

Jesse's Hope

Chapter 4

(excerpt)

Saturday, the Little League game was called early because of rain, but not before I scored a run and threw a runner out at first.

I was on the porch reading a post card from Karen when my newspapers arrived.

The postcard had a photo of Paris Cafe des Trois Freres, a cafe with tables outside on the sidewalk, men in white aprons, and other people sitting at the tables drinking coffee or tea.

“Dear Jesse and Vi. Having a wonderful time. I ordered lunch here by speaking French. I will see you very soon. Affection, Karen” and that was it.

The rain was steady, which always added an hour to my delivery time because I had to keep the newspapers dry with the canvas flap. I also had to walk them to the customer's door to be sure they'd stay dry. Today, I didn't have Lynn to help. I laid the postcard inside the front door.

The rain was so intense I did not see or hear this car pull up and stop where I was standing. The window rolled down and I heard a voice from the inside.

“Is that you, Jesse? You need a ride?” I edged close to the vehicle and recognized the white Lincoln, and the pudgy red face of Pastor Randy Shepard. “Let's get you out of the rain.”

“It's okay. I'm fine,” I said and backed away.

“You'll catch cold. Now, get in the car.” The preacher was insistent. Not only was I scared, but I also had to pee so bad it hurt.

“It's okay, Jesse. Don't be chicken,” said this voice from the back seat. When I saw Mike Stafford's face, I turned and ran away, making sure I remembered the last house I delivered papers.

I still had to pee, but didn't dare stop with that preacher following me, and I ran, but then I got sloppy and was stepping into ruts and potholes up to my

ankles and eventually I was soaked. The pain from having to pee and the chafing of wet jeans defeated me, so I let it all flow out, instantly relieving my pain and just as quickly renewing my strength. My pants were wet and warm.

As I got to my porch, like magic, the rain stopped and by the time I changed into yesterday's jeans, the clouds parted, and the sun shone through.

"Mom, remember about Pastor Shepard? He tried to get me in his car!" As I started my story, the danger seemed more real, and I breathed heavily.

"Tell me everything," she said as she motioned me to the kitchen table.

After I told her about the rain and Pastor Shepard and Mike offering me a ride, we went to the Corner Market public phone, and she made a call. I held Christina.

"Abigail. It's Viola. We're worried about your nephew. Should he be riding around with the preacher? Uh . Shepard?"

"Well, he was with him when Shepard tried to offer Jesse a ride a little while ago." I could hear Ms. Stafford's voice get louder on the other end of the call.

"No. Jesse's right here. All right, we will."

Mom hung up the phone and we rushed back to the apartment.

My mind reviewed the earlier events. I tried to remember Mike in the back seat. It was odd. He was telling me it was okay, but I was sure he was shaking his head like he didn't want to be in the car with Pastor Shepard.

"Mom, I've got to finish my route." I still had five houses for delivery, and I never missed a delivery.

"I don't want you to go back out there."

"It's okay. It's sunny now. I'll be safe. I'll be walking along Washington Street." Washington Street was the 3C Highway in Sabina and was well traveled, especially in the late afternoon. I was insistent.

"You come straight home."

"I will. I promise."

I ran down the stairs, picked up my canvas bag, and retraced the last few houses on my route. I dropped off the papers, the first to the Knisely's, and on down Washington Street.

At the fifth house, I heard the soft crunch of tires on gravel and looked back to see that white 1953 Lincoln Capri following along behind me. When I turned, the car sped past me and went up Jefferson Street. I had one more paper to deliver and that was to the funeral home, then I would run home.

I kept watch all around me as I walked up the wide stairs to the wrap around porch. Today, the door to the funeral home was locked. No one answered the bell. Mr. Bigley's car was gone. I dropped the paper by the door and then heard the crunch of gravel again. The white Lincoln stopped in front of the funeral home, but I didn't think the preacher could see me since I was behind a big plant. I crawled behind a wicker chair and peeked through the porch posts. I could still see Mike in the back seat, and the preacher was behind the wheel, wiping his face with a handkerchief.

They were after me and I had to get away somehow. I sneaked along the porch, crawling on my hands and knees until I got to a rear set of stairs that led behind the funeral home where I was out of their view. Now, with the funeral home between me and them, I ran to Eugene's shed and unlocked the door with my knife.

"Eugene. I need your help!" Only I would ask a dead man for help.

I left my canvas bag outside the door, left the door slightly open, turned the light on, went back outside, and hid in the thick shrub behind Eugene's shed.

Again, I heard the crunch of the Lincoln's tire. When it stopped, I could hear the six-cylinder engine hum and then that engine rattle from cheap gas when he turned the key off. I was sure he could hear my heartbeat and then there was my heavy breathing.

"Jesse, is that you in there?" The preacher's voice pierced my soul, and right there, I prepared for death while silently imploring God to take the preacher instead. I held my breath.

"Jesse."

I heard the door to the shed squeak open. I waited an instant, then ran around the shed, grabbed the door, slammed it so it locked and leaned against it hoping Pastor Shepard was inside.

Movement to my left got my attention and there I could see Mike Stafford carrying a baseball bat and running toward me at full speed. In my haste to dodge him, my foot slipped on the wet gravel, and I lay there, hands to my face, Mike Stafford still bearing down on me.

“We’ve got you, jerk,” he yelled, eyes bulging out of their sockets. He took the bat and jammed it in the dirt right beside my face and then propped the handle under the doorknob. He was trapping the preacher.

Randy Shepard pounded on the door for a second or two before all became silent.

“We’ve got you, you pervert!” Mike yelled through the door. “Jesse, you saved my life.”

He was gasping for breath. Then, he started crying. We both were crying. My heart was trying to break through my chest. Both our hands were gripping that baseball bat propped under Eugene’s doorknob, even though there was no resistance on the other side.

“I don’t hear anything,” I said, sniffing.

“Me either,” he said.

He scooted close to the door and put his ear next to it. We heard nothing inside. Then there was the crunch of tires on the gravel from a car, and all we could see was the bright spotlight.

Someone came toward us, a gun in his hand. “You okay, Mike? Your aunt called us.”

We both started telling Sheriff Clendenning everything.

“Hold on. One at a time. Where’s Shepard.”

“In there.” We were still clinging to the baseball bat.

“Step aside boys.”

We got up quickly and that was when I realized Mike's hands were tied in front of him. I pulled out my knife and cut the rope.

"Why was he after me?" I asked Mike.

"He's weird. He kept talking about you ruining his life."

"Why you?"

I cut through the ropes, careful not to cut Mike.

"He was mad at my aunt." His hands broke free. "If you hadn't shut him in there with Eugene, I'd be a goner."

Up until this moment, Mike had been the cocky, rich kid who had caused my concussion last year during an indoor Red Rover game where he purposely let me break through the line too close to a concrete wall. Later he locked Lynn and me in Eugene's shed, but that's another story. Now, he was different. I didn't even notice his bug eyes. In an instant he had changed.