

Gasping for Air

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CHAPTER 1

Thursday, August 14
4:30 PM

“When I die, just bury me in a cardboard box.”

A laugh escaped me at my brother’s comment.

My younger brother, Joel, lay on the carpet in our den, wearing only a pair of shorts. The neatly trimmed beard covering his face belied the fact he was only nineteen. It looked much better than the big bushy beard he had grown out for his high school graduation the year before. His muscular body was evidence of all the hours he spent at the gym lifting weights.

My second oldest brother, Matt, reclined on the love seat close to where Joel was lying. He wore a shirt, as he didn’t like going bareback, with a pair of baggy shorts. His brown hair was cropped short and his face was clean shaven, just the way he liked it.

“A cardboard box?” I asked incredulously.

Joel turned to face me as I lay on the couch to the right of where Matt reclined. “Yeah, why not?” He shrugged. “It’s cheaper and simpler.”

I stared at him. Was he serious?

The corners of his mouth twitched.

I shook my head as the left side of my mouth lifted into a side smile. The ridiculous idea from Joel was typical of him. He was often saying things that were ridiculous yet slightly believable. I marveled at his talent to keep a straight face when he was doing it too. Half the time, you didn't know if he was serious or trying to pull your leg.

"That's an idea."

I turned to look at Matt.

"I just know I want the song 'All Good Things Come to an End' played at my funeral." Matt reiterated for what felt like the hundredth time.

Joel glanced back at me. "Have you ever thought of what you'd like for your funeral?"

Staring at the ceiling, I shrugged. "I haven't really thought about it much. Plus, I'll be dead so I don't think I'll care at that point."

"I hope Mom brings home funeral buns."

Matt tipped his head back to look at the time on the satellite receiver. "She should probably be home soon." He rolled onto his left side and propped his head up with his hand.

The door to the garage creaked open and all three of us turned as Mom walked in.

"Did you bring any funeral buns home?" Joel didn't even let her get her shoes off before asking.

Mom took off her shoes and placed the things she carried on the ground by the entryway before responding. "No. They had some left over but I didn't take any."

Joel sputtered. "But that's the best part of a funeral!" He sat up and placed his hands on his thighs.

I rolled my eyes. "So, how was the funeral?"

Martin Fraser, a man from our church who had lived and struggled with cancer for many years had finally

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succumbed to the illness. His funeral had been today. Both of our parents had volunteered – Mom in the kitchen and Dad with parking.

“It was okay,” Mom responded, as she departed to her bedroom to change.

She came back a moment later, having shucked the green and black short-sleeved dress she wore to the funeral and was now in black capris and a baggy pink shirt.

Matt swung his legs back to the ground and sat up, letting Mom sit on the other side of the love seat.

“Was there lots of people there?” I sat up as well so I could see Mom better.

She shrugged. “There was a decent amount of people there.”

“Why didn’t you bring any funeral buns home?” Rolling onto his side and propping his head up, Joel faced Mom.

I rolled my eyes. Joel was obsessed with funeral buns.

Shaking her head, Mom replied, “Because I didn’t know you wanted some that badly and there wasn’t that many left. I decided to leave them for other people to take home.”

“Well, you’ll have to bring some home from the next funeral.”

Our family had definitely gone to our share of funerals. I had already been to at least seven in the twenty-two years I’d been on this earth. My parents had attended far more, especially since they often volunteered at ones hosted at our church.

“Okay, I’ll remember that for next time.”

“Is Dad still there?”

“Yeah. He stayed behind to clean up.”

My parents were in their early fifties and had been married for almost twenty-eight years. Dad was by far more extroverted than Mom was and he was probably

in his element being around people.

“Are you guys coming to the supper at the park tomorrow?”

This weekend was the Roseburg Festival and the supper tomorrow kicked off the event. The supper also served as a fundraiser for our youngest brother, Mark’s high school graduating class.

“I’m not going.” Matt answered Mom’s question first. He often didn’t go to events like that, so it wasn’t a surprise he didn’t want to go.

Mom turned expectantly to Joel and me.

I shrugged. “Sure, I’ll go.”

“I’ll go too and then go to the gym afterward.”

“Is Neil going?” I asked. Neil was our oldest brother and so far the only one who had officially moved out of our parents’ house.

Mom responded, “I think so.”

“Great! We can pick him up on our way.” Joel reached for his phone and speedily typed out a message.

A little pang of jealousy stole over me. Joel was excited to spend time with Neil. Why couldn’t I have similar relationships with my brothers? My remaining hope was that it would happen in time.

CHAPTER 2

Friday, August 15

5:33 PM

The next day, I hopped in the passenger seat of Joel's vehicle so we could head to the supper at the park to start the Roseburg Festival. The smell of his black ice air freshener assaulted my nose, but it masked the smell of the industrial glue he dealt with at work. Building and gluing rafters could be a messy job and Joel's car looked the part.

Joel turned the ignition of the car and backed up, spinning the car around on our parents' wide driveway.

Cold air blasted from the air-conditioner, raising goosebumps on my flesh, despite the suffocating August heat outside.

"Your air conditioner works a lot better than the white car's."

The cars Joel and I drove were technically still our parents and were both Chevy Impalas. Different years and different colors, but were very similar. We more often than not referred to them as the white car and the grey car. Joel drove the grey one and I drove the white

one.

Joel leaned back in the driver's seat and rested his one hand on the steering wheel, looking as nonchalant as he usually did. "That's because the white car is a piece of junk."

"Hey! It works."

The corner of Joel's mouth quirked up. "This one is still better."

I shook my head. "I don't understand why you guys prefer the grey car. It's older than the other one."

"Yeah, but the other one has more problems."

"It does not. This one has just as many problems."

Joel rolled his eyes and turned on the radio.

Gravel spat out from the wheels as Joel drove the horrible gravel road leading from our place to the highway. The car jerked as we flew over a pothole and I grabbed the door handle. As we flew over another slightly smaller pothole, I glanced over at the speedometer. Joel was going twenty over the speed limit.

I tried to calm my racing heart. I trusted Joel's driving but it still made me nervous after hitting the ditch several years ago. Losing control wasn't hard to do on gravel.

As if the car wanted to mess with me, the back end swerved slightly.

I breathed a sigh of relief that after a couple of minutes of the gravel road, we were turning onto the highway that would lead us to Roseburg and the Roseburg Summer Festival.

The radio filled in the silence from our lack of conversation.

Joel slowed the car down once we hit the outskirts of Roseburg and turned onto Maple Drive. At the end of Maple Drive, he turned onto Kruger Street and parked in Neil's driveway. Joel stayed in the car while I got out and rang Neil's doorbell. Hopefully, he would

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be ready. He was notorious for being late in our family.

Shifting my weight, I waited for Neil to open the door. Shuffling noises sounded inside the side-by-side house. A moment later the door swung open and Neil stepped out, locking up.

“You ready?”

“Yep.”

I bounded down the few steps leading to the house and got into the back seat to allow the brothers to talk easier.

Neil climbed into the front seat and Joel put the car in gear. Easy conversation flowed between the two as they caught up and talked about sports and going to the gym.

I watched the houses pass by and tried not to be jealous of the camaraderie my brothers had. It wasn't easy. They had a lot of things in common and were both guys, which I was not. I was at a disadvantage when it came to having close relationships with Neil, Matt, Joel, and Mark. Where did that leave me?

Before long – it wouldn't have even been five minutes – Joel was pulling into the park's parking lot and shut off the vehicle. The three of us walked up, paid our five dollars for the meal, and proceeded through the main entrance. The smell of enchiladas and refried beans wafted up my nose, reminding me of my trip to Mexico a couple of years ago.

We went through the line, filling our plates with enchiladas, refried beans, corn, and salad and grabbed a spot at one of the remaining tables in the mezzanine.

“What is this?” Neil eyed the refried beans which I knew he had never eaten before.

I smiled. “That's refried beans. They eat it often in Mexico.”

“It looks like crap.”

Joel's comment made my lips twitch.

Neil didn't have the same restraint. He chuckled. “It

does.”

“It probably tastes like it too.”

I rolled my eyes and took a bite of the beans. It didn't taste as good as I remembered from Mexico but it wasn't bad. I could tell it was from a can and had cooled off already. The mushiness was still the same though.

Neil and Joel dug into their food as well, although I noticed they mostly avoided the beans.

“So,” Neil took a bite of an enchilada. “You going to the gym tonight yet?”

Joel swallowed a bite of his corn before responding. “Yeah, I'll be going there after this.”

I listened and watched as my brothers conversed about the gym and various other things, jumping in when I felt like I had something to say.

About half an hour later, Joel pushed back his chair. “You ready to go?”

Neil and I both agreed and we wound our way through the remaining crowd of people eating and laughing, throwing our garbage away as we passed the garbage cans.

We dropped Neil off at his house before making our way home.

As soon as we were in the door, Joel took off for his room to get ready to go to the gym.

I slumped down onto the couch and flipped on the TV.

Before long, Joel left for the gym and I was left alone.

CHAPTER 3

Saturday, August 16

7:45 AM

The next morning, I rolled out of bed wide awake. It was a Saturday, but like all Saturdays in the summer for the past couple of years, I had to work. It was only a four-hour shift, but I wish I had a day to do nothing.

I rolled out of bed and my greasy hair stuck to my face.

Ugh. Guess it was time to shower.

I ran the hot water for several seconds before turning it to a more comfortable temperature and hopping in. The warm water felt good on my skin causing a contented smile to bloom on my face.

I hummed softly to myself as the water washed away the last vestiges of sleep and refreshed my mind and body.

I dried off and wrapped a towel around me, so I was covered for the short walk to my bedroom.

Joel rushed by as soon as I opened the bathroom door and I froze. I caught a flash of the black shirt he had on and a pair of shorts.

Where was he going in such a hurry? He normally didn't get up this early on a Saturday morning.

I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders. Who knew?

Once I was back in my room, I put my pajamas back on. I had a couple of hours before I had to decide what to wear for the day. There wasn't much point in wearing something else right now. It wasn't like anyone but my family would see me.

As I was frying up some eggs for breakfast, Mom walked into the kitchen in her nightgown.

"Good morning."

"Morning." I flipped over my eggs, then leaned on the counter beside the stove. "Do you know where Joel went this morning? He was in an awful hurry."

Mom poured herself a bowl of cereal. "He was meeting Neil at the park for the free pancake breakfast at the Roseburg Festival."

Right. I had forgotten that was happening. I guess it was easier to forget about those things when you lived outside of town.

Mom grabbed the milk from the fridge and poured some over her cereal before sitting down at the table. "Do you think you could pick up the package waiting at the post office when you go to work?"

"Sure." I slid the eggs from the pan onto a plate. "I was planning to go to the thrift store to drop off some things anyway. I can go to the post office beforehand since they're only one street away from each other."

"Thanks."

We sat in silence as I took my seat at the table with my fried eggs.

As I ate breakfast, I made a mental list of the things I wanted to get done today before work and how long to budget for. Driving to Mathis – about ten minutes. Picking up Mom's package from the post office – shouldn't take more than five minutes. Dropping off

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donations at the thrift store – maybe ten minutes. I looked at the clock. That meant I would have to leave around twenty after ten to still get to work with time to open up before eleven o'clock.

It was eight thirty now so I had almost two hours before I had to leave.

In my bare feet, I padded over to the den and plopped down onto the couch in my favorite spot and turned on the TV. I filled the time remaining before work catching up on my recorded shows and checking social media. Before long, it was time to get ready.

I pulled my favorite red t-shirt over my head and put on my black cotton capris. Before leaving, I grabbed a sweater even though the day was warm because I knew my boss generally liked the library really cold. We blamed her hot flashes but I didn't dare play with the thermostat.

Suffocating heat enveloped me when I opened my car door and hopped inside, a consequence of parking outside during the summer. I drove the seven minutes or so to Mathis and completed the errands I needed to complete before work.

Parking at the public library, I prepared for an uneventful workday. Saturdays were usually a fairly quiet and relaxing shift. As I opened my car door, the heat hit me once again. Today was going to be a hot one. It was a good thing I was going to be inside with the air conditioning.

Routinely, I ran through the opening procedures and flipped the *Come in, we're open* sign.

CHAPTER 4

3:12 PM

I kicked off my sandals and dropped my bags near the love seat. “Here you go,” I said, handing Mom the package I had picked up for her from the post office. She sat on Dad's favorite chair in front of the TV.

“Thanks.”

Perching on the love seat, I noticed how quiet the house was. “Where is everyone?”

Mom hit the pause button on the TV and angled toward me. “Most of them are in Roseburg. Dad's at the municipal booth at the festival, although he should be done shortly.”

Oh, right. The festival was happening.

“Matt decided to go to Neil's house, Mark is at the youth event at the festival, and Joel went to Dorian beach with Zander and some other friends.”

I blinked. “I didn't realize Joel was planning to go to the beach.”

“It was a last minute decision. Shortly after Joel came back from the festival, he said he and his friends had decided to go to the beach and he left around two.”

I looked outside. It was a nice day for it – hot and humid. The water would feel nice on a day like today.

“Dad and I are considering going to supper at the festival. Would you want to go too?”

“What are they having?” I asked as I looked back at Mom.

“I think its perogies and farmer sausage.”

“I’m guessing cottage cheese perogies but sure, if you guys go, I’ll go.” I didn’t really like cottage cheese perogies but it sometimes depended on how they were prepared.

Mom’s phone made a shrill noise indicating an incoming text. I grabbed it from the end table nearest to where I was sitting. Mom usually didn’t have a problem with us reading her texts so I opened it. “Dad’s says he’s on his way home.”

“Ok, thanks. You can respond saying ‘ok’.”

I typed in the two letters and hit send.

“I wasn’t sure if he was going to come home,” Mom explained, “since there is only an hour or so until we’ll want to leave for supper.”

Mom and I talked for a while longer before Dad’s red truck swung onto the driveway.

“So how was the festival?” Mom asked as soon as Dad entered the house.

Dad lowered himself onto the bench near the door and lifted one leg until his ankle was resting on the knee of the other leg. “It was pretty good. Our booth was in the shade so that made it more bearable.” Dad removed his hat and placed it on the bench beside him. “I spent a while talking to Abraham. He was bragging on Joel and how Joel could work like two men.”

“That’s good. It seems like Joel likes working with Abraham. At least from all the stories he shares when he comes home from the rafter shop.”

I grabbed the remote from Mom and turned the sound down before turning away from Mom’s paused

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show to a Christian Contemporary music channel, making sure the volume was quiet enough to mainly be background noise.

Mom continued talking with Dad. “Were you still thinking of going to supper at the park?”

“Yeah.”

I silently hummed to the song on the TV.

“When do you want to leave?” Mom asked.

“What time is it now?”

“About quarter to four.”

“When does the supper start?”

“I think the schedule said five thirty.”

“I would think to aim for shortly after five then.”

“Okay.”

Dad finally removed his shoes and went into his office.

Mom and I continued our conversation from before Dad arrived.

At one point, the phone rang and Mom grabbed the cordless phone to check who was calling.

“Who is it?” I asked.

Mom looked up. “I’m not sure but it’s a local number.”

“Andrea, you getting that?” Dad yelled from his office.”

“No, you can take it,” Mom yelled back.

Dad was the one who liked talking to people more and more often than not the phone call was for him.

The ringing stopped and I could hear Dad’s brusque “Hello.”

“Do you think –”

“Andrea, come here, quick!”

Dad’s nearly panicked voice shot terror into my heart, sending tremors throughout my body. Dad rarely panicked.

Who was calling? What did they say to make Dad’s voice as taut as it was?

Mom tremulously got up from her chair and entered Dad's office.

An anxious energy ran through me. I needed to move so I jumped up, then walked to the window overlooking our front yard.

Staring out the window, my mind spun a million miles a minute. The sight of nature doing nothing to calm my palpitating heart.

Had something happened to one of my brothers? But no, nothing could happen to them...right?

Maybe it was something completely unrelated.

But why had Dad sounded almost frightened when he yelled for Mom? It had to be something, but what?

Had one of the guys gotten into an accident? Or had a heart attack? Maybe Mark went missing? Or –

Muffled sobs burst through my racing thoughts.

Slowly turning away from the window, I tried to prepare myself for whatever news now loomed over us.

Sobs wracked Mom as she came to stand in front of me. She grasped my hands and her Adam's apple bobbed.

My heart rate sped up as she struggled for words. What dreadful thing occurred? Was it worse than I was imagining?

"Joel's been in a..." She visibly swallowed. "He's been in a drowning incident."

My heart dropped.

No! That's not true!

My mind rebelled while my body froze.

God, don't let him die!