care for extremely ill patients. Each nurse was assigned four patients, but most of the time they had less. The additional problems David had while he was in step-down proved the doctor made the right decision. Dr. Emanuel was glad he was able to put the HMO off for so long.

"Thanks Doc, I think I can live with the pain I have now," David said.

“David, you have been one of my most challenging patients. There is no question about it, I had help from someone, somewhere to keep you alive. I will see you in your new room tomorrow morning,” the doctor said.

After the doctor left, Bea went in to tell him goodbye. He would be on another floor when she returned to work that night.

“Usually our patients are only with us for two or three days. We have had the honor of caring for you for over three weeks. You have shown me and convinced many of our staff that miracles do happen. You are living proof of it. Some of us have watched or heard you sending people to the light. Now most of us believe that is exactly what you were doing. We know that you have something special to accomplish before you pass on and we are proud that we were able to help you make it so you could achieve your goal,” Bea said with a twinkle in her eyes.

“Thanks to all of the staff here and God, I am still alive. Yes, I do have some goals to achieve. Thanks to all the nurses and doctors here, I will be able to complete my mission. I do not know how I will do it yet, but I will get the guidance when I need it. Thank you for taking such good care of me, Bea,” David said with a smile.

“It was my pleasure. Perhaps I will see you in your new room before you go home,” she said.

“I would like that,” he replied as Bea walked out of his room waving goodbye.

David pushed the PCA so he could go back to sleep. The severe pain was gone, but he was still hurting.

Ann went in as soon as her shift began to check on him. She was happy for him because the worst of his ordeal was over. All of his vital signs were good. She was relieved that all the incidents and mishaps he had been through did not slow down the healing process too much.

She woke him before breakfast to get him cleaned up for the day.

“Before we get started on the bath, let me get that catheter out. All right, take a deep breath,” Ann said as she pulled it out.

“That feels so much better and I hardly felt a thing when you pulled it out. Thanks, Ann,” he said.

She had him cleaned up and fresh linens on the bed quickly. Without the retention sutures, he was able to help more by getting in the chair while she changed the bed linens. It was the first time he got out of bed by himself. Ann stood close to him, just in case, but he did not need any help.

She told him he was out of the woods and she would have to leave. She needed to take care of her sick patients. They smiled at each other as she left his room.

Breakfast arrived a little after eight o'clock and he was ready to chow down. Those stupid retention sutures would not be pressing against a full stomach. He had his bed raised and the table over by his side when a woman came in and put the tray down. It was still warm when he removed the cover. Eggs, bacon, toast and a huge strawberry were on the tray along with milk, orange juice and coffee. He could only eat half of it when he starting feeling full. He stopped eating. It was a hard lesson to learn, but as long as he had the colostomy bag, he would not eat too much again.

Right after he finished his breakfast, he called Nancy with the good news. “Hi! It is me and I do not have those wires in me anymore,” he almost shouted in her ear.

“You finally got it out. Do you feel all right? Did it help with the pain?” she asked excited and happy for him.

“Dr. Emanuel took all of them out, not just the one that was hurting me. He did not promise, but it is his opinion that I am healed enough to remove them. I feel ninety-five percent better already. The intense pain is gone. It is not gone completely, but I can live with what I feel now. Please call my mother and have her call me. Just tell her I have some good news. I want

to tell her they are out. She will feel much better hearing the news from me. I worry about her with all of her health problems,” he said with sadness in his voice.

“I will call her as soon as we hang up. Do you want me to bring anything?” she asked.

“Yes, some shorts and T-shirts so I can walk around without my butt hanging out,” David replied.

“All right, I will find some to take with me this morning. I will call your mother now and see you in about an hour. I love you,” Nancy said.

“I will keep the phone close to me until she calls. I will see you soon. I love you, too,” David replied.

A couple of minutes later, the phone rang.

“Hello Mom,” he said.

“Hi, I heard you are much better and you have some good news for me. Nancy told me she promised you that she would not tell me, so what is it?” she asked impatiently.

“The doctor took out the retention sutures this morning,” he said.

“Are they those things that were hurting you so much?” she asked.

“Yes and now most of the major pain is gone. I still have a lot of healing to do, but the doctor thinks I am on the mend,” he replied. For some reason, the words “on the mend” always made her feel better so he used them for her benefit.

For the first time since the first surgery, he was able to hear her talk and answer all her questions at least two times each. She had so many of them she could not remember what she had already asked him. Therefore, she repeated herself. But he did not care. He was happy because she was happy. He talked to her for almost an hour. When Nancy walked in the door he said, “Mom I have to go now. Nancy’s here with some clothes for me to wear instead of these silly hospital gowns. She will give you my new telephone number tonight when she calls. I should be going to the regular room in a little while. I will talk to you soon, I promise. Things are just going to get better and better now, Mom. I love you,” David said.

“All right, thank Nancy for me keeping me so well informed about your condition. I love you, Son,” Dot said with a lump in her throat as she hung up. She was happy that he was doing so well, but she was still worried and would not feel comfortable until he was at home.

“Hi, I see you brought a bag of stuff for me. You brought me a Slurpee, too. It is a small one. Thanks for that. It is going to taste so good,” he said smiling.

She rushed over and gave him a kiss right on his lips. She did not have to wear the facemask or gown or gloves anymore. They removed the sign because he was going to a new room and there was no need for him to be isolated.

“It feels so good to feel your lips against mine. It is been way too long. I am glad you finally got those wires out. I thought we should celebrate. You look so much better than you did yesterday,” Nancy replied with tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Why are you crying?” David asked.

“I am so happy you are getting better. I was terrified the entire time you had those wires in you,” Nancy answered.

“I know you were but they are out now so we can enjoy our Slurpees.

They talked while drinking the Slurpees then watched some television.

“Good morning, Mr. Brundage. I am sorry for coming in so late to change your bandage, but I have a new, very ill patient. I did not want to leave her until she was stable,” Ann said when she walked into the room.

“I understand completely. If the nurses on this floor did not take care of me like you are taking care of your new patient now, I would probably be dead. So do not apologize, please,” he told her.

“Thank you, Mr. Brundage. That is a very nice thing to say. But now we need to get that bandage changed. Before that though, I need to clean out the colostomy bag,” she said when she noticed it was starting to get full. She changed it as Nancy watched.

Susan, the colostomy nurse, taught Nancy how to change the bag and the fixture for it. She changed it quite a few times and was getting pretty good at it. When David was released from the hospital, she would be changing it all the time. She felt comfortable doing it. It only took a couple of minutes, but it was a dirty job. She would be doing it soon enough by herself so she let the nurses change it while he was still in the hospital.

“Do you want to change the bandage today, Mrs. Brundage?” asked Ann.

“Sure, I can do that,” Nancy said. She completed the wound care perfectly, always keeping a sterile field.

“You picked that up fast,” Ann complimented her.

“Thank you, but I have seen it done a lot and I have helped many times. Plus, David had a similar wound four months,” Nancy reminded her.

“Yes, I keep forgetting all he is been through. He will be in good hands when he goes home. I am sorry to leave so soon, but I need to get back to my other patient,” Ann apologized again.

“In case we do not see you again before he leaves this floor, thank you for all of your help, Ann,” Nancy said.

“You are very welcomed,” Ann said as she exited the room.

“Here comes your lunch, so I am going home to eat mine. If they move you before I get back, I will find you. See you soon. I love you,” Nancy said as he started eating his lunch.

He had a beef patty with potatoes and carrots, a little carton of milk and a piece of apple pie with side of ice cream. Hospital food was notorious for tasting bad, but after not eating for a long time, it tasted pretty good.

After lunch David put a pair of shorts on and asked Maggie to disconnect his IV so he could put on a T-shirt. She did and hooked it back up when the shirt was on. When Michelle took him for his walk, he wanted to be dressed. He was swimming in the clothes because he had lost a total of eighty pounds since the first surgery. At least his butt was not hanging out for the world to see.

He wanted the spirits to see him dressed so they would know that he was not going to be in the hospital much longer. After he was dressed, he pushed the PCA and took a little nap.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Brundage. I was not sure if you would still be in this room. I heard through the grapevine that you are moving to a regular room today,” Michelle said as she walked into the room.

“Yes,” David replied. He got up and sat on the edge of the bed. He was ready to go for his walk.

Maggie walked in the room and he asked her to disconnect my IV so he could walk in the hall with Michelle.

“Mr. Brundage, you are unhooked from all the tubes now, so enjoy your walk,” Maggie said happily.

“Thank you,” David said walking out the door using his walker. He finally felt free. He headed toward the nurses’ station where he could hear all of them talking. He nodded when he passed by the desk. They looked at him and starting clapping. They were almost as happy as he was that he was feeling so much better. He had been to hell and back in the last three weeks.

Michelle was following close behind him. He could see the staff members watching him in disbelief. There were spirits on both sides of him and he was saying, “Go to the light. Go to the light.”

Many of the visitors thought he was nuts and the grin on Michelle's face was confirming they were right. They did not know that Michelle was grinning because she knew he was sending many lost spirits to heaven.

He made it to the window and looked outside and thought, *I am going to be all right now.* Then he returned to his room. The people from transport were there to take him to his new room.

Ann came in the room to get him ready. She put his gown back on and hooked up his IV.

David had become somewhat of a folk hero in the hospital after dying three times and coming back to life. All of the staff had heard the stories about him. His therapist, Michelle was convinced that he was an angel. The second floor was about to experience a small fraction of what the Step Down Unit had witnessed.

When he was ready to go, he started sobbing. After all he had been through he had become extremely emotional.

"What is wrong, Mr. Brundage?" Ann asked. She became concerned because she had seen him get severely ill in a matter of minutes.

"Nothing, it is just that I thought when I left this floor the trip was going to be the morgue. I am just very happy to be alive," David said.

"Yes you are and you are going to stay that way for a long time," Ann told him and meant it.

It was dinnertime when he arrived in his new room on the second floor. The floor had many lost spirits looking for someone to give them guidance. They watched David as he was rolled passed them.

"Hello, Mr. Brundage, my name is Sharon and I will be your nurse until seven o'clock this evening. Your dinner is on the way upstairs right now. Would you like to sit up in the chair for dinner?" she asked.

"Just before I was transferred up here, I finished my therapy session. I am very tired now, so could I eat in bed tonight?" he asked.

"Sure," Sharon replied and raised his bed just as his tray was brought into the room. She put it on the table in front of him.

That was the last time he saw her that night. The nurses on the second floor had eight patients each and were extremely busy.

Some of the spirits lined up outside David's door. He told them all to go to the light. They were all very confused and grateful for the instructions he gave them.

"Hi, Babe, you look great. I sure hope you can come home soon," Nancy said when she arrived.

"I should be able to go home any time now. I have been in a regular room for two hours now," David laughed. "My new phone number is on the board over there on the wall. Would you make sure you give it to my mom when you talk to her tonight, please?"

Nancy wrote it down and put it in her pocket. She assured him everyone in the family would get it.

"It is so nice to be able to just walk in your room when I get here. I do not have to wear the silly gown, facemask and gloves any more," Nancy said happily.

They talked and watched television. While they were watching, Jackie stopped in after work for a visit. She could not make her usual afternoon visit because she had an important meeting she could not miss.

"Dad, you look really good," she said as she kissed him.

They talked about the family and all the difficulties he had been through. But that was all behind them now. They could look forward to when he would go home again. He had to get well enough to have the colostomy reversed. That discussion brought them back to reality. There was still more to come. That surgery had good and bad points. Good because they would

not have to deal with changing the bag anymore. Bad because he would need a fourth surgery and he did not handle them well.

Nancy changed the topic by telling them how she rearranged the office to make it into an office/bedroom for David until he could manage the stairs again to get up to their bedroom. She was anxious for David to come home. That was all they wanted to focus. They talked until visiting hours were over. The two women had to leave for the night.

“Goodnight, I love you both,” David said.

“We love you, too,” Nancy and Jackie said in unison.

While watching television, David fell asleep.

It was about midnight when Kathy, the night nurse went in to change his bandage. The wound still had to be cleaned thoroughly of the dried blood, which still caused him pain. They were still giving him pain medication before changing the bandage.

“Hello, Mr. Brundage, you can stay asleep if you want to while I change your bandage and clean your colostomy bag. If you push the PCA along with the medicine I just gave you, you might be able to go right back to sleep,” Kathy said.

He did as she suggested and fell back to sleep. He did not even remember her being there that night. He slept through the rest of the night, except to go to the bathroom a couple of times.

The lights came on and the window blinds were opened.

“Good morning, Mr. Brundage. My name is Janet and I am a second year student nurse. I will be taking care of you until three o’clock this afternoon. You are my only patient, so I can give you the royal treatment today. Is there anything I can get for you?” she asked.

“Yes, I would like some orange juice and a cup of coffee, please,” David said.

“I will be back in a minute with that for you,” Janet said.

She came back with two orange juice containers and a steaming hot cup of coffee.

“While you drink your coffee, I will prepare your care plan for the day. I will be back in about fifteen minutes to get you washed up for breakfast,” Janet said dashing out of the room.

By the time David was finished with his juice and coffee Janet was back. She had fresh linens and a gown with her.

“Janet, I need my colostomy bag changed before you start my bath,” he said with a frown. He still did not like the bag.

“That will not be a problem,” she said as she looked at the bag to see the type it was and got the necessary supplies to clean it.

She cleaned it as efficiently as any of the nurses. She did an even better job giving him a bath and shave.

“After your bath, we need to get you in the chair to eat your breakfast. The doctor left orders for you to get out of bed as often as you can manage,” she informed him.

After he was cleaned up, she helped him into the chair beside the bed. It reclined and was cover with sheets and pillows to make it more comfortable for him. He moved very slowly and pushed the PCA once he was sitting down.

His breakfast arrived shortly after he was settled. Janet went and studied his chart while he ate breakfast.

After his breakfast, Sharon, his nurse for the day, came into the room. Both nurses helped him back into his bed and Sharon started teaching Janet how to change his bandage. It was the first time Janet had seen such a serious wound. She was stunned at the first sight, just like most of the other nurses who had seen it for the first time.

Sharon explained, “Mr. Brundage’s lateral wounds are from the retention sutures used to close him back up after he eviscerated. The main wound is going to have to close naturally because of a severe infection he contracted just before the evisceration. The wound is cleaned thoroughly and then packed with gauze. It is covered using the wet-to-dry method.

“Wet-to-dry is just like it sounds. First, pack it with a layer of wet sterile gauze, then a layer of dry sterile gauze. After it is packed, use a large, sterile pad to completely cover the wound using tape to hold it all in place. IT must be changed twice a day using this method. Do you have any questions, Janet?” the nurse asked her student.

Janet replied, “Yes, just one. If I am assigned to Mr. Brundage again tomorrow, will I be able to change the bandage while you or another nurse watches me?”

Sharon told her she would and that she showed great promise of becoming a good nurse. Then Janet said before thinking, “He is the guy that dies and comes back with angels, is not he?”

Sharon gave Janet a disapproving look and said, “Yes, Mr. Brundage has had a very difficult time. He is recovering nicely and getting stronger everyday. He is expected to go home very soon.”

All of the student nurses heard the stories about David. The rumors that went around the hospital were extremely exaggerated. They range from him being a crazy man talking to ghosts to the man they say is an angel. All of the students were hoping they would have a chance to meet him. But Janet did not have to hope any longer. She was standing in his room talking to him. She was ecstatic to be his student nurse for the day and maybe again the next day.

“I am so sorry, Mr. Brundage,” Janet apologized.

“Do not worry about it. You did not offend me. I am happy to be here. Nothing seems to bother me anymore. I did not realize I was so famous,” he laughed.

Nancy walked in during the conversation. When David noticed her, he said proudly, “Hi Nance, did you know you are married to a very famous person?”

“Yes, you are and I love you very much,” she replied just as proudly.

“David has caught the attention of the entire hospital staff. Some amazing things have happened around him. The stories were told so many times, some of them are getting out of hand. The fact that he is alive is a miracle,” Sharon explained.

“I am happy he is alive and I do not care what people say about him. I am going to keep him,” Nancy said protectively.

Sharon and Janet excused themselves and left the room so they could have some time alone. They talked about when he would be going home and how they would handle things once he got in the house.

Jackie walked in saying, “Hi Dad, I took an early lunch so I could find your room. Nancy told me you would be moving. How does it feel to be out of step-down?”

“It feels good, but I miss the nurses. They took wonderful care of me. I can honestly say that some of them kept me alive. They are a great group of people and I will remember them for the rest of my life,” David said.

They talked about what was going on at home and how much Lucky missed her daddy. The story about the red *I Love You* heart was brought up because it was so cute. They all started laughing. It felt so good for them to be able to enjoy life again.

A short while later Jackie went back to work. Nancy left about a half hour later to get some errands done. She was still getting things ready for David’s homecoming.

Janet went back in the room after she saw Nancy leave to take David’s vital signs. They were all normal.

“Mr. Brundage, what are the spirits like that you see?” she asked.

David was surprised she was so blunt, but answered, “Most of the time it is like being in a movie theater just before the main feature begins. I hear a low rumbling of whispers and voices all blended together. I can see different types of spirits in the hall. Some of them are like holograms. Others appear to be in the ‘hall of mist’, which is the cleansing of the soul before one goes to the light. A few of them look like real people. They are the vivid colored plastic looking ones. But the strangest ones are completely clear and look like heat images of wavy human forms.

“Occasionally, one of them will realize I can see it and try to communicate with me. They have showed me objects, pictures of things and have even tried to talk to me. Most of the time, I do not understand what they are trying to say so I tell them to go to the light. Some of them seem confused by that, so I have to explain where the light is located. I say to them, ‘Look in the distance and you will see a bright light. Walk toward the light. It will get brighter and brighter. Once you are close enough, an angel will assist you the rest of the way.’ I watch as they disappear into the light. Once in a while, I can see the angel come to help them into it. That looks really cool,” he explained as Janet listened with her eyes wide opened in amazement.

She absorbed every word and asked, “Have you ever tried to make contact with them?”

“No, sometimes this stuff really freaks me out. Right now, I can blame it on the drugs I am taking for the pain. Ordinarily, I would be scared with all the stuff that has been happening to me, but I think God is helping me deal with it all. The first time I was touched by God was during my first surgery when my heart stopped on the operating table. Can you see the ripples in my fingernails?” he asked. “They appeared shortly after my first near death experience.”

“They are all wavy and bumpy. That is so weird,” Janet said.

“Each time I came back, I had more ripples. The more ripples I had, the more spirits I saw and the more weird things would happen. Rub your finger across one of my nails,” David said as he held out his hand.

“They feel so strange. They are bumpy, but I am feeling something inside myself I cannot explain,” Janet said with a frightened look.

“Do not be afraid. Reach into your heart and feel God,” he instructed.

A strange, overwhelming feeling of peace came over her as her fingers passed over his fingernails a second time. She felt contentment and love like she had never experience before. Her face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“You are an angel. They are right!” she said with tears in her eyes.

“No, I am only a messenger, but you can imagine what the touch of an angel would feel like. Multiply that feeling by one hundred to imagine how God’s embrace would feel,” he said.

“I know things about you now I dare not repeat. Too many people would think I have lost my mind. When people in the hospital talk about you, I will not be able to confirm it to anyone, but I will know the truth. I am truly sorry for that, Mr. Brundage,” Janet said

“That is all right, Janet. God understands and loves you,” David replied.

The whole conversation was dropped when a man brought in his lunch. David got in the chair again so he could eat his lunch sitting at a table.

“Thank you for all of your help, Sir,” Janet said with a great respect for him.

“You are welcome, Janet. Will you be able to walk with me while I do my physical therapy today?” he asked.

“Yes, as long as it is done by three o’clock. The hospital will not let the students work passed our shift,” Janet said.

“All right, I will take a nap now and see you later,” he said pushing the PCA. He was sleeping in less than five minutes.

“I finally found you, Mr. Brundage. I went up to step-down looking for you. You must be glad to be in a regular room. It gets you one step closer to getting out of here. Are you ready to take a walk?” asked Michelle.

He woke up when he heard her voice.

“Sure, but I want to get dressed first. I do not want everyone looking at my butt hanging out of this silly gown,” he laughed.

Michelle got his clothes and helped him put his shorts on because he could not bend down to get them over his feet.

“We will need to get a nurse to disconnect the IV,” Michelle said as she pushed the call button.

“Would someone please come down and disconnect Mr. Brundage’s IV so I can take him for his therapy?” she asked.

Janet came into the room to disconnect it. “Michelle, do you mind if I walk with you?” she asked.

“If David does not mind, neither do I. He can walk between us. Perhaps you will get to feel the presents of an angel while we are in the hall,” Michelle said.

“I sure hope so,” Janet replied.

With believers on both sides of him, the spirits were out in full force when they reached the hall.

“Go to the light in the distance. Walk straight ahead. You will see it soon. Go there as fast you can,” David said to fifteen to twenty spirits. They understood his message and soared toward the light. As they approached it, angels appeared. David could hear the music from heaven. It was soothing and peaceful. The angels took the spirits and whisked them away into the light. Two of the angels flew passed. They flew so close to David that Michelle and Janet felt a breeze.

“Now I know why you like doing Mr. Brundage’s therapy each day by walking with him,” Janet said.

“Yes, but do not tell anyone. They would think you are crazy,” Michelle laughed.

While they were talking, David was looking around the hall. He noticed a scale in one of the empty rooms. He had been wondering how much weight he lost since he was admitted into the hospital.

He stopped walking and asked, “Can I weigh myself on that scale?”

Janet led the way to the scale. He stepped on it and said, “I cannot believe it. I weigh two hundred and forty-two pounds now. I have lost another forty pounds since I have been here. I do not think too many people would like my diet plan though,” he laughed as the two nurses joined in the laughter.

They walked the length of the hall and then returned to his room.

“That was the most exhilarating experience I have had in my whole life,” Janet said.

Walking wore David out, so he took a nap when they got him back into bed. Janet looked in on him before she left for the day. He was still sleeping soundly.

He woke up later that afternoon and sat in the chair without any help. He watched television while he ate dinner. Shortly after dinner, Dr. Emanuel stopped by to see him.

“Good evening, David. You look great sitting there. It makes my news a little easier to say. The HMO is pressuring me to release you tomorrow. I know you would feel more comfortable staying a few more days, but they refuse to pay for any additional days.

“Tomorrow morning I will want the nurses to help you take a shower. I want to be sure you can make it through one without any problem. If you get through it, you should be fine at home. It will be important when you get home to wash the wound in the shower daily. Use the shower chair you have at home for a while until you can stand through a complete shower. It will be safer for you and Nancy if you sit on the chair while you shower until you are steady on your feet.

“The HMO will pay for home nursing care twice a day. You can talk it over with your wife tonight and I will meet with both of you here tomorrow at noon,” Dr. Emanuel said.

“Thanks for letting me know so I can break it to Nancy. I am doing much better. I got in the chair by myself for the first time just before you arrived. It will be cutting it close, but I think I will be all right. Nancy will be nervous, I am sure, but she will be worried no matter when I go home,” David said.

“All right then, I will see you both here tomorrow at noon.” the doctor said and disappeared out the door.

When Nancy visited that night, he greeted her saying, “Hi Honey, good news. I get to go home tomorrow, he told her.

“No, you are not. That is way too soon. You are kidding? Please tell me you are kidding,” she said in a panic.

“No I am not kidding,” he said and she knew he was serious.

“You just got into this room. You have not even taken a shower yet. I am not sure I am ready. Are you?” she asked in a panic.

“Ready or not, the HMO will not pay for the room after tomorrow,” David informed her.

She was stunned, to say the least. She thought, *He was on a critical list last week, but has to go home this week.* It did not make any sense to her.

“I want to talk to the doctor,” she said louder than she meant. She was very upset at the news. It was not that she did not want him to come home because she did desperately. But she felt it was too soon and wanted to hear the doctor tell her that her husband would not be in jeopardy if he did leave the hospital so soon.

“Calm down, Honey. It will be all right. The doctor is going to meet us here at noon tomorrow. He wants me to take a shower in the morning to make sure I can tolerate the water in the wound and standing for that length of time, I guess. Anyway, he will talk with us tomorrow. He is arranging for a home health care nurse to come to the house twice a day to change the bandage,” David said.

“All right, I guess this is going to happen whether we like it or not. I will bring some clothes with me tomorrow so you do not have to go home in that silly gown. I will make sure everything is ready for you. I have to call the family and let them know you are being released. This is going to shock your mom as much as it did me,” Nancy said.

So much was running through her mind at one time. She wanted to have everything perfect for when he came home.

They talked about everything David would need when he got home. Nancy made a mental note as they talked. When he got sleepy, she went home to get the house ready for the long awaited homecoming.

David woke up and watched television until Kathy came in to change his bandage again.

“I heard the good news. You are going home tomorrow,” she said.

“Yes and we are thrilled, but my wife is not quite sure she is ready for me. I will be a lot to handle for the first few weeks. I still cannot do anything for myself,” David said.

After his bandage was changed, he went to sleep for the night. While he was sleeping, Nancy was at home double checking everything for his homecoming in the morning.

Day 24

Janet woke him up at seven-thirty on his twenty-fourth day in the hospital. She brought some coffee and juice for him.

“Good morning, Mr. Brundage,” she said as she handed him the juice.

“I like this service. Too bad I am going home today,” he said jokingly and they both laughed.

“Would you like to get out of bed for breakfast?” Janet asked him.

“Sure, but let me do it myself. I need the practice,” he replied.

Janet honored his request, but stayed close in case he needed help. She moved the table over close to him so he could eat his breakfast. When it arrived he ate everything on the tray.

“That was the best breakfast I have had since being in the hospital. It was scrambled eggs and toast,” David said. It was really no different than any of the other meals he had there, but it was good because he felt good. He was going home finally!

Janet changed the linens on his bed while he was sitting in the chair.

“After breakfast we will get you in the shower. It will feel good to wash your hair and soak your wounds with warm water. It has been a long time since you have taken a shower,” she said as she left the room to get some extra towels to spread out on the bed. She knew he would be very weak after the shower and need to lie down as soon as possible.

After he finished eating, she took his tray out of the room and told Sharon he was ready for a shower.

“All right, Mr. Brundage, are you ready to do this? Maybe you should press the PCA one more time before I disconnect it,” Sharon suggested.

“We will remove your bandage and the colostomy bag. You will be able to soak the wounds,” Sharon said removing everything.

“What happens if I have a bowel movement while I am in the shower?” he asked.

“We will clean it up. Please try not worry. I know you are nervous, but Janet and I will be with you the entire time,” Sharon said trying to put him at ease.

He stood up and slowly walked to the bathroom in the corner of the room. Janet turned the water on to get it regulated. They wanted the shower to go smoothly because he had to leave today no matter what happened. They did not want him to have any unnecessary anxiety about leaving. Sharon stood close to him as he carefully walked in the bathroom door.

Once he got into the shower, Sharon instructed, “Hold the bars with one hand and I will put some shampoo in the other one so you can wash your hair.”

It felt good to be able to wash his own hair, not that he had very much of it. Just before he went into the hospital, Nancy shaved most of it off. So it was only about an inch long.

Sharon lathered a washcloth and gave it to him. He washed his face and the rest of his body that he could reach. Sharon took over and washed the parts he could not reach. The warm water rushing over his body felt good. Even the soap rinsing off did not hurt the open wounds. He was surprised. He thought it was going to hurt when the water hit the wound. But it did not hurt at all. In fact, it felt good.

He was relaxed until his legs started shaking.

“Mr. Brundage, hang on the bars with both hands. Let me wash the soap off you. We will get you out as quickly as possible,” Sharon said as she sprayed the warm water over him.

Sharon and Janet helped him out of the shower when all the soap was rinsed off of him. He put most of his weight on the walker as he walked to the bed. The nurses helped him sit down slowly so he did not get hurt.

Once he was dry, Sharon hooked up his IV. She put a new colostomy bag and a clean bandage on him. While she was busy, Janet went out and put some green scrubs on. Both nurses got soaking wet while they were showering him.

Janet came back in the room and when Sharon finished, she left to change into a set of scrubs. While she was out of the room, Janet put a gown on David.

Once he was safely in bed, he pushed the PCA and took a nap. He was in pain and worn out from the shower.

Nancy arrived the same time his lunch was delivered. It was about eleven-thirty. She moved the table close to him so he could reach his food.

“Hi, here’s your lunch. Has the doctor been here yet?” she asked as she put the tray on the table.

He raised the head of the bed so he could eat and said, “Nope, not yet. I did take a shower. In the middle of it, I got pretty shaky. It is a good thing we have that shower chair at home. It took two nurses to help me. I had to hang onto the shower bars so I did not fall. It will be all right at home because I can sit on the chair while you help me. He wanted to go home, so he tried to reassure her things would work out.

Just as he finished eating, Dr. Emanuel walked in and greeted them both. Then he asked Nancy, “How do you feel about David going home?”

“I am nervous, but I will be nervous no matter when he comes home. The insurance company will not pay for another day or two and we surely cannot afford to pay for it, so we do not have a choice,” she said.

David and the doctor started laughing.

“What in the world is so funny?” she asked getting angry at them.

“That is exactly what David said about how you would feel about his release,” the doctor answered. “You two know each other so well, it is almost scary.”

“Well, we have to get down to business. The nurse said you got shaky during your shower, but with the shower chair, you should not have that problem. I had my nurse set up home care visits twice a day for the first three days. They will report each visit directly to my office. Their first visit is schedule for six-thirty tonight. I want them to check the wound after your car ride home. I will write prescriptions for pain and antibiotics for you to take at home. I will have the nurse go over the instructions with you before you leave. Do either of you have any questions about anything?” he asked them.

Nancy answered him saying, “Nothing at the moment, but as soon as you leave, I will think of twenty questions I should have asked you.”

“If that happens, call my office. They can reach me anytime, day or night. I will call you back as soon as I possibly can, so do not worry,” the doctor said.

“Now, I hate to rush off, but I have to get ready for surgery. Both of you take care and I want to see you, David, in my office in a week for a check up. See you then and good luck,” said the doctor as he rushed out the door.

David was smiling. He was ready to go home. His eyes welled up and he yelled, “I made it! I am going to walk out of here! Let’s go home, Hon.”

“Not quite so fast David. You need the PICC line removed from your arm,” Sharon said as she walked into the room with Janet close behind her. A few minutes later, a technician came in to remove it. David pushed the PCA one last time for the ride home. The technician removed it without a problem and covered the cut with a piece of sterile gauze, taping it securely.

“Thank you for giving me a shower this morning and taking care of me,” David said to Sharon and Janet.

“Hello, my name is Jerry and I am a volunteer with patient transport. If you will sit in the wheelchair, I will take you down to the front door,” he said.

Nancy thanked the two nurses as she gathered up the bags they packed for her to take with them. There were three bags with supplies she could use at home. Once a supply went into a patient’s room, it could not be used on anyone else. So the bags were filled with colostomy bags and bandaging equipment that were already in his room. She had the bags in her arms and left to pull the car around to the front door.

While Jerry pushed David through the hall in the chair, David saw spirits floating in the air. Two of them went in the elevator with them. When the doors opened, David could not resist saying one last time, “Go the light, you can see it off in the distance. Go as fast as you can and you will be greeted by angels.” He watched as they followed his instructions. David was a little sad. He started to enjoy their visits and helping the lost ones go to the light.

Jerry did not say a word as he heard David talking. He just did his job and pushed the chair straight to the entrance where Nancy was going to meet them. They only had to wait a minute when David saw their car come around the corner. He could not miss it. It had an American flag waving in the wind from the radio antenna. Jerry wheeled him outside and Nancy opened the car door. David was smiling at all the spirits he was leaving behind. They looked like they were waving to him as Jerry helped him into the car.

They thanked Jerry for his help and Nancy drove home. But she was not alone. Her husband was finally sitting beside her. He was finally going home with her!

Chapter 11

David was grinning ear to ear with tears rolling down his face. He was still emotional and could not control his tears of joy.

He tried to explain his feeling to Nancy by saying, "I did not believe I was going to make it out there alive this time. God told me I had a job to do, but there were so many times when I just felt like quitting. For some reason, He helped me when I needed it most. I do not know why I am so emotional. All I do know is that it is great to be alive and going home with you."

"I am glad you are alive, too. You will never know just how glad I am. We have been through a lot over the past few months and my emotions are running amuck, too," she said trying to let him know that she understood how he felt because she also felt emotional.

It seemed like the car went over every single bump in the road on the way home. Sitting in their '94 Sunbird was very cramped and the suspension could use a little work. Every bump was agony for him. Going over the railroad tracks tossed him from side to side even though Nancy went over them as slowly as possible.

It only took fifteen minutes to get home from the hospital, but it seemed like fifteen hours to David.

Lucky was in the front window watching for her mommy to come home from the hospital. Nancy went into the house first to settle her down and put her outside so she did not jump all over David when he walked in the house. He had been in the hospital for a long time and the dog was going to go crazy as soon as she saw him.

After Nancy got her outside, she put a dining room chair in the middle of the living room with pillows around it. David would use the pillows to protect his stomach when Lucky was let in the house.

Nancy had things ready for David to go in the house. She got the walker out of the car and helped David out. He was in a lot of pain after being bounced around in the car. He grabbed onto the walker and walked into the house. He was out of breath when he finally got to the chair.

Nancy put the pillows on his stomach and said, "Let me know when you are ready for Lucky to come in."

"I am ready, but please do not let her jump on me. It is going to hurt, but we might as well get it done. All right, let her in," David said.

He braced himself as Nancy walked to the back door. When she opened it, Lucky stopped dead in her tracks and started barking. David had changed while he was in the hospital.

They thought she did not recognize him. David turned and looked to his left and saw two spirits standing there. That is why Lucky was barking. She either saw them or felt their presence. Either way, she knew they were in the house. They must have followed David from the hospital.

"Go to the light. Please do not stay here. You can see the light in the distance, go to it now," David told the spirits. They understood that they were scaring the dog and went to the light.

When they left, Lucky's tail started wagging. She started walking toward David cautiously. David reached down and let her sniff his hand. As soon as she smelled his scent, she went running around the room. She tried to jump on his lap, but Nancy grabbed her. She did not hurt him when her paws hit the pillows. He was glad the pillows were protecting him. Lucky carried on for several minutes.

When she calmed down enough, Nancy went to the kitchen to get David a pain pill.

"Lucky is a happy puppy now that you are home," Nancy said from the kitchen.

David removed the pillows that surrounded him and grabbed his walker. He moved to his recliner and got comfortable.

“This is much better,” David said.

“What is?” she asked.

“Sitting in my chair is better.”

“You are not supposed to get up by yourself. Please wait and let me help you for a day or two, until you get stronger. A fall could land you right back in the hospital,” Nancy warned as she rushed into the living room to make sure he was all right.

“What is wrong?” she asked. He was extremely pale.

“The pain is getting pretty bad. I have moved more in the last hour than I have in six weeks. I could use a pain pill.”

“I have it here. Let me get a glass of water.”

“I am not going anywhere.”

He turned on the television and started to channel surf.

“It is great to have my big television back. That postage stamp size screen at the hospital was like looking at ants instead of people. To channel surf there, you had to go through all the channels. The remote did not go backwards. It is so great to be home with my own things,” he said.

“Here are your pills. After you take them, do you want to go to bed for a while?” she asked.

“Yes, I am exhausted from the trip home and the excitement of seeing Lucky again,” David replied

He took his medicine and went to bed. Nancy put a twin bed in the office for him while he recuperated. He was not going to be able to manage the stairs up to their bedroom for quite a while. Their bed was a waterbed and there was no way he would be able to get in and out of it anyway.

“This looks great. You sure worked your butt off to get all of this done. Where did the book shelves go?” he asked.

“I put all the extra stuff in the spare closet in John’s bedroom. It was the only way I could get the bed in here,” she said.

“This will be nice and comfortable, thank you. I love you for everything you have done for me since I have been going through this medical stuff,” he said.

“I love you, too. You would have done the same for me if things were reversed. Now, you have a good nap and I will wake you when the visiting nurse gets here,” she said.

Nancy got a card table set up in the corner of the living room for wound care supplies. She took the bags of supplies from the hospital and put their contents on it. One bag had bandages, sterile water, cotton swabs, sterile gloves and tape in it. The colostomy bags, cleaning supplies and a bottle of deodorant for the bags were in the second one. The third one had more bandage supplies. She put that one in the hall closet. She had everything ready for when the nurse came later that day.

She arrived right on time. Lucky started barking when the doorbell rang and woke David up.

Nancy opened the door and said, “Hi, you must be the visiting nurse the hospital sent over. Please, come in.”

“Yes, my name is Darlene. I will be the supervising nurse and will evaluate your husband’s condition and write a care plan for him,” the nurse said.

Nancy showed her to the living room and told her to have a seat while she got David out of bed and in his recliner. David told Nancy earlier that afternoon before he went to bed that he wanted his bandages changed in his chair. He thought it would be more comfortable for him and the lighting was better in the living room for the nurse to see what she was doing.

While he was getting in the recliner, Darlene introduced herself and explained that she was the supervising nurse and would only see him once a week.

“Hello, it is nice to meet you,” David said.

“Your daily nurse will be Julie. She will be here every morning and late afternoon for at least the next week per your doctor’s orders,” Darlene continued explaining how things would work with his home care.

Darlene brought a large shopping bag full of medical supplies with her. Some of them were duplicates of what Nancy already had on the card table, but some things were different. The nurse said she would add her supplies to the ones on the table. Everything would be used before David’s wound was healed. In fact, they would probably need to replenish the supply.

Darlene took his vital signs then looked at the wound and colostomy. She wrote down the information in a file from the initial exam. When she took his pulse, she noticed the ripples in his fingernails.

“Have you always had these bumps on your fingernails, Mr. Brundage?” she asked while looking them.

“What bumps? Oh, you mean the ripples. They appeared after the first time my heart stopped on the operating table last April. They have gotten more pronounced since my last near death experience,” David replied. “Please call me David.”

Stunned by his response, she asked, “How many near death experiences did you have?”

“I think three, but maybe there were more while I was recovering from the evisceration. I was pretty wiped out on drugs during that period,” David replied.

“You sure have had a rough time of it. Well, I guess I had better get started. I need to get your full medical history for my records,” Darlene said as she pulled out a medical questionnaire from her briefcase and asked him a lot of standard medical questions.

After they were finished with the questionnaire, Nancy pulled the card table over closer to them.

“This table will make it a lot easier to change the bandages. Thank you, Mrs. Brundage,” Darlene said.

“It was no problem and please call me Nancy,” she said.

Darlene removed the bandages. She saw the cuts on both sides of the wound and said, “Those cuts from the retention sutures will be painful when I clean them, but they will heal much faster than the main wound.

“I have been told that you learned how to clean his wounds and change the bandage, Nancy. If you will, let Julie handle it for the first couples of days. Then you can start helping her. When I am sure you can manage changing them by yourself, I will get approval from Dr. Emanuel for you to do it. After you have done it a few times alone, we will just come twice a week. Of course, the doctor has to give his approval first,” said Darlene.

“That is fine with me,” Nancy replied.

Darlene cleaned the wound and had the bandage changed in thirty minutes.

“Julie will change the colostomy bag tomorrow morning after your shower. If either of you have any questions please call us. Our phone numbers are on the front of the folder with the paper work I am leaving for you both to look over. It was nice meeting you and I will see you from time to time during your care,” Darlene said.

“Thank you very much, Darlene. It was nice meeting you,” David said.

“Yes, thank you for all of the supplies and help. Would you please have Julie call us an hour before she plans to be here so I can have David showered. It will also give his pain medication time to work before she changes the bandage?” asked Nancy.

“Sure, I can do that. Remember, any questions you have, please call anytime. Someone is always at the main phone number to answer questions. If you need a nurse to come out, she

will page a nurse and he or she call you as soon as possible,” Darlene told them as she left the house.

David watched television while Nancy got dinner ready. One of the spirits that followed them home started making one of the end table lights in the living room go on and off.

“Stop it!” David yelled. “Get out of here and take your buddies with you. Go to the light,” he yelled. They were beginning to annoy him with all the games they played.

The ceiling fan started spinning and the television went on and off a few times. The spirits did not like anyone yelling at them.

Nancy rushed in to see what all of the commotion was about, “Are you all right? What happened?” she asked.

“It was some of those things that followed us back from the hospital,” David explained.

“What things? You mean the spirits? I hope they do not act up while people are visiting us. I do not want them scaring our friends,” Nancy said.

Nancy went back into the kitchen to finish cooking. David ate his supper in his recliner. It was more comfortable than eating in a hospital bed and the food was much better. He ate a little bit off his plate, but could not finish it.

“My stomach must have really shrunk. I am full already,” David said.

“I can believe that. You did not have anything to eat for days at a time. Do not force yourself to eat anymore right now. If you want more later on tonight, I can heat it up for you. If not tonight, then you can have it for lunch tomorrow. Just do not over do it, please,” Nancy begged him. She did not want his colostomy bag to explode in her living room.

John and Jackie came home at the same time that night, but only long enough to say “hello” and change their clothes. They were happy he was home, but they both made plans with their friends before they knew he was being released from the hospital. They both offered to stay home, but David told them to go have fun. He would be going to bed for the night very shortly anyway. So they got ready for their night out, kissed their parents and were gone for the evening.

After dinner, Nancy and David watched television and talked a little while. It was about nine o’clock when David said he wanted to go to bed.

“It has been a long day for me, Honey. I have to go to bed. Goodnight, I love you,” he said. She walked him to the bathroom to wash up and brush his teeth. She helped him get into bed and kissed him. Then she went back into the living room.

She was worried about him so she slept downstairs on the couch in case he woke up during the night. He did wake up once for more pain pills. She was glad she heard him trying to get up. He was going to try to get them by himself. She jumped off the couch and turned on a light. She wanted him to know she was on her way to help him.

She got him a glass of water and two pain pills. She waited at the side of the bed until he swallowed them then took the glass back into the kitchen. He went back to sleep so she went back to the couch and fell asleep, too.

She woke up to the phone ringing at eight o’clock the next morning. It was Julie saying she would be there in an hour. Nancy thanked her for the call and went to wake David up to get him showered. By the time they were done with his shower, her shower and his morning medication, Julie was at the door.

“Good morning, I am Julie and I will be Mr. Brundage’s nurse for the next few weeks,” she said.

“Yes, come in please. I am Nancy and this is my husband, David,” Nancy said as they walked into the living room.

“Hi Julie, it is nice to meet you. Call me David, please,” David said.

Julie was very energetic and ready to get busy. She had four more patients to see that day. They were all over the city of Austin, so she would be on the road longer than she would be

caring for patients. But the concept was good and it was good that nurses were willing to travel so much every day to get to their patients.

“All right David. You took a shower this morning. That’s good, the wound should be clean and the bandage and colostomy bag are already removed. Can I see what we are dealing with and get a plan of action in my head. It will go faster if I know how I am going to do things,” Julie said.

David had been holding a large bath towel over the stoma in case he had an accident. Julie told them it was a good idea.

She got busy removing the tape residue that surrounded the wound and colostomy. She brought a special tape removal solution she had to use. In some places, she had to rub hard to get it off. He was glad he had taken his pain pills and they were working. The pain from her rubbing would have been excruciating, but with the pills in his system, it only hurt a little.

“There is no sign of infection. The wound is pink with healthy tissue around it. The part that concerns me is the trench between the main wound and the stoma,” Julie said.

“The colostomy nurse at the hospital was using a material she called plastic skin to fill the trench. She put the new fixture for the colostomy bag over that. So far, it is been working well, Nancy explained.

Nancy gave Julie a pack of the plastic skin she brought home from the hospital. She showed her where the colostomy nurse was putting it. She like the way the plastic skin worked so her concerns were alleviated. After the plastic skin was in place, Julie put the new colostomy bag over the stoma and a clean bandage on the wound.

“You are very experienced at changing his bandage. I am supposed to come here twice a day, but I can see that you can manage his care pretty much by yourself. I am going to ask Darlene to call the doctor and have my visits reduced to once a day for the first week, if that is all right with you,” Julie said.

“Sure, I have been taking care of him for a while now. It will also save us some money. Our co-payment is fifteen dollars a visit, which gets expensive after a week or two. I promise I will call you if I have any questions or concerns about anything,” Nancy said.

Darlene called Dr. Emanuel’s office and asked his nurse to get approval for Julie to cut her visits to once a day. She told the nurse that the patient’s wife had the skills necessary to change his bandage.

The nurse told her that he would probably give his approval because the nurses at the hospital raved to him about how well Nancy could manage with the bandages and the colostomy bag. The nurse said she would get back to Darlene as soon as she could reach the doctor to get his official approval.

“I am sure Dr. Emanuel will agree with our assessment. I will call you as soon as I hear from him. If we get the approval, I will not come tonight. I will give you a call in the morning around the same time as today if that works for both of you. It was nice meeting you both and I will see you either tonight or in the morning,” Julie said.

David thanked Julie and Nancy thanked her as they walked to the front door.

Julie called that afternoon to say the doctor told her to see David that evening and then she could start daily visits the next day. So she would be at their house about six o’clock that evening.

Nancy said, “Thank you, Julie. I will give David his pain pills an hour before that so you will not have to call before you come tonight.”

David slept and watched television with little to no exercise at all. The most he did was walk to the bathroom and bedroom. But it was enough for him. He was always winded when he got to his destination.

For the next week, Nancy would get him showered before the nurse arrived for the morning visits. The whole process would have been boring, except that spirits found ways to communicate with David. It was like a door had opened to a parallel universe.

When David went to bed at night, he had two fans on to drown out the low whisperings and rumblings the spirits made. David and Nancy were not afraid of them. But they became a nuisance very quickly. Strange things happened when they were in the house. The lights would go on and off, the garage door would open and close, the ceiling fans would turn when they were not on, the doorbell would ring and the television would go on and off. The thing that bothered them most was how confused they were making Lucky. She was barking constantly.

Occasionally during the night, they would find David sleeping. One or two of them would hover over his bed driving the Lucky crazy. She would breathe heavy and bark, but muffled her bark. She did not want to wake David, but the spirits were too close to him for her to ignore. She was very protective of her master.

When he woke up, the spirits hovering above David startled him. He would tell them to go to the light. Most of the time, they would leave and go in the direction of the light. But other times they would try to show him something or try to communicate with him. David's skills as a psychic were not developed, so he had no idea what to do with the information the spirits were trying to convey to him. He was too sick to try to do any research on the Internet, but promised himself he would as soon as he was physically able to sit at the computer. After a few minutes the spirits left him alone realizing he was not aware of his abilities as a psychic.

David was getting better with every passing day. Nancy still cleaned and changed his colostomy bag without complaining. She hoped that when he was strong enough, he would take over the chore. Many marriages would have crumbled with the amount of home care required and the physical and monetary stress they were under day in and day out. But their marriage just kept getting stronger.

"You have a doctor's appointment today for your one week check up. So, get up and let us get moving. I will help you get your shower then we need to replace the colostomy bag. Would you like cream of wheat for breakfast?"

"That sounds good, but I am dreading the car ride to Dr. Emanuel's office," David replied.

"The pain pills should still be in your system that you took before your shower. It should not be too bad. I will take two pills with us and you can take them before we leave the office. They will make it easier on you coming home," Nancy said.

That calmed him down enough so he could take his shower. While he was eating his breakfast, Nancy took her shower.

David wore pants with an elastic top because they would not be tight on his waist or the wound. By the time they were ready to leave, David was worn out. Nancy backed out of the garage and opened the car door for David. He managed to get himself in and close the door. He was getting better. He would not have been able to do that by himself a week ago.

No matter what route they took to the doctor's office, they had to cross a set of railroad tracks. Nancy drove slowly over them and tried to avoid as many bumps in the road as possible. It seemed like she was hitting every single bump she could find to David. She was not doing it, of course. In fact, it was just the opposite, she was trying to avoid them.

Finally, after fifteen very long minutes for both of them, they reached their destination. She dropped him off in front of the office building. He sat on a bench just inside the main door while she parked the car. He moved very slowly, using his cane. He might have been slow, but he was doing it by himself.

"You parked the car fast enough. I want to get upstairs and see what the doctor has to say about my recovery," David said anxiously.

David was exhausted by the time they reached the office. It was a long walk to the office from the main lobby. His doctor's office was the last one at the end of a long hallway.

Nancy signed him in while he sat in one of the chairs in the waiting room. They had barely sat down when Angie, the doctor's nurse took them to the examining room. She took his vital signs and said, "Mr. Brundage, we are very happy to see you. Doc told us you had a very rough time in the hospital. He kept us apprised of your progress. We were praying for you to get better soon. He will be with you in a minute."

"Thank you, Angie. Your prayers worked. Thank everyone for me please," David said.

"I will," she said and left the room.

"You are looking much better, David. Let me take a look at the wounds," the doctor said removing the bandage and inspected them.

"The retention wounds are almost healed. The trench is healing nicely, too. I am glad the plastic skin worked to protect it. The main wound is being kept clean. That is very important."

He turned to Nancy and said, "You are doing a good job keeping it clean, Nancy."

Turning back to David, he said, "While you are in the shower, let the water run over the wound. It will remove the dried blood without causing you any pain. It will also help Nancy. She will not have to work so hard to clean it when she changes the bandage. I will need to see you again in six weeks. Maybe then, we can discuss the colostomy reversal. Do either of you have any questions?"

"What about the ripples in my fingernails? Will they ever go away?" asked David.

"They were probably caused from a vitamin deficiency or lack of oxygen. I am not absolutely sure what caused them. They should go away as your nails grow. If they are not causing you any pain, I am not going to worry about them at this point. You are doing great. I will send Angie in to put a fresh bandage on your wound," Dr. Emanuel said.

"I can do it. I think you have all the supplies I need," Nancy volunteered.

"All right, you have been doing a great job. Keep up the good work, both of you," the doctor said.

When he left the room, Nancy put on a fresh bandage. They went to the desk to make another appointment and paid their co-payment.

David was exhausted. He had not had that much activity in months. It was a good thing Nancy brought the pain pills. He took them while she was making the appointment. He was in tremendous pain by the time they got to the first floor. Nancy went to get the car. She had to help him get in because of the pain and exhaustion. He was groggy on the way home, but he cheered up when he saw Lucky waiting for them in the front window.

Lucky jumped on them when they walked in the house. She was very happy to see David. She usually settled down as soon as she got her doggie cookie, but she was upset about something. Before they could figure out what was wrong, the lights blinked on and off. Apparently, the spirits were happy he was home, too. The ceiling fans were spinning and the television was on full blast. They must have been playing games with Lucky while David and Nancy were at the doctor's office.

"Poor Lucky, she does not know what to think about this spirit stuff," Nancy said.

"We hardly know ourselves. We are all in the same boat," David said.

"I hope our neighbors do not call the police when we are not at home. They could think someone is trying to break into the house with all the commotion these spirits make," Nancy said.

"We have enough to deal with at the moment. I do not want a bunch of people trying to prove our house has been invaded with spirits. There are people who chase spirit phenomena all over the world. They set up cameras and other technical equipment to prove that spirits really do exist," David said.

David told the spirits to go the light. Some went to it, but others went back to the empty zone, a place between heaven and earth. They were the lost spirits that did not realize they were passing to the other side. The mumbling at night, and even during the day, was taking a toll on them. They were hoping it was only a temporary situation. The constant low mumbblings were nerve racking.

Psychics are use to communication with the paranormal world and they know how to deal with it. David tried to get on the Internet to research the subject, but he could not sit at the computer for any length of time. The short time he was able to sit up, he did learn that a few simple prayers would calm them down. He asked his spirit guide to help protect him from them so he could get some rest. It worked. They stopped for a while.

Nancy helped David take a daily shower. She changed his bandage and cleaned his colostomy bag twice a day. She changed the fixture to the bag every three days. She still never complained. She was grateful her husband was alive and was willing to do anything necessary to keep him that way.

The visiting nurse came to the house twice a week to check on his progress. This routine went on for two weeks.

He was finally getting stronger. One evening when his colostomy bag needed cleaning, he asked Nancy to show him how to do it. He was hoping he would be able to start doing it for himself. He felt bad that his wife had to do something that disgusting for him.

“Are you sure you are ready?” she asked.

“Yes, I think I can manage it by myself if you show me how to do it. It is a disgusting thing to do and you have been doing it long enough. I want to do something to take some of the pressure off you. I cannot change my own bandage, but with your training, I should be able to clean the bag. Our marriage vows have been tested and I am thankful that I have you in my life. So, will you teach me?” he asked.

“David, I am thankful that you are in my life, too. I am not going anywhere, no matter what I have to do for you. I am sure you would do the same for me if the situation were reversed. If you are ready, I am more than willing to let you do it,” she answered.

They went into the bathroom and sprayed it with room deodorant before starting. She began the lesson saying, “Remove the bag, like this and pour the contents in the toilet bowl. Rinse the bag using tap water and pour it into the toilet. It has to be rinsed three or four times before it is completely clean. When it is, pour a tiny bit of the liquid deodorant into the bag. Then attach it to the fixture, like this. That is all there is to it.”

He said, “It looks easy enough, but it sure is a smelly job.”

They both started laughing. They were always laughing when other people would be crying. They had a very happy life together. It showed them just how lucky they were when they laughed at things like learning to clean a colostomy bag.

She asked him if he had any questions.

He answered, “No, not about how to do it, but I do not think I will be able to reach the faucet without making a mess. Do we have a plastic squirt bottle? I can hold the bag over the toilet and squirt the water into it from the bottle. I think that would work better for me when I do it by myself.”

“If we do not have anything in the house, I will go to the store and buy one. It cannot be that expensive,” she told him.

So things were settled. Nancy had to get a squirt bottle.

She watched him clean the bag the next time it needed it. The first couple times she had to help him get the bag clean. By the second day, he was doing it pretty much by himself.

On the third day, when she woke up, he was already up and sitting in his recliner drinking a cup of coffee. She liked to clean his bag before she had anything to eat or drink. He was less likely to have an accident that way.

“Are you ready to clean the bag?” she asked.

To her surprise, he said, “It is done!”

She said, “You did it by yourself? I am so proud of you and very thankful, too.”

They were laughing and crying at the same time. He was crying because he could finally do something for himself and help his wife in the process. She was crying because she was overwhelmed with all the things she was doing each day. That was one less thing she would have to do. But more than that, it meant that her husband was really recovering.

His six week check up went well. He tolerated the bumps in the road much better than his first visit to the office. He was still in pain, but he could tolerate it better. Nancy parked the car. David waited for her to go in the elevator together. She was still afraid to let him try it on his own.

He was out of breath when he reached the office. It was the most he had walked since his last visit there.

Dr. Emanuel told him things were progressing on schedule. He should keep doing what he was doing and he should be fully recovered in a couple of months.

On the way home, they both admitted how glad they were that the ordeal was finally coming to an end.

The spirits showed up every now and then turning the lights, television and other things electrical on and off. David would send them to the light. It was happening less and less since David asked for help from his spirit guide. He was glad the ruckus had slowed down. Nancy asked questions about them since they were not around all the time.

“What do the spirits look like?” she asked.

“There are several different types, some good and some bad. I do not know why they look so different, but they do. Some look like holograms. I see more of them than any of the others. They go to the light when I tell them how to find it.

“Some are ghostly types that are black and white holograms.

“There are others that are vivid, bright colors and look like plastic. They are scary. They do not leave right away, but eventually they go to the light, too.

“There are playful ones that look like a wave of heat, the rippling of water and sometimes they even look clear. The clear ones come and go.

“Others are gray and look like zombies. They are stuck in the transition world. They do not realize they are dead yet. It takes a lot of work to get them free to move on to heaven.

“The pure energy types look like light in the shape of a human. I cannot see them most of the time, but I feel their presence. I cannot understand what they are saying to me because it sounds like a foreign language. They are a little spooky because I cannot see them, but they mean no harm.

“All of the spirits I just mentioned are good.

“There are bad spirits. They are the reason I started praying. They look like shadows with hardly any shape to them at all. They seem to be sucking the love and goodness out of you until you do not want to live anymore. Looking at them is like looking down a black hole that pulls you toward it. The bad ones are terrifying and I never want to see any of them again. I do not even like talking about them.

“My spirit guide looks like Brownie. Remember him? He is my teddy bear when I was a baby. He told me he is been watching over me since my birth. When my parents bought Brownie, my spirit guide took up residence inside him. That is probably the reason I am still attached to him at my age,” David explained.

“What do the good spirits do? What do they say when they are showing you something? Tell me what happens to them,” Nancy asked.

“Many of them have showed me a book, chart or sometimes just a piece of paper with writing on it. I cannot read any of it though. The words were written in a foreign language. I

think some of them were speaking in a foreign language, too. That is why I could not understand them, but they understood me when I talked to them,” David said.

“The entire spirit world is really spooky to me. I do not know if anyone else will believe you,” Nancy said.

“I know, but it is true and I do not need to prove it to anyone else. I was on the other side for short periods of time. I hope I do not continue seeing this stuff while I am here on earth. I want to enjoy life. I will have an eternity to figure it out when I get to the other side forever. Some will believe it and others will not, but I am not on a quest to prove any of it.

“I hope everyone pays attention to what God said to me. They were His words, not mine. Everyone will get the proof they need when they die. Hearing the words of God through me, maybe when they die they will realize they have passed over and go to the light,” David said.

“Wait a minute! You never told me anything about God speaking to you. When did that happen? Tell me all about it,” Nancy said.

“It was while I was having the emergency surgery after I eviscerated. I went to the other side and while I was there, God spoke to me. He gave me a mission to do while I am here on earth. He wants me to tell people not to use His name to justify wars or killings. He wants everyone to follow His word. He wants everyone to love one another,” David said giving her the short version of what God told him.

Nancy interrupted him saying, “I cannot believe you did not tell me this before.”

“I was afraid to talk about it at first. I thought you would think I am crazy. But you believe everything else I said about the spirits and near death experiences, so I hope you believe this, too,” he replied.

“Of course, I believe you. You were never overly religious before all this, so why would you make something like this up?” she asked.

“I am glad you believe me. I do not care if anyone else does, but I needed for you to believe me. I am getting tired of talking. Do you want to watch some television?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said with a smile.

The days were boring and fell into a predictable routine, especially since the spirits were not around as much. The ripples in his fingernails were growing out.

David noticed that as his fingernails grew, the ripples were disappearing and he was seeing the spirits less and less.

He was getting better and could be left on his own for a couple hours. Nancy decided she needed to go out and get a job one day out of the blue. Their health insurance coverage would be ending in a few months. Her unemployment was ending in two months. With David still needing another surgery, Nancy thought it was time to get something.

She made arrangements with Jackie to be on call in case he had an emergency so she could go out job hunting. Since she was laid off, she had been sending her resume to businesses over the Internet, but had not gotten any suitable offers. She was to the point where she would take anything.

She took a shower and got dressed for interviewing. She told David she would be back as soon as she had a job. Five hours later, she came home with a job at a local department store. She worked retail when she was younger and knew she would hate it, but they needed insurance coverage and money, so she took it.

The visiting nurses were not necessary any more because his wound was almost healed. The main wound was not quite healed, but it would not take much longer. There was one problem. He was getting infections in the scar where the two sides of the tissue were closing together. The infected spots looked like large white heads. When they broke open and drained, they left deep holes. Some of them were three to four centimeters deep.

It was the last week in October, three months since the evisceration. They thought it should be healed by now and were getting concerned.

Nancy called to make an appointment with Dr. Emanuel to look at the infected areas. The nurse told them the doctor would see him that afternoon.

Driving there was hardly painful at all for David, but it still hurt him when they went over a bump and the railroad tracks. Nancy dropped him like always and went to park the car.

He took the elevator and using his cane, walked to the doctor's office without even stopping to rest. When he got to the office, he went to the desk and signed himself in. Then he took a seat.

After parking the car, Nancy walked in the building expecting to see David waiting for her on the bench. When she did not see him, she rushed up to the office. When she saw him sitting there, she breathed a sign of relief.

She sat down next to him and asked, "Why did you come up here without me?"

"I wanted to come up by myself. I knew I could make it. I am sorry if I worried you, but as you can see, I am perfectly all right. I did not even have to stop and rest," he said pleased with himself.

When his name was called, David followed the nurse into the examining room with Nancy trailing behind them. She needed to hear what the doctor had to say first hand because David still got confused sometimes. Even before all these medical problems, he had a bad habit of leaving some details out that did not seem important to him. She needed to know all the facts so she could care for him properly.

For some strange reason, every time they were into a doctor's office, they ended up laughing. That day was no exception. When the doctor walked in, they were still laughing at a story Nancy had just told David.

"Good morning. You look much better. It is good to see you laughing. With all the laughter, I am sure whatever brought you here cannot be too serious. What seems to be the problem?" he asked.

"I am still getting infections. They start out like whiteheads and turn into deep holes. As soon as one heals, another one pops up," David answered.

"They are fistulas. They are abnormal passages from abscesses on the scar tissue of the wound. They allow infection to come to the body surface," the doctor explained.

David asked, "How can we stop them from happening?"

"Let me ask you something first. Are you ready to get that bag off? Your wounds are healed enough to do the colostomy reversal," the doctor informed him.

"Yes, I cannot wait. You can do it as soon as possible, as far as I am concerned, but what about the fistulas?" he asked.

"While I am doing the reversal, I will remove the some of the scar tissue and the fistulas," the doctor explained.

"Killing two birds with one stone, I like that idea," David said getting excited. Maybe after the surgery, he would start feeling better, physically and mentally.

"Talk to my office manager, Gladys and we will get it done within the next two weeks. I think that will give us both enough time to prepare," Dr. Emanuel said with a smile.

"The sooner the better as far as I am concerned. I hate it. I cannot imagine having to have it for the rest of my life," David said.

"I will make sure Gladys gets it scheduled as soon as possible. She will call you a few days before the surgery to set up the pre-op tests. I will see you soon," the doctor said and left the room.

Nancy and David talked to Gladys. She scheduled the surgery for November the sixth. That was only ten days away.

On the way home, they talked about how glad they were that he was well enough for the colostomy reversal. As soon as they walked in the door, David went into his bedroom to take a nap. The day was very tiring for him.

While he was lying on the bed waiting for sleep to come, he thought, *The wild activity the spirits caused has slowed down considerably. Maybe they are not around much anymore because the ripples in my fingernails are growing out. I started seeing the spirits in the hospital after the very first surgery. Shortly after that I noticed the ripples on my fingernails. So maybe when the ripples are gone, the spirits will be gone, too. They have caused many ripples in our lives. We are actually writing a book about the experience. This may cause ripples in many people's lives. Dr. Emanuel did say that when my heart stopped I was not here. I was somewhere else, but he did not know where.*

That morning when David woke up, he walked into the living room and the lights started to flicker. He looked around and saw three of the playful spirits. It was like they heard his thoughts and came to check in on him to make sure he was doing all right.

Nancy walked in the room and saw the look in his eyes and knew instinctively that he was looking at a spirit. He confirmed what she was thinking when he smiled at her. Sometimes David and Nancy did not need words to understand each other.

For the next seven days they went back to their routine of eating, sleeping, watching television, talking and changing the bandage and cleaning the colostomy bag. It was actually good to have such a boring routine after almost a year of chaos.

The spirits came back daily, but were not annoying this time. It was just enough to break the monotony of waiting for the surgery. David and Nancy were wondering if they would come back when he got out of the hospital after the reversal.

Three days prior to the surgery, Gladys called. The doctor ordered David to go on a clear diet. The night before the surgery he was to take some medication and a salt solution to clean his system out. The doctor took every precaution to ensure that he would have an easy recovery.

David followed the instructions to the letter. He wanted to be as cautious as the doctor. He wanted the surgery and recovery to be as easy as possible.

The night before the surgery, Nancy and David discussed the other surgeries. They talked about things that happened during them and told each other their fears. By the end of their discussion, Nancy could see he was in good mental and physical condition. They felt good about the outcome of the surgery he was going to have the next morning.

David was ready for the surgery this time!

Chapter 12

David and Nancy arrived at the hospital at seven o'clock the morning of his surgery. The hospital environment was different this time. David could sense the presence of spirits but he could not see any of them. Hand in hand, they walked down to the admitting room. As they turned a corner, they saw Ann, one of his nurses from the Step Down Unit.

"Hi Ann, do you remember me?" he asked her.

"Yes, Mr. Brundage, I will never forget you. You look great. Hello, Mrs. Brundage," she said being extremely professional.

"Hi, Ann, what are you doing in Admitting? I thought you were assigned to the Step Down Unit," Nancy said.

"I am a floater now. I go wherever I am needed. It makes my days very interesting. The best experience of my entire nursing career was taking care of your husband. He had some very unique problems. I am happy to be his nurse for the day. I will get him ready for the colostomy reversal this morning. When I saw your name on the chart, I came down so you would not have to wait," she said.

Having a familiar face helped David calm down. He knew the operation was going to be easy compared to the ones in the past, but he was still nervous.

He did the admissions paperwork the day before on the phone. All he had to do was show his driver license, insurance card and sign the paperwork. When he was finished signing, Ann wheeled him to the pre-op area. She gave him a gown and told him to remove all this clothing and put it on. She also gave him a bouffant cap and booties that were to be put on just before he was rolled into the operating room. After he changed, Ann took his medical history and input it into the computer.

"The operating room nurse will be in shortly to put an IV line in your arm. Your veins look like they have healed. Maybe it will be easy to get a line in today. I am going to give you something to help you relax right now," Ann said.

Just then the anesthesiologist walked into the room.

"Hello, Mr. Brundage, I am Doctor James Jones. I will be taking care of you while you are napping," the doctor jokingly said. He asked all of the usual questions about allergies to medications. Then he asked, "Do you have any questions before I get ready for your surgery?"

"No, Sir. This is my fourth operation in less than a year. I know what to expect. This surgery is going to be an easy one," David replied.

"I am sure it will be, Mr. Brundage. I will see you in a few minutes," the doctor said rushed off to get ready.

Shortly after he left, the operating room nurse entered the room.

"Hello, my name is Julie and I will be assisting the doctors today. I am going to put in your IV line now," she said.

"I am kind of a hard stick," David replied.

Julie seemingly ignored his comment and got the line in with one stick. She was done before he knew it.

This is going to be a breeze if everything goes as easy as that, David thought.

"I sorry I seemed to be ignoring you. I was concentrating on getting the needle in your vein. When I do it I cannot talk. It makes my hands move ever so slightly. That could mean the difference between one or two sticks. Anyway, your veins have had time to heal. That always

makes finding a good vein easier. I will see you in the operating room in a few minutes,” Julie said and left the room.

As she was leaving, Jackie walked in the room.

“Hi, Dad, you look like you are ready for this one,” she said as she kissed her dad on the forehead.

“Yes, I want this bag off me,” he said pointing to the colostomy bag.

“Here is more medicine, Mr. Brundage,” Ann said putting it in the IV. He started feeling it take affect a few minutes later.

“Nancy, would you put my hat and boots on before I forget them?” he asked.

She was putting them on as Dr. Emanuel walked into the room.

“Good morning, are you ready, David?” he asked.

“Yes and I know this operation will be easy for you and me, Doc. I have had enough problems, so this one has to go without a hitch,” David said.

“We are taking every precaution with this one. While I am in there, I will remove the scar tissue and fistulas and do the reversal. When I close, I am going to double stitch everything. You will only have a few staples in for the first day. Then we are going to use a Vacuum Assisted Closure system or VAC to close the wound. The VAC will suck the drainage out of the wound into a canister that will be emptied. With the VAC, the healthy tissue will be able to grow faster because the drainage will not be there to inhibit its growth. It should also help eliminate the infection problem you have had in the past. I will explain it in more detail after the surgery. I will see you in the operating room in a few minutes. Do you have any questions before I leave?” he asked.

“No, this is becoming routine for me,” David laughed. The medication was working.

“I have one, Dr. Emanuel. How long do you think the surgery will take?” Nancy asked.

“I do not want to commit to a time. It will depend on how much scar tissue I have to remove. You can have the nurse at the desk just outside this room check on his progress if you start getting anxious. Give me at least two hours though, before you start getting too nervous. I will meet you and the family in the waiting area at the main entrance,” the doctor said.

“All right, but you better have a smile when you come out. We only want good news,” Nancy ordered with an anxious smile.

“I will do what I can, I promise. See you in a couple of hours,” he said and left to scrub for the operation.

The operating team wheeled a gurney in a few minutes after the doctor left to take David to the operating room.

“I love you. Please do not scare us this time,” Nancy said.

“I love you, Dad,” Jackie said as David was getting on the gurney with help from the team. A second later, he was being rolled down the hall to have his fourth surgery in less than a year.

The two women stood there looking at each other. They both had tears in their eyes. Neither of them wanted to cry though. They were trying to protect each other. They knew if one of them started crying, the other one would, too. They walked to the waiting area holding hands in silence.

When David was wheeled into the operating room he could see his spirit guide, Brownie. He gave David the thumbs up sign. That is when he knew, for sure, that he would be fine. He got on to the operating table himself before anyone could help him. He wanted to do it on his own.

“Mr. Brundage, remember me, Dr. Jones? I am giving you a little more medicine to help you relax and some oxygen. Take nice deep breaths and you will be asleep before you know it. Have a nice nap,” he said and David went to sleep.

Nancy and Jackie sat in the same chairs they sat in for each of David's surgeries. They used the time to catch up on Jackie's life. They did not talk much at home because Nancy was always busy with David and Jackie was either working or out with her friends.

They took turns going to the bathroom. While one was away from the waiting area, the other one was watching their belongings.

About an hour after the surgery started, Susie and Nolo got there to wait with them. When they got to the entrance, Nancy met them. They greeted each other with kisses. Nancy told them there was no word yet on David. They would not hear anything for at least another hour. They decided to go to the hospital cafeteria for some breakfast.

Susie and Nolo got situated at a table while Nancy and Jackie waited in line to get bacon, eggs, toast, juice and coffee for the four of them. They eat in silence, each caught up in their own thoughts about what was happening in the operating room.

When they finished eating, they went back to the waiting area. It had been two hours since the surgery began. They had not heard anything, so Jackie went to the volunteer's desk on the other side of the waiting area to see if they had heard anything about him. The volunteer told her they had not heard anything. Jackie thanked him and came back to the others and repeated what the volunteer told her.

They decided to wait another half hour then Nancy would go to the pre-op area to inquire about her husband's condition.

While they waited, they reminisced about some of the good times they shared with David. Nolo was part of their family as far as they were concerned because they had known him since he was in elementary school with Susie. Each of them had a story about a special time they shared with David. They cried and laughed during every story.

Nancy looked at the clock. She had waited long enough. She was going to ask the nurse to check on David's condition. As she stood up, Dr. Emanuel turned the corner. When he saw her, he plastered the biggest smile he could manage on his face.

Nancy waited for him to come to them then sat back down as he sat down across from her.

He said, "Everything went well. He is in recovery and doing fine. There was more scar tissue than I expected, so removing it took longer than I had planned. The colostomy reversal was a complete success, so he does not need the bag anymore."

"That will make him the happiest man in this hospital. It will be the first question he asks when he opens his eyes," Nancy said.

"It was the first thing he said when he opened his eyes. He has already asked me if it was gone. When I told him it was, he said, 'Thank God' and went right back to sleep," the doctor said.

They all started laughing. Leave it to David to have them laughing while he was recovering from major surgery.

Dr. Emanuel continued, "He will be in recovery for another hour or two then he will be taken to a room upstairs. The nurse in pre-op will be able to tell you the room number as soon as he has one. He did very well and should recover completely now. The VAC will help him heal faster and safer. Now, I have another surgery and I still need to eat lunch. So I will see you this evening or tomorrow morning. The morning would be better because you all look like you could use a good night's sleep. He is in good hands here, so after you see him for a few minutes, get out of here and relax for the night. And that is doctor's orders!"

As he stood up to leave, they all thanked him. He smiled at them before walking away.

Twenty minutes later, they were told his room number and they could wait for him there. They gathered their things and walked to the elevator that took them to the second floor. They went into his room to watch television and talk more about David while waiting for him to be brought to the room.

Finally, the recovery team brought David to his room. Nancy and the rest of the family went out into the hall while they got him moved from the gurney to the hospital bed. The floor nurse went in behind the gurney. She had to get him situated and take his vital signs before his family could see him. She said his wife could go in, but the rest of them needed to wait until she was finished. So Nancy went in and walked over to the bed and kissed him on the forehead.

He opened his eyes. When he saw her, he said, "The doctor told me I do not have the bag anymore. Would you check to make sure it is gone? Not that I do not believe him, but I will believe you more."

The nurse lifted his gown and showed Nancy the bandage that covered where the stoma used to be. She said, "It is gone, Honey. I promise you. It is not there anymore."

He smiled up at her and went back to sleep.

The nurse was finished with him and the rest of the family was allowed in the room.

His eyes opened again and Jackie said, "I am so glad it is over and you are all right. I love you, Dad."

Susie said, "Nolo and I love you, too."

"I made it through another one, kids, but I am so tired. I love ...," he fell asleep mid sentence.

"We'd better go home. I have got to let the rest of the family know the operation went well. We will let him rest. I am coming back tonight," Nancy said.

"I will come on my lunch break like I did the last time he was here," Jackie volunteered.

Susie added, "Nolo and I will come tomorrow afternoon around two-thirty."

"I will ask John if he wants to come back with me tonight. If we only stay for a couple of minutes, he might come. It will make David happy to see him and it will help John to see him, too," Nancy said.

They all walked out of the hospital together. Nancy and Jackie helped Nolo get Susie and her wheelchair into the van before going to their own cars. Jackie followed Nancy home. John was waiting for them when they walked in the door. He was anxious to hear how the surgery went.

Jackie called for a pizza to be delivered for their dinner while Nancy filled John in on the day's events. Jackie and John talked quietly while Nancy called Dot and Gail to tell them how David was doing. Just as Nancy hung up the phone, the pizza was delivered. They ate then Jackie went out for the evening. When she left, Nancy and John went to the hospital. John wanted to see for himself that David was doing all right. But not before Nancy promised they would only stay a few minutes.

The nurse took David's vital signs every fifteen minutes for the first couple of hours then cut it back to once an hour. They had to keep his door closed because his snoring was so loudly. The nurses heard him at their station and knew the other patients would start complaining sooner or later.

He woke up about seven-thirty that evening and started looking for the call button. His mouth was dry and he wanted some ice chips. As he was feeling around for it, Nancy and John walked into the room.

"I need the call button. I need some ice chips," David said in a whisper.

Nancy said, "I stopped at the desk before coming to your room. The nurse said you could not have anything by mouth yet. The doctor wants to make sure you do not get nauseous. He will be in early in the morning. If you are still all right, I am sure he will let you have some then," Nancy said.

All of a sudden he got a strange look on his face.

Nancy said, "What is the matter? Are you in pain?"

"Am I dreaming or is John standing beside you?" he asked.

“No, David you are not dreaming. I am here. I just want to tell you that I love you,” John said with tears in his eyes, which made Nancy and David cry, too.

He pulled himself up in the bed and was expecting severe abdominal pain. There was pain, but nothing like he expected. He got a big grin on his face and said, “The pain is not bad at all this time. I hope it is a good sign.”

“Be careful, you are still on heavy pain medication,” Nancy warned.

“I was on strong meds before, but it still hurt like hell. This is nothing,” he exclaimed.

She felt relieved because he was doing so well. Then she remembered the times he got sick in a matter of seconds. She decided to enjoy the moment with him and not worry about things that had not even happened yet or may never happen. They talked for a few minutes. She noticed him pushing the PCA.

“Is the pain coming back?” she asked

“Yes, it is starting to get pretty bad. I am getting tired, too. You and John should go home and get some sleep. You must be exhausted. I need to go to sleep now anyway. I love you. John, I know how much courage it took for you to come here tonight. I am glad you did because I needed to see you. I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too. Goodnight, David,” he said.

“I love you, too and I will see you tomorrow morning,” Nancy said kissing his cheek.

David was sleeping before the door closed. The nurses took his vital signs during the night, but he did not wake up until the next morning.

It was early when Dr. Emanuel charged into the room and turned on the overhead lights.

“Good morning, David. How are you doing this morning? Any nausea?” he asked.

David said, “No, so can I have some ice chips now?”

“I need to look at the wound first. I am taking out the staples so we can get ready for the VAC. I want to make sure there is no infection. The operation went extremely well. I was able to remove all of the scar tissue and fistulas, which will expedite the healing process.”

As the doctor was talking, he removed the bandage and staples from the wound. The nurse walked into the room while he was working on David.

“It looks good. We are going to put a wet-to-dry bandage on it until the VAC arrives. It should be here sometime this morning. The wound care nurse will be ready to put it on as soon as it arrives. You are going to be amazed at how fast this wound closes using the machine.

“In answer to your question, yes you can have a few ice chips. No more than two every fifteen minutes. Try to eat as few as possible today. Keep yourself heavily medicated to get through the pain. I will stop in tonight to see how the machine is working. Bye for now, you are doing great, David. Keep it up. Nurse, please dress his wound using wet-to-dry bandages,” he said before leaving.

“Thanks, Doc,” David said.

“Hi, I am Wendy, your nurse and this is Diane, your technician,” the older women said. “We will be taking care of you today.”

David had two gapping wounds in his belly. The main wound was approximately 38 centimeters long, twelve wide and about seven and a half deep. The second wound where the colostomy was attached was five centimeters around and seven and a half deep.

For the first time, David looked down at his wound and said, “I cannot believe I am not bleeding to death with a wound opened like that. The middle of my stomach looks like a couple of high grade steaks.”

Wendy and Diane could not help laughing at how he described his wound. They stopped laughing and Wendy asked Diane to assist in getting supplies to bandage the wounds.

Diane walked to the bed and saw David’s wound up close. She was a bit stunned. Most of the technicians have seen wounds before, but they are usually closed with staples or stitches. David’s was wide opened. It was a horrific site.

“Please get some warm water and clean sheets,” Wendy told Diane as she took off his gown. Blood had leaked through the bandage and got on the sheets, his gown and his skin.

“Would you leave the gown off until I get the central line out of my neck? The gown rubs it and makes my neck hurt. I do not need any more pain at the moment,” David said.

“Yes, Mr. Brundage, we will cover you with the sheet when we are done,” Wendy said.

Wendy cleaned the wounds with sterile water and applied the bandage while Diane washed the rest of his body. It was all extremely painful so David kept pushing the PCA.

Shortly after the nurses left his room, Nancy walked in for her morning visit. He was sleeping, so she went back out to get a cup of coffee. When she returned, he was still sleeping. She saw a pamphlet on the table about the VAC and started reading it. He woke up just as she had finished it.

“How are you doing today, Sweetie?” she asked when he opened his eyes.

“I feel all right. I still have some pain, but nothing like the last three operations. Right now I am waiting for the vacuum thing to get here. I hope it does not hurt too much when they put it on me,” he said.

About mid morning, the wound care nurse, Beth showed up with the VAC.

“Hi, I am Beth, the wound care nurse. Your doctor has ordered this machine for you to help your wound heal faster. One of the good things about the VAC is that the bandage is changed every three days instead of twice a day. You will not have to have tape torn off you so often. That should be good news for you looking at the size of the wound.

“Let’s begin. First, this gray sponge is placed in the wound to absorb the drainage when the VAC is turned on. After the sponges are in place, the entire wound area is covered with a clear plastic tape. A hole is cut in the tape at the center of the sponge. Then a hose is inserted through the hole of the tape into the sponge. When the pump is turned on, it will suck on the sponge. As the wound drains into the sponge, the drainage will be sucked out through the hose and into this canister that will be emptied once or twice a day. How often it is emptied will depend on how much the wound drains. I am sure you will have many questions, but let me start putting it on you. When you see something or I say something you do not understand, ask and I will answer by showing you rather than trying to explain,” Beth said.

Beth asked David if he minded if she had a few nurses come in to watch the installation of the VAC. He did not mind, so she used the call button and invited any nurse who had the time to come into his room to observe. The VAC was a brand new piece of medical equipment, so most of the nurses had never seen one, let alone watched one being put on a patient.

When Beth pulled the sheet down to remove the bandages she asked, “Where’s your gown?”

“I do not want to wear one until the central line is removed. It rubs the tube and hurts my neck,” David replied.

“That sounds reasonable to me. No one wants any more pain than necessary,” she said. She wanted him as comfortable as possible. The VAC was a scary machine until it was seen working. Then it was amazing.

Five nurses and student nurses came into the room, including Wendy and Diane as Beth removed the bandages.

“We need to clean the wound first. We want the tissue to be fresh and pink. This will be a little painful, Mr. Brundage, so you may want to push the PCA,” Beth warned.

David cringed when he heard there was going to be more pain and did as he was told. Beth cleaned it then put the sponges inside the larger wound. She filled it until the sponges were about a half inch above the opening of the wound. Then she did the same thing to the smaller one. She followed the procedure she told Nancy and David about before she started, explaining step by step for the observers.

“This always fascinates me,” Beth said as she turned on the VAC. They watched as the sponge got sucked in. After a few seconds, the wound looked like it was closed. All that was visible was a strip of sponge as long as the wound and about 3 centimeters wide. Everyone, including David agreed that it was amazing.

“Leave the pump on constantly for the next two days, except to empty the canister. If the pressure is causing you severe pain, turn the pressure down a notch using the blue knob to the right of the on-off switch. Right now it is set to the maximum, so it will not hurt if you do turn it down a little bit. Does it hurt or do you have any questions before I leave?” she asked.

“No questions, but I am tired. I need to go to sleep for a while,” David said.

Wendy said, “Thank you, Mr. Brundage, for letting all of us observe the fascinating demonstration.”

David smiled at them all in response.

“Mr. Brundage, you will be able to get more rest without having to change the bandage twice a day. I will see you Friday. Goodbye,” she said walking out the door with all the nurses behind her.

The morning was exhausting for him so Nancy left shortly after Beth and the nurses.

David took a nap and slept until that evening when Dr. Emanuel walked in with Nancy following him in for her evening visit.

“Hi, David, how are you doing this evening?” the doctor asked.

“Hi, all right I guess. What time is it?” he asked smiling at Nancy.

“It is almost six o’clock,” she answered.

“I slept all day,” he said surprised.

“I guess you did if you have not been awake since I left this morning,” Nancy replied.

Dr. Emanuel looked at the VAC and asked, “How does it feel?”

“Fine, so far. Can I have some juice or something other than ice chips?” David asked.

“Yes, but start with apple juice. If you are all right after an hour, you can have some ice cream. I will check in with you in the morning. If you are still all right, you can go to a soft diet. If the VAC works for you, I am going to order a portable one that goes around your waist so you can walk around,” the doctor said as he was walking out the door.

“Well, this one is working, so I think you can order the portable one. I bet Beth agrees with me,” David said.

“I will talk to Beth and if she does agree with you, I will order it right away,” the doctor said.

“Thank you, Doc. See you soon,” David said as the doctor was turning to leave.

“You are doing great. Keep it up and you will be able to come home as soon as the portable VAC gets here,” Nancy said.

“Let’s watch some television now before I get too tired,” David said.

They talked and watched television for about an hour. The next thing Nancy heard was David snoring. She kissed him on the forehead and went home.

The night nurse came in to take David’s vital signs saying, “Hi, my name is Linc and I will be your nurse tonight. You are doing very well, Mr. Brundage. I will try not to disturb you too much during the night.”

“That would be nice. I need the sleep. Thanks, Linc and it is nice to meet you,” David said.

Even though Linc checked on him every few hours, he slept through the night without even hearing him in the room.

Dr. Emanuel arrived just before shift change.

“Good morning, David. How are you doing today?” asked the doctor.

“Good,” David replied.

“One of the nurses will remove the catheter today so you can get out of bed and sit in the chair. Try to sit in it as much as you can stand today. Tomorrow you are going to start physical therapy. Do you think you can handle that?” asked the doctor.

“I sure can. I cannot wait to get out of this bed and start moving around again, even if it is just in the halls of the hospital,” answered David.

Shortly after the doctor left, the nurse came in and removed the catheter. Removing it always hurt, but after it was out he felt much better.

At seven o’clock in the morning, two student nurses entered the room and turned on the lights again.

“Good morning, Mr. Brundage. My name is Maureen and this is Heather. We are student nurses and we will be taking care of you today along with one of the nurses,” Maureen said.

“How did I get so lucky to have two students?” asked David.

“There are vacant rooms at the moment and you are a special patient because you have the VAC. Our supervisor thought it would be a good opportunity for us to learn about the machine. Can we get you anything before we get you cleaned up?” asked Heather.

“I would love a cup of coffee,” David replied.

“I will check your chart to make sure it is part of your diet. If it is, I will be back in a minute with a cup,” Heather said.

While Heather was getting the coffee, Maureen started getting the supplies ready to give him a sponge bath and shave.

Heather brought the coffee to him and he savored every sip. “This tastes so good. I am getting back to normal again,” he said.

“We have to get you out of bed and in the chair today. The doctor wants you up and sitting in it for most of the day,” Heather said.

“All right, I will get up if both you ladies will help me,” David replied. He swung his legs to the side and sat up on the edge of the bed. Hardly any pain, he was sure he would be out of the hospital as soon as the portable VAC arrived.

As he stood up, the sheet dropped to the floor. “Where’s your gown?” the students asked together. David explained the problem he had with the central line in his neck. If they were embarrassed, they hid it from him. They said they understood and Maureen got a clean sheet to cover him with while Heather helped him into the chair beside his bed. After he was settled, they gave him his bath and shave.

“All right, Mr. Brundage, can you stand up? Heather will help you while I wash your back,” Maureen said.

When they were finished, Maureen put a gown on him, but left it untied so it would be loose around the neck and would not hit the tube to the central line in his neck.

He said, “It took a student nurse to think of a way I could wear the gown without hurting my neck. Thank you so much, Maureen.”

“You need to have something on today. You are will be getting up and down quite a bit this morning,” explained Maureen.

By lunchtime, he was exhausted. He was not used to sitting for any length of time.

He had broth, ice tea, pudding and a Popsicle for lunch. He ate some of everything, but did not finish eating it all. He was full and did not want to over eat. Just as he was finishing, Jackie stopped by for a quick visit on her lunch break.

“Hi, Dad, you are sitting up. You look great. You are even eating some food, if you want to call it that,” Jackie teased.

Heather and Maureen came back in just as she made the comment.

David looked at them and said, "I am up because I have a couple of prison guards that are very strict. They would not let me have a minute of rest today," David grumbled, but smiled at them so they would know he was just joking.

"You are doing better every day, Dad. When do you think you will be going home?" she asked.

"Saturday, if the VAC gets here in time," David replied.

"That will make it a lot easier on Nancy now that she is working again," Jackie said.

They continued to talk for a few minutes then Jackie had to get back to work. "I will stop by again tomorrow at lunch time. I love you, Dad," she said giving him a kiss.

"Love you, Jackie," David replied.

After she left, he went back to sleep for a couple of hours. Heather and Maureen left the hospital for the day while he was sleeping, so there was no one in the room when he woke up. He turned on the television and watched it until his dinner arrived. It was more of the same, broth, ice tea, pudding and ice cream.

Nancy arrived shortly after he had finished his dinner. She was happy to see him awake and watching television.

"Hi, you look like you are ready to go home," Nancy commented.

"I am but, I have to wait for my vacuum cleaner," he joked.

"They have it ordered. When it gets here, you can come home. I am looking forward to that. But so are you, probably even more than me. Do you want to watch some television? I think *Friends* is on in a few minutes," Nancy suggested.

They watched for a while until they both fell asleep. His snoring woke her up, so she kissed him and went home for the night.

Linc took his vital signs during the night, but he was so tired from sitting up all day that he did not even hear him in the room.

Dr. Emanuel checked on him early Friday morning. "Good morning! How do you feel today?" the doctor asked.

"I am feeling pretty good. I slept great last night. I am sure they did the usual poking and prodding, but I slept though it," David said.

"I am starting you back on a regular diet today. But do not try to push it. If you cannot handle it, let the nurse know and we will go back to soft for a little while longer. As soon as the portable VAC arrives, you will be able to go home. I ordered it on Wednesday so it should arrive later today or tomorrow morning. I am off this weekend, but my partner, Dr. Yang will be covering for me. He knows that I do not want you leaving the hospital without the portable VAC. He can reach me if there is a problem, so do not worry," the doctor explained.

All David was concerned with was the kind of food he was going to be eating at breakfast. He asked, "Am I getting a regular breakfast tray this morning?"

"Yes, I will tell the nurses to order it for you when I leave. Do you have any more questions?" he asked.

"No, I am ready for breakfast," said David.

"I probably will not see you again before you are released, so I want see you in my office in two weeks. If you have a problem before then, call my office," the doctor said as he shook David's hand.

"Thank you for everything, Doc. I will see you in a couple weeks. Have a good weekend. You deserve it," said David.

Dr. Emanuel thanked him and left the room.

Heather came in a few minutes later with a cup of coffee. "Good morning, Mr. Brundage. I brought you some coffee while you wait for your breakfast," she said holding the cup out to him.

“You are going to be great nurse some day, Heather. A cup of coffee is just what I needed to start my day off right,” David replied.

“A regular breakfast tray has been ordered for you. It should be here in a few minutes. Would you like to get in the chair to drink your coffee?” she asked.

“Not really, but I am sure you would be happy if I did, so I will,” replied David.

David sat on the edge of the bed and Heather helped him get in the chair.

“Where is your gown, Mr. Brundage? You have to start wearing one now that you are in and out of bed so often. Can your wife bring some shorts for you to wear? That would be better than nothing. For now I will cover you with a sheet while you have your breakfast.”

He agreed to call Nancy to ask her to bring him some shorts. He sat back and enjoyed his coffee. His breakfast tray was brought in a few minutes later. He had scrambled eggs, juice, blueberry muffin, milk and more coffee.

Heather came back into his room shortly after he finished breakfast. “Did you enjoy your breakfast? Please call your wife about the shorts now before she leaves the house,” she pleaded.

“All right, but first I have to go to the bathroom and then I promise, I will call her,” David said.

Heather called for the nurse to disconnect the IV and VAC. The VAC could be disconnected for a short period of time without doing any harm. She assisted him into the bathroom. He was naked, but there was no time for modesty. He got there just in time.

While he was in the bathroom, Heather changed his linens and got things ready for his bath. When he was finished she helped him out of the bathroom and back in the chair.

Heather gave him the phone so he could call his wife. Nancy was just walking out the door when the phone rang. She said she would bring him some clothes with her and would be there shortly.

Heather put the phone on the table and then gave him a sponge bath. She had him stand and hold on to the bed railing while she washed his backside. His legs were shaking by the time she finished, so he sat down on the bed. She helped him get back into bed and covered him with a clean sheet. She let him stay naked until his wife brought his shorts in for him.

“I am tired. I think I will take a nap until Nancy gets here,” said David. He slept until Nancy woke him up.

They sat there watching television. It seemed like that is all they did anymore. But they really could not do anything else because he got tired too quickly. They watched *Live with Regis and Kelly*. When the show was over, they talked about how much better it would be for them when he got to go home.

It was late morning when Beth, the wound care nurse entered his room with twelve student nurses, male and female.

Beth said, “Good morning, Mr. Brundage. You offered to let some of the students observe while I change the sponges to the VAC, so I brought as many as I could find with the time to spare. I hope this many will not embarrass or bother you. It is just that this is a new piece of equipment and it is a great opportunity for them.”

“It will not embarrass me at all. I am glad I can help the hospital in some way. The doctors and nurses have kept me alive through four surgeries. It will help me to help them. Thanks for the chance to do it. Before you start, let me take some pain medication. I am a bit of a baby when it comes to pain,” said David as all the students and Beth snickered at his comment. Most of them were thinking that he was a courageous man to have gone through all he had been through and still have a sense of humor.

Beth let him push the PCA. While they waited for the medication to start working, she explained to her students what she was going to do. She warned them that it was not going to be a pretty sight and if anyone had to leave the room, no one would think badly of them.

When Beth was finished explaining the procedure, she lifted his gown to reveal the wound. She turned the VAC pump off and removed the tape and sponge. The students were watching intently. When they saw the opened wound, some of them turned their heads for a second to catch their breath. One of them had to excuse herself and left the room. The rest of them turned back and Beth continued.

She used sterile water and gauze pads to clean the wound cavity. David was wincing in pain as she cleaned the dry blood from around the edge of it. She told them the importance of keeping the area sterile and showed them how it was done.

“Judy, please put some gloves on. I am going to have you hold the sponges in place while I continue putting them inside the wound. They cannot touch any of the skin outside the wound because that would contaminate them,” said Beth to her youngest student.

Judy was still in high school and wanted to be a wound care nurse. Her high school had a program that allowed seniors could go to school half of the day and work the other half. She was assigned to Beth so she could learn the duties of a wound care nurse. She looked so young, David thought she was a baby, but she stood her ground and did a great job. She did everything that was asked of her without hesitation.

When the wound cavity was filled with sponges, Beth put two sponges in the colostomy hole and made a bridge from the main wound to the colostomy with a single strip of sponge. After the tape was placed over the wound and the VAC pump was turned back on, the sponges were sucked down and the wounds were just about closed again.

“That is so amazing,” one student blurted out.

They were all fascinated with the process and thanked David for the opportunity to observe the new medical treatment. Beth thanked David, too, for allowing her to do the demonstration with so many students in the room. They all thanked him as they left. Heather, the student nurse that was assigned to him for the day was the only one to stay.

“Is there anything I can get for you, Mr. Brundage?” she asked.

“No, I just want to go to sleep. That wears me out,” David replied.

“By the time you wake up, I will be gone for the day. Thank you for letting so many of us in the room for the procedure. It was a great learning experience for all of us,” said Heather.

“Thank you for taking such good care of me. See you in the morning,” replied David as Heather walked to the door.

The next thing David knew, Jackie was in the room. It was two hours later.

“Hi Jackie, when did you get here?” he asked.

“I got here few minutes ago. You were sleeping so peacefully I did not want to wake you,” she said.

“I have all day to sleep. Please wake me when you get here. I look forward to your visits,” he said.

While they were talking, Nolo wheeled Susie into the room.

“Hi, you two, it is so good to see you. If you would have waited another day, you could have gone to the house to see me. I hope to be going home tomorrow. I just need the portable VAC and I am out of here,” said David.

“That is great news, David. You look like you are feeling better, too,” Susie said.

“Hi, David,” said Nolo. He was not much of a talker when he was in the hospital. But at home, he can keep the conversation going for hours.

All four of them caught up on what was going on at home. Everyone was more relaxed because David was doing so well. The fear in his children’s eyes was gone. He could see that they felt better, too.

Jackie left first. She had to get back to work. “Bye Dad, I will see you tomorrow, I love you,” she said heading out the door.

“Bye, I love you, too,” replied David.

“Susie, do you see or feel the presence of any spirits?” asked David. Susie was on the other side just before coming into this world. She was not breathing when she was born. It was three minutes and forty-one seconds after her birth before she took her first breath. She never mentioned anything about seeing spirits or anything about the other side to David, or anyone for that matter, until he told her of his experiences with them. Her senses were getting stronger as she got older. Being handicapped, she had many friends who were handicapped, too. Some of them had already passed. She had experiences of sensing the presence of some of her friends that had passed on to the other side.

“No, I do not see any here. I have only seen or felt the presence of some of my friends that have passed away. Sometimes I can hear the voices from the other side. So can Nolo,” she said.

It is not unusual for people who have had a near death experience to keep it to themselves. They are afraid to talk about having contact with the other side for fear of being ridiculed. With the advanced medical procedures we have now, more people are having near death experiences. More and more people are starting to talk about it, which is good for the people that have wanted to talk, but were afraid.

“I only have a few ripples left in my fingernails. I see spirits occasionally, and I hear the voices once in a while. It is nothing like it used to be when they covered my fingernails,” said David.

His lunch tray was brought in at noon. It was grilled chicken and potatoes.

Nolo said, “We have to get some lunch and let you eat in peace. We will call Mom tomorrow night to see if you got home. We hope you do. We love you.”

“I love you both, too. Bye,” replied David.

David watched television while he ate his lunch. After eating, he took another nap. He was finally in a routine because his condition had improved so quickly. He was sure he would be all right when he went home.

When he woke up he heard a voice saying, “Hi, Mr. Brundage. I am Shelly and I will be your physical therapist today. Are you ready to go for a walk?” she asked.

“Yes, but I will need to get disconnected first,” David responded.

Shelly called Wendy to come in and disconnected the IV and VAC.

David stood up without difficulty. He grabbed the walker and was out the door before the therapist knew it. The halls seemed to be empty compared to his past visits to the hospital. No flashes of light or voices calling out to him. They walked the full length of the hall then back to his room. He did not have any problem during the walk, but he was glad to be back so he could sit down. He was getting tired. That was the most he had walked since the surgery.

“Mr. Brundage, I would say you are ready to go home,” Shelly said.

“I am, but I still need the portable VAC before I can leave,” David replied.

“I hope it gets here then, but if you are still here tomorrow, I will see you about two-thirty,” she said.

He sat in his chair instead of getting back into bed. “I am going to watch some television. Would you send Wendy back in to reconnect me, please,” asked David.

“Yes, I will tell her when I go by the desk. Good job today, Mr. Brundage,” Shelly said.

Wendy came in a few minutes later to hook his IV and VAC back up. “You are doing great, Mr. Brundage. If the portable VAC gets here you will go home tomorrow,” she said.

“Yes, I will. Nothing against anyone here, but I cannot wait to get home,” David replied.

Dr. Emanuel came in to check on him one more time before he left for the weekend. Things with David changed so quickly in the past, he wanted to put his mind at ease before he left for the weekend.

Shelly and Dr. Emanuel left him watching television. He started to feel some pain so he pushed the PCA. Still in the chair, he was snoring so loudly the nurse closed the door to his room.

A knock on the door woke him up. It was his dinner. The man put the tray on the table and moved it closer to David. When he raised the lid he saw meatloaf, potatoes, peas, skim milk and coffee. Dessert was a bowl of chocolate ice cream.

Nancy went to visit him after work. She looked so tired.

“Hi, Honey, you do not have to stay tonight. I know you are tired.

“Yes, I am, but I wanted to see you before I went home. What did you do today?” she asked.

“I walked the full length of the hall and back. I have been sitting in this chair all afternoon,” he said.

“I am glad you are doing so much better. I hope you come home tomorrow. I am really tired. I was on my feet all day. I hate retail. I would love to get another job in the semiconductor business. I would be on my feet a lot with that type of job also. But there are some parts of a semiconductor job where you can sit down,” Nancy said.

“As soon as the industry picks up again, you will be one of the first people they call back,” David stated with confidence.

They watched the news on television then Nancy said, “I love you, but I have to go home and get some sleep.”

She still had to eat and call him mother.

“I love you, too. If I have to stay here tomorrow, you do not need to visit me. If you want to talk, you can call me. I want you to get some rest,” he said feeling sorry for her. He wanted to do something to help her, but there was nothing he could do while he was stuck in the hospital.

“I might do that. I love you,” she said, kissed him and went home.

He watched television for the rest of the evening and fell asleep after *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Linc turned off the television when he went in to take his vital signs later that night.

David woke up when a woman put his breakfast tray on the table. He had a full breakfast with bacon and eggs, toast, orange juice and coffee. After he ate, he had to go to the bathroom. He called for the nurse to disconnect him from the IV and VAC. A technician named Shannon came in and told him the nurse would be a few minutes.

“If you could move my bed closer to the bathroom door, I could get to the bathroom without disconnecting anything,” David said.

“That is a great idea,” Shannon said. “It will only take me a few minutes, if you can wait, I will do it right now.”

“I can wait. Go ahead and do it,” he replied.

She told the nurse she was not needed in his room. Then she rearranged the furniture and moved the bed closer to the bathroom. With the new arrangement all he had to do was take two steps to be at the bathroom. It gave him a sense of independence and it boosted his moral. Not being able to do anything was getting him depressed. It was not a major depression, but he was down.

“This is the way all the patient’s rooms should be set up. It makes it easier on everyone,” he told Shannon.

“It makes sense to me, Mr. Brundage,” she said.

David finished in the bathroom and got back into bed. While he was eating, he thought, *I wish that unit would get here so I can go home today.*

Dr. Yang, Dr. Emanuel’s associate came in and told David he was being released. David said he had to have the portable VAC before he could leave the hospital.

“I thought that unit arrived yesterday. If it is not here, it will not be here until Monday. I am sorry, but I guess you will be stuck here until then,” the doctor said sympathetically.

“I do not know why it is taking so long to get here. Dr. Emanuel ordered it on Wednesday,” David said.

“I could find out if you really want to know,” Dr. Yang offered.

“No, that is all right. It will not get here any faster whether I know why or not, but thank you for the offer,” David replied.

“You are right about that, it will not. Again, I am sorry you have to stay here through the weekend,” he apologized and left the room as Shannon walked in with fresh linens.

“Would you like to get up and get in the chair for your bath?” She asked.

“All right,” David replied and moved into the chair.

Shannon changed the linens first and then gave him a bath. When she finished, she put a fresh gown on him and he got back into bed. She covered him with a clean sheet and blanket. After she left the room, he watched television until his lunch arrived.

The whole day was uneventful, except for the fact that he could not go home until Monday.

He took his walk with the physical therapist and watched college football for most of the day.

Nancy called early in the afternoon to check on him. He told her the VAC did not get there, so he had to stay in the hospital until Monday. Knowing how tired she was from working and going back and forth to visit him every day, he told her she did not have to visit him until Monday. He knew she would have her hands full when he went home. He told her he would watch football anyway. She knew how much he loved sports, so she said she would try not to visit. But not seeing him would be hard for her.

She called Susie and Nolo and asked them to visit him so he would have visitors if she did not go. Jackie already had plans to visit him, so at least he would have someone with him. John got a frightened look when he heard her asking Susie to visit David. He loved David, but hated hospitals with a passion. When she did not ask him to go, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Mom you know I love David, but I cannot stand to see him in the hospital. It frightens me. I hope he understands,” he said to his mother.

“John, David knows you love him. He also knows how much you hate hospitals. He told me not to force you to go visit him. He does understand how you feel,” Nancy replied.

Jackie visited him Saturday. She was there for a couple hours in the morning. Then she went back in the evening for a little while.

Jackie, Susie and Nolo visited on Sunday afternoon and his mother called that evening. Nancy called him later that night to check on him again. She told him to call her when he was ready to come home the next day if she was not there already.

Monday morning Dr. Emanuel stopped in to tell him that the machine would be delivered at nine o'clock and he could go home as soon as the wound care nurse put it on him. After the doctor left, he sent the nurse in to remove David's IV and get him ready to go home. David was getting excited. He was finally going home.

The portable VAC arrived early and the wound care nurse was there to put it on him.

“A home care nurse will go to your home on Wednesday to change the sponges. You are good to go after this is done,” Beth said.

“Hi, Honey, can you please come and take me home?” he asked Nancy when he called her.

“I am on my way. I love you,” she said.

She arrived a half hour later. His nurse went over the instructions for him to follow when he got home. All the nurses stopped by to see him before he left to wish him well.

On the ride home the bumps were not quite as bad as his last trip home. He looked all around the car for spirits, but there were none. It was a new experience for them. Everything was normal!

Chapter 13

As they pulled up in the driveway David saw Lucky in the window. David was excited to see her and hoped she remembered him.

Nancy went in and put Lucky outside until she could get David settled in the living room. Like the last time he came home, she got the room set up so Lucky would not hurt him when she saw him.

When she opened the door, Lucky ran to David jumping, sniffing and finally licking him. She did remember him.

After she calmed down, Nancy helped him move to the recliner. He felt good to be home.

The house was very quiet. The low mumbles and whispers of the spirits were gone. They noticed the quietness, but neither one of them mentioned it. They were wondering if it was the calm before the storm or were the spirits gone for good.

They sat in the living room talking about his past operations. David commented on how much faster and easier the recovery was for the last one. Nancy agreed with him. They were thankful. Both of them were tired of him being sick. It had been a long time since the first operation.

A nurse certified on the use of the VAC was due soon. She would be David's home health care nurse.

Nancy opened the door when the doorbell rang. The woman stand outside said, "Hi, my name is Maggie Deal and I will be the wound care nurse for Mr. Brundage."

"It is nice to meet you, Maggie. I am Nancy, David's wife. My husband is in the living room. Please come in," Nancy said.

David greeted her saying, "Hi, I am David. You must be the nurse that is going to help with the VAC."

"Yes, I am. My name is Maggie," she said reaching out to shake his hand.

Maggie began the visit by taking David's vital signs and medical history. She asked the same questions as the first home care nurse, so the interview was completed quickly.

She put the file in her briefcase and started explaining about the portable VAC. She said, "I have ordered supplies for one week. We can always order more if you need it. The supplies are non-returnable once they have been in your house. Therefore, I do not want to order too much."

While pointing to the parts of the machine she was talking about she explained, "This is the on-off switch. The knob next to it is to regulate the pressure of the suction to the sponge. The tube attached to the sponges goes into this canister. When this red light goes on, it means the canister needs to be replaced. When replacing it, the tube must be replaced also. These clips attached to the tube can be opened and closed. Push the clip together until it clicks when the canister needs to be changed. As you can see, the tube comes in two pieces. When the tube is closed off, twist this fixture and remove the part attached to the canister. Remove the canister by pulling it straight up. When it is out of the machine, put it in this red plastic bag for hazardous waste. I will get it on my next visit and dispose of it for you. The canister will probably have to be changed every day or two in the beginning. I am only coming here every Tuesday and Friday. Therefore you will more than likely have to change it."

"Do either of you have any questions?" she asked.

Nancy shook her head.

David said, "No, but learning about it is very interesting."

After she had explained what they would need to know, she started to remove the old bandage.

“Cleaning the wound each time will probably be painful. If you would like to clean it in the shower we can do that,” Maggie said.

“I can have a shower? I would like to do that. I did not think it would be possible with the machine attached to me,” David exclaimed.

“Yes, it is possible. You remove the machine as if you were going to change the canister. The tube in the sponges will be the only thing exposed to the water and it will be closed off,” she explained.

Nancy turned the shower on to regulate the water for him. Maggie helped him into the shower. She showed Nancy how to help him without hurting him. She did not know that Nancy already knew how to take care of him and his wound. Not wanting to be rude, Nancy listened. Maybe she could learn something new that would help her in the future.

“Let the warm water rinse the dried blood away and wipe gently around the wound. Try to get the sticky tape off the outside of the wound,” Maggie explained as Nancy watched.

David thought, *It is less painful than the other bandage changes. It was going to be easy this time.*

The women dried him when he got out. His legs were shaking. He was very weak, but he felt better. Nancy got a pair of shorts and helped him get dressed.

They helped him into his recliner and Maggie put the sponges in and set up the VAC. She turned it on and it sucked the sponges until the wound was almost closed.

Nancy said, “I am amazed every time I see that vacuum turned on.”

“It is impressive,” Maggie said.

“I will be coming on Tuesday and Friday until the wound is switched to wet-to-dry bandage for the final closure. The process should take about three weeks. If you have any problems please contact our office anytime,” Maggie stated.

“Thank you, I feel better having taken a shower. Those sponge baths just do not do as good a job. It is a lot less painful cleaning the wound in the shower,” David said.

“We will see you Friday,” Nancy said

“All right, bye,” Maggie said as Nancy walked her to the door.

During the next three weeks things went along smoothly. Maggie changed the sponges every Tuesday and Friday. David was extremely bored. He did not have enough to do to keep an educated man occupied. He could only spend a few minutes at a time on his computer due to the stress on the wound in a sitting position. It was barely enough time to read the email. The spirits were gone and there was not enough activity in the house to distract him from the boredom. Nancy, John and Jackie had to go to work, which left David home alone. All he could do is watch television and sleep.

Billy appeared to David on the anniversary of his death, which was November 17, 1998. He said to David, “Start getting the information together for your book. It is part of why you were granted additional time.”

David was not sure if the vision was real or imagined and he ignored Billy’s advice.

Thanksgiving was not even a big distraction because David could not eat much. Any strain on the stomach caused him pain.

The first week in December of 2003, the wound had healed enough so that the VAC was not needed any longer. Maggie got orders from Dr. Emanuel to start using the wet-to-dry bandage again. Nancy could do that procedure. Maggie was no longer needed. The doctor approved of Nancy taking over with David’s care.

The Christmas activities distracted him. Nancy even took him on short shopping trips. He wanted to pick out his own presents for his children. He used one of the mobile carts they have in the stores. He was like a little boy buzzing up and down the aisles. It had been a long time since he had been out of the house. A couple of trips to the store helped his spirit immensely.

David's biggest Christmas present was his wound closed the day before Christmas. He did not have any bandages on his belly on Christmas Day. There was not much money for Christmas, but there was a lot of love. David being alive that Christmas was appreciated by his entire family. They thanked God for all their blessings and to guide them in the future.

David and Nancy celebrated the New Year with new hope and a healthier year in 2004. On New Year's Eve, David saw flashes and shadows of spirits. Most of the ripples in his fingernails were gone. There were only a couple left on his left ring finger.

There must be a link to the psychic ability and ripples in the fingernails. I am certain of it now, David thought.

He could sit at the computer longer since his wound closed. He started searching on the Internet again. In chat rooms, he asked psychics and people who had near death experiences about ripples in fingernails. Some people from each group had the ripples. The correlation between ripples in the fingernails and psychics was astounding. God linked some people with near death experiences and psychics together. By using the powers they possess such as their predictions, premonitions, healing powers and connection to the paranormal world, they have caused ripples in our lives.

For David, part of him died. Yet it woke up his inner spirit and showed him the path back to God.

The last time he saw a spirits was February 13, 2004.

He was depressed because he got holes caused by infection. The doctor treated them with antibiotics. They would heal while he was taking the medicine, but came back shortly after he finished taking it. It continued until the end of March in 2004, but nothing could be done except taking medicines.

In April, the ripples were completely gone from his fingernails.

The fistulas were still causing him problems at the end of April. The pain caused by them was increasing.

He was compelled to write the book Billy had advised him to write months ago. He began writing it on the first anniversary of the first time his heart stopped April 4, 2004. He was still tired much of the time and the infections continued so it took a while to write it.

He wrote the part where he walked with God. Writing about it made him think about how close he was to dying. Realizing for the first time how lucky he was to be alive put him in a better frame of mind. The depression he had before starting the book must have caused the infections because two days after writing about God, they healed. He was sure that writing the book was what God wanted him to do.

On July 7, 2004, he completed half of the book. By then he felt stronger and no longer needed the cane to walk. His family was at work and he was craving chocolate ice cream. He got dress and drove himself to the store to buy some. That was the day he felt as if he had truly recovered.

He contacted a clergyman on July 9, 2004 about the walk he took with God.

By July 27, 2004 he was even stronger. He took his wife out to dinner and celebrated their 24th wedding anniversary. They were also celebrating the acceptance of the book contract.

He was finally enjoying life again. He went swimming in their pool. Finally, he was able to exercise without pain. His whole outlook on life had changed. He was no longer a negative person. No matter what else happened to him, he knew he would live a good life. He had found God and is sure that is what made the difference in his life. The ripples are no longer in his fingernails, but he sees a spirit every once in a while. It is nice to know they are there.

His journey lasted four hundred and eighty-four days!