

But For The



Crash

George A. M. Heroux

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Eloquent Books

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Chapter One

Patti had long ago acclimated to the brisk Minnesota chill that would send most students her age to the warmth of a shelter. She thrived in this weather even though her native Illinois seldom foisted such iciness on its citizens, at least not for a prolonged period. Just like some residents of the Dakotas or perhaps sections of Wisconsin, and of course Alaska, Minnesotans seemed to adore frosty air. Sturdy folks. As a sophomore at Howard Christian College, Patti had grown to love this weather for reasons that only inhabitants of Minnesota understand.

A small travel bag sat on the hard ground beside her. The trip was to be for one week only, and she was assured that laundry facilities would be available. She had no need for dress clothes or party dresses. Her trip was to provide two hands to a church's reconstruction project in New Orleans. She bent slightly and picked up the bag as a car slowed and stopped in front of her.

"Hey, Patti," the driver hollered into the murky air. "Rarin' to go?"

"Get in," the woman in the passenger seat said. "It's cold out there. We're picking up Heather at her dorm."

There was excitement in the cold air. It all started when a notice was posted in the student recreation room. It was a plea for help. A very popular church was in dire need of a week's worth of labor—painting, patching, cleaning, and fixing. The church sent an SOS to Howard Christian College and a few

other selected schools for some free labor. Perhaps there were students who would donate their spring vacation to this effort in lieu of a week on a beach somewhere. To these students leaving the college today for a week, this sounded like an opportunity to have some camaraderie and to give something of themselves. Only the students of a college with Howard Christian's ideals would be likely to respond to such a request.

* * *

Walter Caine was the finance manager for the largest car dealer in Springfield, Foster Ford. It had been a remarkably successful month. Only a few more closed deals by this very aggressive sales team would break the record for April and exceed sales quotas for the month by a wide margin, a reason to celebrate.

"Going with us tonight?" The question came from Paul Preston, Foster Ford's top salesman for the month.

"I guess. This is the first beat-the-quota month of the year. I have to give you guys all the encouragement I can."

Paul shrugged. "Wouldn't be the same without you, Buddy. Want me to drive?"

Walter shook his head. "Naw, I have a company car for the weekend. I'll drive myself and go home from there. Where we going?"

"We gave that a lot of thought," Paul said. "Friday's. That's the happening place. We'll be there about seven."

"Sounds good, Amigo," Walter shouted as Paul quickly left the finance manager's office—a prospective customer was coming through the front door.

Paul demonstrated exactly why he was salesman of the month. He showed the customer what the customer wanted to see, then he showed the customer what he wanted him to see. This bit of slight of hand ended with the customer's signature on the dotted line. That was the deal that put Foster Ford over the top for the biggest April ever. Now, if only the customer

can somehow afford the more expensive car that became his object of desire through Paul's subtle direction. Walter found a way. The company worked with several banks and had a variety of payment packages. Within twenty minutes, Walter had found financing that would work for the company and for the customer.

* * *

Cayla was still in the driver's seat as her car, with passengers Patti, Maris, and Heather, moved along the highway past Eau Claire, Wisconsin. "Everybody up for some driving? I figure it will be about four hours each. Piece of cake."

"Especially since we get to take a rest break in the middle of the night at Patti's parents in Collinsville," Heather pointed out. "Are you sure we're welcome at that time of night?"

"Sure. We should be good for an early breakfast, too," Patti said.

Patti hadn't seen her parents since the Christmas break. She was an only child who adored her parents not only because they were financing her education but because her parents were kind, energetic, intelligent, and loving. Asking her mother to whip up a breakfast for four hungry students was tantamount to asking her to open a door. No, it was better than that because her mother was anxious to perform this small favor. She and her husband were looking forward to meeting the other students. They knew that her friends would be the kind of girls who would be personable, bright, and pleasant—mirror images of their daughter Patti.

It wasn't long after Patti left for school that her parents realized how much they would miss the perky and pretty Patti, a phrase occasionally used by her father. The fact that she was attractive did not go unnoticed by the boys in her high school, but Patti was much too popular to concern herself with any one boy. At college, her outgoing personality resulted in considerable attention also but now from boys who were more

serious, studious, and ambitious. However, she continued to leave her options open.

* * *

Friday's was happening. Walter and Paul entered at the same time, seven on the clock.

"There they are," Paul said, gesturing toward a large table where five men and two women were already seated.

"Party time," was the greeting from one of the women. "We're drinking Zombies. We have a pitcher just for you guys."

Paul picked up the pitcher and poured a drink for Walter and then for himself. "Here's to our leader," gesturing toward Walter.

Walter held his glass up. "Heck, all I do is make sure your deals get financed. Your group can flat-out sell. Here's looking at the best damn sales team in the state, maybe in the country."

Jerry, one of the men in the group, shouted over to Walter. "Hey, Wally. How did a baby face like you ever get to be finance manager anyway?"

Ruth, the woman who had shouted the welcome to them, jumped in: "He has a baby face 'cause he's a baby. How old are you, Sweetheart?"

"I'm twenty-eight going on about sixty in this job. I won't ask you your age, though, Ruth. If nothing else, I am a gentleman."

Jack, another man in the group, held up his glass: "Are we here to drink or to talk work like old ladies?"

"We're drinking because of work, Dummy," Paul said.

"We haven't drunk enough to entitle you to call me Dummy, Lamebrain."

"Objection overruled," Paul responded. "Now is it time for a good ole-fashioned drinking game or not?"

It's odd that alcohol turns full-grown adults into children or at best teenagers, not physically of course, but the part of the brain that produces common sense goes on vacation. It didn't

matter whether the game was created on the spot or was as old as Roman toga parties. The end result was the same: bottoms up. This group was there to celebrate and celebrate is what they did—all of them. Nowhere in sight was a designated driver.

* * *

Now, Heather was the driver, and Patti was in the passenger seat providing stay-awake conversation. Cayla and Maris, who had completed their driving shifts, were sound asleep in the backseat.

“Ever been to Springfield?” Patti asked. “It’s about an hour and a half down the road.”

“Nope,” Heather answered. “Actually, I would love to visit sometime. I’m a bit of a Lincoln buff.”

“I lived eighty miles from Springfield all of my life. I visited with my family a few times, and my senior class in high school came here to roam the Lincoln sites.”

“There’s a Presidential museum there now. That’s completed, isn’t it?”

“Sure,” Patti said. “I was in Springfield last year during the summer. My parents couldn’t wait to see it.”

“Your parents are saints to put up with an early morning visit from four college girls,” Heather observed.

“Oh, they’ll love having us, even if we’re only going to stay for an hour or so.”

“Your dad’s a minister, isn’t he?” Heather asked.

“Yes, but he has a problem, Parkinson’s disease. He’s pretty much had to retire.”

“That’s sad. But, you know, I read somewhere that people with P.D. can still live a long time. Isn’t Cayla’s father a minister, too?” Heather asked.

Patti smiled. “Yes, he is. He’s the only divorced minister I know. But her mother may be more interesting: She’s the CEO of a really major corporation. I forget which one.”

“Really? That’s great, really great—the CEO thing, I mean, not the divorce thing.”

"How about you?" Patti asked. "You have a minister for a parent?"

"No, not me. My folks aren't thrilled all that much that I'm at a Christian college. Don't get me wrong. They're great parents. They're just not religious."

"Then, how could you have . . ."

Heather interrupted: "I'm an independent thinker. Sometimes parents are wrong, that's all."

"Anyway," Patti said, "We're not going to see much of Springfield. The highway just curves around it."

Patti was accurate in her description of the highway that avoids downtown Springfield. The four-lane road is both Route 72 that goes east and west and Route 55 that goes north and south. These two highways join for the move around the city of Springfield to the east and then part after leaving the main section of the city. Curving around Springfield was not an exact description, however. There is only one area on the joined highway that constitutes a slanting curve where a driver can not see the highway ahead for several miles.

* * *

Paul and Walter staggered out of the bar, hanging on to each other. The celebration had gone on for more than three hours.

"There's the old company car, Wally," Paul said. "You gonna be able to drive all right, fella?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I might take a little nap before I hit the road."

"You live in Decatur, don't you?"

"It's about a forty minute drive. Do it twice a day."

Paul opened the car door for Walter and eased him in behind the wheel. "Okay, Wally, ole pal. Drive carefully."

Paul, quite inebriated himself, was not in any condition to advise Walter to drive carefully. If he had been sober and responsible, he would have discouraged Walter from getting into that car that evening to the point of taking his keys away from him. Alas, Paul was neither sober nor responsible. This

night, he was not Walter's friend, because friends don't let their friends drive drunk.

* * *

It was almost midnight when the car with four Howard Christian College students approached Springfield. Heather was still in the driver's seat. Patti had been nodding off but was now alert.

"I can take over anytime you want," Patti said. "I'll cruise us into Collinsville."

"Why not?" Heather answered. "Let's switch at a rest stop or a McDonald's. Either of those coming up, do you remember?"

Patti thought a minute. "I think there might be a few Mickey Ds in the exits ahead."

"Okay, I'll watch for one," Heather said.

Since Heather wasn't really tired at this point, she wasn't really anxious to give up the wheel. She was rather enjoying the drive, reminding her of the trips she made to other vacation spots when she was younger and when her parents allowed her to drive for the first time on a highway very similar to this one. She knew also that there had to be a McDonald's at every one of these exits. Maybe she would just drive on to the next rest stop.

* * *

Walter rested uncomfortably with his head against the side window, then woke with a start and mumbled out loud to himself: "I'm dead. Let's go home, Wally, and rest on a real pillow." He started the engine and moved slowly out of the parking lot. He steered his car onto a four-line road. A sign read 72 West, then 72 East next right. "Why do they have to make this so complicated?" he asked himself. There was no car in front or in back of him when he turned onto the exit, not the entrance, of Route 72, even though a bright red and white sign shouted WRONG WAY. Within a few seconds, he

was on the highway and increasing his speed up to and past the sixty-five mile speed limit.

* * *

By the time the students reached the slight curve on 55/72, all four of them were awake albeit drowsy. There was an audible gasp, a scream of "look out," a mumbled groan as all four of the students saw a car headed directly toward them, driving on the wrong side of the highway. In the other car, Walter's heart sank; in that instant, and not before then, he realized what he had done.

The crash was explosive, the results horrendous. Meeting head-on, both cars weighing over 2,000 pounds and traveling at speeds in excess of 65 miles an hour, in an instant there were torn steel and ripped bodies distributed randomly on the highway.

No study has ever determined how or why some people survive such a crash. The angle of impact to individual bodies? The amount of steel directly fortifying to some extent any one individual? The work of God, one person's mission on earth not completed? Just luck? Whatever the reason, Patti, Maris, and Cayla died in that moment. Heather suffered fourteen broken bones and numerous lacerations. Walter broke his arm, that's all.

While time was no longer relevant for three Howard Christian College students, time stood still for Heather and Walter. The wrecked cars smoldered. The smell of burned seatbelts and torn steel punctured the air. A passer-by stopped and called 911 on his cell phone. Almost immediately, wailing sirens pierced the formerly quiet night. Within moments, one and then several other State Police vehicles were at the scene, quickly followed by emergency medical technicians. Later, that first State Policeman to arrive at the site of the crash pronounced this collision as the worst he had seen in his twenty years as a police officer. The image would stay with him for the rest of his life.

Chapter Two

A few hours later, a State Policeman arrived at Mary and Bill Goodwin's front door. They had received a call about a half-hour earlier. They had been told that Patti had been in an accident and that someone would be contacting them as soon as possible with an update on Patti's condition. They feared the worst. Their fears were realized in the person of State Policeman Ed Collins at the door. Sergeant Collins was invited in, and Bill and Mary sat down. Instantly, they both knew they were about to get news that they couldn't hear while standing.

There are a number of individuals who are trained in notification—the art, I suppose, of telling family members about the death of a loved one. It is not an easy task. The job falls to police officers, doctors, or coroners mostly. It is traumatic enough to lose a member of the family without having the news being given in a phone call or through some other stark, sudden communication. Typically, family members are told by phone that there has been an accident and that they should go to the hospital as soon as possible. The accident victim may have been killed instantly in the crash, but that news, nevertheless, is withheld until someone trained in notification can accomplish that unenviable communications task.

"We've been asked by our Springfield District office to give you some sad news about your daughter Patti," Trooper Collins said. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of such news, but Patti has lost her life in a car crash in Springfield. I'm so sorry."

Bill, already in almost constant pain from his Parkinson's, moaned softly. "Are you sure?" Bill asked. "You know there were four girls in the car. They were supposed to be here during the night. Are you sure it was Patti? Are you certain?"

"Tragically, three of the girls died in the crash. Only one survived. Heather Sanford is in serious condition in Memorial Hospital in Springfield."

Mary, as always in any critical situation, was the practical thinker. "What should we do? Should we go to Springfield?"

"Our coroner will be in touch with you later today. She'll explain what she'll need from you," Sergeant Collins said.

"What do you know about what happened?" Mary asked. "Were they struck by another vehicle?"

"Yes, there was another car involved, a drunk driver, we believe, driving on the wrong side of the highway. That's about all I know at this point. I'm sure you'll get a call shortly and that, eventually, you'll be informed of all the details."

"I'm sorry," Mary said. "Can I get you a cup of coffee or something? I'm not thinking very clearly."

"No, no, thank you, Mrs. Goodwin," the Trooper said, moving slowly to the door. "Again, I'm sorry."

It wasn't until the door closed that tears flowed from the eyes of both Reverend and Mrs. Goodwin. The official notification made it all real—their daughter was dead. Bill tried to comfort Mary by sitting next to her on the sofa with his arm around her, but it was Bill who was inconsolable in his sorrow.

"How could this have happened to our little Patti," he said. "We always protected her. Why couldn't we have protected her this time?"

Suddenly, Mary felt totally inadequate. She had been the strong one, coaxing Bill not to give up in dealing with his Parkinson's. She had the ramp built, encouraged him to learn all he could about the disease, helped him to form a support group, was by his side for stability and comfort. Even as a child, Mary, the eldest child of six children, was the go-to of the family, not only for her siblings but for a mother who struggled with mental illness. Mary saw to it that brothers and sisters pursued educational opportunities vigorously.

Her own education was completed with an M.A. in Nursing that proved to serve Bill well as the disease progressed now too rapidly. But now what?

Bill Goodwin had always been a quiet man whose primary goal was to serve. He did so magnificently, providing moral sustenance to his flock at Capital City Baptist Church for over twenty years. No one was more respected in the church community. Parkinson's disease came suddenly and unexpectedly when he noticed a slight tremor, at that time totally unexplained. Then came a failure of reflexes leading to an impaired balance and falls. It was not difficult for his general physician to recognize these cardinal symptoms. It had been four years since the diagnosis. Now, in addition to the motor aspects, his speech had become soft, hoarse, and monotonous.

"We need to be strong, Bill," Mary said quietly. "Strong and brave. We have to face the horror in front of us—the funeral, the legal matters—in a way that would make Patti proud of us."

"Yes, I know," Bill replied softly. "I'll try, but it will be very difficult. First, I have to deal with why the God we espoused, that we revered, would let this happen to us. So many times, others have told me exactly that, and now I am expressing the same feelings."

When deaths occur and there needs to be someone to calm and advise the family, to see them through such a difficult period, it is very often the minister, the priest, or the rabbi who is up to the challenge. They know what to say and how to say it. This time, however, it was the minister who needed guidance. He needed to receive care and counsel, not dispense it.

Mary dropped to her knees. "Let us pray for Patti and her friends and then for us to have the strength to do whatever is needed of us, whatever our smart Patti would want us to do."

* * *

Paul and Ann Sanford were the parents of three girls, 28-year-old, now lawyer Elaine, 25-year-old newspaper

reporter Carrie, and 20-year-old Heather, now lying seriously injured in Springfield's Memorial Hospital. Almost immediately after hearing the news of the crash, they made plans to travel from Cleveland, Ohio, to Springfield, Illinois.

"Were you able to get the plane and hotel reservations?" Ann asked.

"Yes," Paul answered. "I just got off the phone. We're leaving on United at 10:20."

"In the morning?"

"Of course in the morning," Paul said. "We're not flying out in the middle of the night."

"There's no need to bark at me," Ann responded. "I'm as worried about her as you are."

Paul shrugged and did not respond. Except for the enormous seriousness of the subject matter, this was not a particularly unusual conversation, or lack thereof, between Paul and Ann Sanford. Their relationship had been just fine in the early years, but all of that had changed fifteen years ago when Paul stepped outside of his marriage to find excitement and more satisfying companionship. The first affair lasted a year, and then there were others. Ann, who was always faithful in her marriage, never forgave him for those interludes although they had completely ceased in the last five years.

Paul was sixty years old. Ann had her fifty-eighth birthday the day after the crash. Obviously, there was no celebration. In fact, the birthday was not even noted; it was totally forgotten. Instead, all thoughts were with phone calls to family members and to the hospital, continued anguish concerning the crash, and plans for getting to Illinois as quickly as possible.

"Look," Ann continued, "we're going to spend a lot of time together in the next week or so. Let's try to be civil to each other."

"Please, Ann, can't we just think about Heather for the time being? If you hadn't agreed to have her go off to that Christian college, this would never have happened to her."

Ann picked up a book from the table and slammed it back on the table. "This is my fault? It's all my fault that Heather's in a hospital?"

"I didn't say that," Paul countered. "I'm just saying that we should never have agreed to have her go to school there. The first thing we're going to do when she's well is get her out of there."

"We agreed that she should go to college wherever she wanted. She picked Howard Christian. End of story."

"That college damn well almost killed her," Paul exploded. "That whole business of driving in the middle of the night for charitable labor. The school arranged that."

Ann was not in the mood to sooth Paul's temper tantrum. "Our daughter is still alive but may be in terrible pain. Can't we wait until she is well again before we start considering the school, her friends, everyone involved? Shouldn't our anger be with that drunk driver?"

"I have plenty of anger for him," Paul said. "I hope they put him away for the rest of his life. Even that's too good for him."

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