



Steve Evans slid his key in the door and took a second to clear his head. The more pills he took each day, the longer, and the later, the effects lingered. He'd promised his wife that the last time would be the last time. Not a promise he could keep, but he needed Lee Anne to believe he was keeping it. Especially now. After being gone for two weeks on assignment for the magazine, all he wanted was a peaceful evening with his family. He pushed the door open, expecting to be met with the joyous hugs of his seven-year-old daughter, Samantha, followed closely by the exuberant jabbering of one-year-old, Iris. That was the dream of the weary traveler. Reality lay on the other side of the door.

"Girls, Daddy's home." The words almost echoed back to him in the dark entry way. *Where is everyone?* "Girls...Lee Anne?" He reached to flip on the light.

"Leave it off."

His wife stepped out of the living room and into his view. Steve found himself squinting, trying to make out her features. "There you are." He opened his arms wide. "You are a sight for sore eyes. Come here."

Instead of moving into his embrace, she tossed something at his feet. Steve couldn't see what it was, but the rattle of pills in a baggie as it skidded across the hard wood floor of the entry hall told him all he needed to know. He waited for Lee Anne to speak. He needed time to

formulate an excuse, time to judge her reaction. The darkened, overly quiet house did not bode well for him.

“Pick them up.”

“What?”

“Pick. Them. Up.”

Steve moved to comply. “Sweetheart, it’s not what you think.”

“Really?”

The tears in her voice gave him hope. Lee Anne wasn’t a crier. If he could hold her...comfort her...they might get through this.

“Why don’t you tell me what I’m thinking?”

He bounced the bag of pills in his hands and longed for the escape they promised.

“These are old. I must have missed them when I dumped the rest last month. I told you I was done with this whole thing. I haven’t touched a pill in—”

The light came on in his face. Steve threw a hand up to shield his eyes from the sudden illumination. Lee Anne took five steps forward and slapped his arm away from his face.

“Look at me.”

Steve met Lee Anne’s gaze. He saw rage and hurt in her blue eyes and knew what she saw in his would condemn him without words.

She studied him. Her hand shook when she cupped his stubble-roughened chin and turned his face into the light.

Lee Anne jerked her hand away. “You’re such a liar.”

“Babe—”

“Get out.”

“But...”

Lee Anne paced away. “No buts! You’re out of chances, and I’m out of options. We have children in this house, Steve. What if the girls had been the ones to find that bag?”

“I made sure it was out of their reach.”

She ran a hand through her hair. Her eyes flashed blue fire when she faced him. “And you think that makes it OK?” She motioned to the side of the entry. “Take your stuff and get out.”

Steve followed the motion and saw their extra suitcase leaning against the wall next to the door. The reality of her demands slammed into his heart. “You can’t just throw me out of the house.”

Lee Anne dug keys out of her pocket. “Fine, you stay, I’ll leave.” She grabbed her bag from the hall table and tried to shoulder past him.

Steve blocked her path. “You aren’t going anywhere. The girls...” The absence of his daughters registered. “Where are the girls? If you’re throwing me out, I need to talk to them before I leave. They’ll be confused. I want them to know I’m not going for good.”

“They’re with my friends. I didn’t want our daughters to be a part of this. They deserve better than a drug-addicted father.”

He flinched at her words. That he agreed with her only made the situation worse. “Lee Anne, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’ve lied to you. I’m sorry I’ve disappointed you. But I haven’t seen the girls in two weeks. You can’t expect me to just walk away.”

Lee Anne shoved her way to the door and threw it open. Her voice sounded beyond weary. “I don’t know what I expect anymore. I just know that you have to leave.”

Defeated, Steve picked up the bag he'd carried in along with the bag his wife packed for him. He moved out on to the stoop. "Lee Anne. I love you—"

"Then prove it. Get some help. Don't..." Her voice broke. "Don't bother coming back until you do."

The door slammed shut in his face.

How do I explain drug addiction to my babies? There'd been no time for questions this morning. Lee Anne had bundled Samantha off to school and dropped Iris at the day care she'd used occasionally. Life had changed. They'd change with it. They'd make it better. They'd make it together. *Maybe Steve...* She shrugged the beginnings of the thought aside. The girls were her responsibility now. A single parent was better than none. *I know that better than most.* If Steve never got his act together, the girls would always have her to depend on. As of last night, Steve would have to take care of himself.

Her day's errands had included a visit to a lawyer. She needed to know what her rights were. After that, she stopped by a temporary employment service to submit her resume. She had two years of college towards a business degree. Surely that would get her a decent job until she could complete her education. Her days as a stay-at-home mom were done. Her half of their joint savings account would pay the bills for a couple of months, then it would be on her. The bank was her final stop. A new account and paperwork to transfer half of the joint funds into her name alone. Then, driven by a need to hold her babies close, she'd rushed to pick Iris up. Sitting in her rocker with her baby girl held tight, she finally surrendered to the tears she'd refused all day.

Steve, why couldn't you love us enough?

She heard whimpering from down the hall. Iris was awake and Sam would be home soon, bringing with her all the questions a curious seven-year-old could ask. Sam loved her daddy. They'd been marking off the days on the calendar for two weeks. Counting down until daddy came home bringing hugs and gifts for all. *Then I decided to dust the bookshelves in the study.*

That thought brought her back to the present and the best way to break her daughters' hearts. She laid out Sam's favorite afterschool snack, chocolate sandwich cookies and a tall glass of cold milk. On second thought, she fixed a matching snack for herself and even placed a cookie on the tray of Iris's high chair. Hopefully the cookies would take the sting out of the news.

Steve waited impatiently, counting the rings. *I finally get my nerve up, and she's not answering.*

"Hello."

He closed his eyes, savoring the sound of that single word. Almost eight years, and Lee Anne's voice sounded just as he remembered.

"Hello, is any one there?"

He shook off his reverie and cleared his throat. "Lee Anne, it's Steve." The vacuum of silence hung between them for several seconds. "Lee Anne?"

"How did you find us?"

He flinched away from her cold response. *What did I expect?* "How isn't really important. Can we talk?"

"After eight years, there's nothing you can say that I need to hear. Good..."

"Lee Anne, please. Please don't hang up. Can you give me just five minutes?" Silence returned to the line. He knew she was still there. He could hear her breathing.

“Get it over with.”

The words he’d practiced so carefully fled from his mind and left him stammering.

“I...how...”

“Steve, you called me.. I don’t have time to waste on your drug-induced ramblings. If you have something to say, say it, or I’m hanging up.”

Her accusation galvanized him. “I’m not on the drugs anymore. I’ve been clean for almost three years.”

“Um-hmm...four minutes.”

He leaned back in his chair, covering his eyes with his free hand. There was so much bitterness in her voice. “Lee Anne, I know you don’t have any reason to believe me, but I’m telling you the truth. I’m not the man you knew eight years ago. I’m clean. I’ve given my life to Christ—”

“You called after all this time to tell me that you found religion? How nice for you. I wouldn’t know anything about that. I’ve been a little busy with school, work, and being a single parent. You do remember your daughters, right? They take up a lot of my time.”

“How are the girls? What have you told them about me?”

“The girls are fine. Perfect, beautiful, healthy, and smart, no thanks to you. What have I told them? Just the truth. That you choose a drug habit over your family. That I had no idea where you were or even if you were still alive. I pretty much figured the drugs had killed you by now.”

Steve looked at the framed photos on the corner of his desk. They were the only pictures he had of Samantha and Iris, copies of the ones he carried in his wallet, eight years out of date.

His heart ached to see them...hold them...to tell them that he'd never stopped loving them. "I'd like to see them, and you. If you'll give the word, I can be on a plane tonight."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"But—"

"Steve." A sigh echoed in his ear. "Look, I'm not trying to be a witch, OK? But the girls and I are settled and happy. We've made a life without you. They don't know you, and that's the way I have to think you wanted it. It's the way I intend to leave it. If you really are clean, good for you. But I won't take the chance of bringing you back into their lives only to be hurt again. So, please...lose this number. Have a nice life, and we'll do the same."

Steve bowed his head. *Father, can you please help me? Can you please give me another chance with my family?* "Can I at least give you my number? Will you just tell them that I called and let them decide this for themselves? I love them. I want to be a part of their lives."

"Good bye, Steve." The click of the severed connection was ice water poured over his heart. He tossed the phone on his desk and wept. *Father, what do I do now?*

Samantha's eyes ran with tears. She clutched a picture of her mother in one hand, with her other she held onto the hand of her nine-year-old sister Iris. *What happens now?* The picture trembled in her grasp, the image shimmered through her tears as if in a liquid mirror, like the one in the fairy tale Mom used to read at bedtime. The voice came to her from a long distance away.

"Is there someone we can call for you?"

Her attention slowly refocused on the figure crouched beside her knee. Sam let go of Iris's hand to swipe at the moisture on her face. Iris doubled over next to her, racked by silent

sobs. Sam pulled her closer and met the eyes of the police woman. The pity she saw in the woman's face was almost more than Sam could bear.

Sam sniffed. "I'm sorry, what?"

The woman's voice was gentle as she repeated her question. "Is there someone we can call for you? A friend, pastor, relative. We have to make sure there's an adult here with you before we leave, someone to take care of you."

Sixteen-year-old Samantha Evans looked around the room. *Someone to take care of them.* Her fingers tightened on the frame. That was Mom's job. There wasn't anyone else.

She looked at the picture.

Mom's dead?

Why couldn't she think? She needed to think. Things would be up to her now.

Sam tried to answer, couldn't. She cleared her throat. "Helen. Helen Cooper." She recited the number for Mom's best friend from memory, buried her face in Iris's hair, and surrendered to tears of despair.

The officer stood and took a couple of steps away as she placed the call. Steps away but the room still echoed with her words as she spoke into the phone. "Is this Helen Cooper? This is officer Wyatt from the Austin police department. There's been an accident."

Iris stood at the foot of the small section of mounded soil. Tears ran down her cheeks and mingled with frigid drops of rain. She forced herself to stand straighter when Samantha's arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"We need to go," Sam prodded gently, her breath fogging around them both.

Iris nodded. “Are you sure about this?” she whispered, looking for assurance from the only person she had left in the world.

“Not really,” her big sister answered with blunt honesty. “But I don’t see another answer. If we stay here, they might try to separate us. The only guarantee we have...the only choice that keeps us together is leaving. Do you trust me?”

“You know I do,” her voice was hoarse. “But you just turned sixteen, I’m ten. If anyone finds out—”

“We’ll have to make sure they don’t. Sam’s voice was resolute. “We’ve talked this to death, Iris. I know this is home, but staying here isn’t an option. Everyone knows us. Everyone knows what happened. Mom’s plans for us didn’t work out like she thought they would. Now we have to do this on our own, make a fresh start.”

Iris drew in a ragged breath and took a few steps forward. She kissed the single white rose she carried, stooping to lay it at the base of the granite monument. She brushed the rain from the engraving. Lee Anne Evans. Her lips moved but processed no sound. She cleared her throat and tried again. “I love you, Mom.”

Sam followed with a second rose accompanied by a whispered promise. “I’ll take care of her.”

The children joined hands, walked back to the car loaded with everything they held precious, and drove away. Iris continued to stare out of the window until her mother’s grave was lost from sight.

The ditch loomed as the car slid sideways. Sam fought the wheel. She refused to let the Texas winter and the treacherous roads it created become a bigger danger than the *twisted* foster

parents they were fleeing. Knuckles white on the steering wheel, her mouth dry as cotton, Samantha gulped for a new breath as the nose of the vehicle straightened.

“We should have waited.” Ten-year-old Iris tightened her seatbelt.

Sam looked at her little sister. “You know we couldn’t. Richard was getting pushier every day.”

“Did he...?”

Sam released an audible sigh of relief. “No. No, he didn’t, but it was just a matter of time. We had to get out of there, and we had to do it today. No reason to wait.”

Iris’s breath hitched when the car lost traction again. “I can think of one.”

“Not worth the risk. We have the money from Mom’s life insurance.” Sam saw her sister flinch at the mention of their dead mother. She pried a hand from the steering wheel, reaching over to brush Iris’s long brown hair from her face. “Honey, look at me.”

Iris raised her eyes.

“You know that we have to do this.” She focused her attention back on the ice frosted road. “They’ll separate us for sure if we don’t. With Mom and Dad both dead and Helen’s husband panting after both of us, we’re out of options.

Iris was silent for several seconds. “We don’t know that Dad is dead.”

Sam shook her head. “He’s been gone for nine years, sweetheart. If the drugs haven’t killed him by now...” Her voice dwindled off. “That’s not a complication we’ll ever need to worry about.”

“What if Richard and Helen come looking for us?”

“Geeze, Sis. Why should they? We have no proof that Helen’s husband is a pervert. Leaving now keeps everyone out of trouble.

“The company is getting ready to transfer them both again. They have plenty to do without worrying about two *ungrateful kids*.” Sam’s voice held a mocking tone. Her heart still stung from the tongue-lashing she’d received from Helen after approaching her about her husband’s improper displays of affection. Samantha shrugged. “They would’ve tried to stop us from leaving, but once they know we’re gone, they won’t care. As of today, we’re on our own.”

“I’m scared. We’re just kids.”

“Yes, but thanks to some really good genes, we’re both smarter than the average bear.” Sam waited for a smile that never came. “We can do this.”

“I know.” Iris rehearsed instructions in a singsong voice. “No one gets our address, no one gets our phone number, and no one comes to the house. Be careful what I say and who I say it to.”

“It won’t be that bad. We have plenty of money and, thanks to Mom, the coaching to use it wisely. I’ll be eighteen in a year and a half. It’s all gonna work out.”

Iris slumped back in her seat. The frown on the ten-year-old’s face told her better than words that her little sister wasn’t convinced.

Steve Evans juggled the box and fumbled the key. He shoved through the door of his Chicago apartment, kicking the door closed impatiently. Once inside the spacious living area, he dropped the box on the sofa. Anticipation made him feel like a nervous bride. Well, maybe not a bride, but that was the only other person he could think of who would share this sense of expectancy. So much hinged on the success of this project.

He tried to slide his fingers under the sturdy brown packing tape to no avail. The shipping company had the box secured like Fort Knox. Old habit drove Steve’s hand to his pants pocket to

retrieve his grandfather's pocket knife, remembering too late that he'd traded it for a fix years ago.

Scissors. He looked around the room, tapping an irritated hand on his thigh? Did he own a pair of scissors? Junk drawer. His search came up empty. The butcher block knife rack on the cabinet caught his eye. Steve yanked out a wicked looking chef's knife and turned to attack the box. Tape, paper, and bubble wrap flew around him, finally revealing the treasure inside.

Twelve neatly stacked author's copies of his book stared up at him. Steve's hands shook as he removed one from the top of the stack. An impossible dream come true. A means to an end. An answer to his prayers. The beginning of his journey back home.

Six months ago, Lee Anne hadn't given him the chance to tell her about this new path and the success God had granted. If he could get her to listen, if she would accept this as proof of the change God had made in his life... *Maybe I can be a part of my daughters' lives again.* He sank to the sofa beside the box and bowed his head over the shiny cover. *Thank you, Jesus.*

Steve Evans shifted in the old folding chair. The legs wobbled under his weight, and he froze in place, his hands coming to the edges of the seat in a white knuckled grip. The audience would never take what he had to say seriously if the chair gave way and deposited his butt on the makeshift stage.

He tried to refocus his attention without much success. The chaplain at the podium droned on about shelter hours, rules, and programs. The announcement of next week's job fair and transportation to the event caught Steve's attention but left the gathered men unaffected. The men in the audience whispered loudly to companions or sat alone in zoned out silence. Not here to listen by their own choice, but simply as a guarantee for a hot meal once this was over.

Steve bowed his head and said the hundredth prayer of the day. *Jesus please give me words. If this is part of your will for me, help me reach them. There's so much at stake. No one knows that more than I do.* His chest swelled with a deep breath, and Steve completed his prayer with the words that had ended every prayer of every day since he found Lee Anne's obituary. *And wherever my girls are, keep them safe 'til we're together again.*

When he looked up, nothing in the room had changed. He caught a glimpse from the chaplain and nodded. Why was this so hard? How could writing about his life and experiences be so easy and speaking about them be so difficult?

The cell phone in his pocket vibrated with an incoming call, skyrocketing his already agitated pulse. Steve yanked the device free, unconcerned about the chair or what his host or audience might think about him taking a call on stage. If the detective agency had news about his daughters he'd be offering his apologies as he left anyway. His fingers were numb as he fumbled with the phone, finally bringing the small screen into view. *My agent.* He sat back, arms limp, breathing ragged. *Please God, bring me some good news soon.*

Steve slid the phone back into his pocket and tried to refocus his heart and mind on the here and now. He went over his mental notes, his attention brought back to the present when he heard his name.

He stood carefully, praying continued strength into the fragile legs of the chair, and walked to the edge of the platform. He stared out at the group of homeless men, trying to make eye contact, trying to establish a thread of connection between their despair and the hope he'd come to offer.

"I'm Steven Evans, and I'm a drug addict."

THE END

I hope you enjoyed these snap shot scenes into the pre CALLIE lives of some of my characters. If you're interested in the rest of the story you can check out the WOMEN OF VALLEY VIEW titles, reviews, complete first chapters, and purchase links on my blog at:

www.sharonsrock.com