

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Jimmy opened his mouth in a silent scream. He lashed out with his hands but touched nothing. He spun around, not sure which way was up. He frantically kicked his legs and came to the surface of the water. He opened his eyes, choked, and gasped for air. He saw Garner, unmoving, standing on the bank. Jimmy went under again. The darkness overtook him. He opened his eyes.

And saw a Watcher.

There was no visibility in the opaque water, yet the figure distinctly appeared before him. The Watcher floated without struggle, without panic. He reached out and took Jimmy's right hand. Warmth and security accompanied his touch. Every fear fled from Jimmy's soul. Water no longer owned his dread.

The touch turned into an invitation. Deep called to deep. Jimmy's spirit echoed amen, and a cruel drowning was transformed into a glorious baptism. He closed his eyes in perfect peace as another hand touched the back of his shirt.

The journey from earth to heaven is actually quite brief, the time of transition measured in seconds, not minutes. But Jimmy Mitchell hadn't lived a conventional life, and he didn't take a direct route to paradise. He lingered on the path.

He saw himself lying in a hospital bed connected to multiple tubes linking his body to IV bags and complex machines. His eyes were shut, his face pale. The sight reminded him of Grandpa in the ICU.

Gazing upward, Jimmy longed to move away from the dying teenage boy in the bed toward the glory awaiting those who love God. Beyond the light above he sensed the outline of a familiar face, but a thin tie kept him tethered to earth. He glanced downward.

In a chair beside his bed sat Mama, her head bowed, her eyes closed. In that instant Jimmy knew his link with mortality had more to do with Mama's prayers than medicines and machines. Leaving earth and its pain would be better by far, but the One who holds the keys to life and death kept him in limbo. Daddy entered the room and knelt at the foot of the bed. Jimmy had never seen his father praying on his knees. Daddy reached across and took Mama's hand.

The Watcher who came to Jimmy in the water re-entered his vision.

“Go back,” he said.

Jimmy wanted to protest. Even the remote fringes of the heavenly realm reverberated with a fullness of life that made the best days on earth seem dull and dingy.

“Your times are in his hands,” the Watcher reassured him. “The place prepared for you endures forever.”

Jimmy’s eyes fluttered open, but he didn’t attempt to focus. Mama cried out. He couldn’t distinguish her words, and his eyes closed. The next time consciousness returned, he managed to turn his head slightly to the right. Mama, a lightweight blanket pulled up to her chin, was asleep in a recliner beside his bed. The window behind her was dark. The air conditioner in the room hummed. Jimmy focused on Mama for a few seconds, drawing strength and comfort from her presence before falling back into unconsciousness. His opened his eyes a third time and the light of a new day caused him to squint. A nurse was holding his arm taking his blood pressure. The tube that had been in his nose was gone. Mama stood beside her with a big smile on her face.

“Good morning, sunshine,” she said.

Jimmy managed a weak grin. He licked his lips. Mama picked up a tiny sponge on a stick and pressed it against his tongue. He opened his mouth enough to allow her to gently swab the inside of his mouth. The few drops of moisture he received from the sponge were filled with sweetness.

“Thirsty,” he said.

“You can give him something through a straw,” the nurse said, stepping away from the bed.

Mama held a glass of water and positioned the straw in the corner of his mouth. Jimmy took a big sip. It caused him to cough and some of the water ran out the side.

“I’m sorry,” Mama said, wiping off the water with a tissue.

“Don’t try to drink too fast,” the nurse said to Jimmy.

Jimmy took a smaller sip. It went down fine. He closed his eyes and dozed again. When he awoke, he looked around the room and felt more normal. Mama was sitting in

the recliner chair watching him. Jimmy could see blue sky through the window behind her left shoulder. He took a deep breath.

“I feel better,” he said.

Mama stood and came to the side of the bed.

“You’re doing great. The doctors are pleased. The worst danger is over.”

Suddenly, Jimmy remembered Jake Garner.

“Jake,” he said in alarm. “He made me - ”

“Don’t worry,” Mama said soothingly. “You’re safe, now. Rest. Don’t try to talk.”

Mama stroked his cheek with her hand then leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. The door to his room opened, and Daddy entered. Jimmy saw him standing at the foot of the bed.

“He took a few sips of water before his nap,” Mama said. Daddy came around the side of the bed and gently touched the top of Jimmy’s head.

“The bruises,” he began with a serious look on his face. “If I could get my hands on - ”

“Lee, no,” Mama said.

Daddy focused on Jimmy, and his countenance softened. He, too, leaned over and kissed him on the forehead.

“Hi, Daddy,” Jimmy said. “How are you?”

Daddy rubbed his eyes. He took out his handkerchief and blew his nose.

“We were so worried,” he said. “I’m thankful that you’re alive.”

“Dying is okay,” Jimmy said. “I wanted to go to heaven and see Grandpa, but the Watcher who helped me in the water told me I had to come back.”

Daddy looked at Mama. “What has he told you?”

“Nothing. I’ve kept him quiet and encouraged him to rest. This is the most alert he’s been.”

“How long have I been asleep?” Jimmy asked.

“Two days,” Mama replied.

Jimmy opened his eyes wider in surprise. “Two days?”

“Your body needs time to recover,” Mama said. “You may feel better, but you’re not well. The doctors are still concerned about you.”

Mama and Daddy talked while Jimmy closed his eyes. The door opened, and Dr. Dennard, the neurologist, entered the room.

“He’s been awake,” Mama said. “And talking coherently.”

“Excellent.”

Dr. Dennard examined Jimmy. He asked him to move his fingers and wiggle his toes.

“Count to ten,” the doctor said.

Jimmy complied.

“Who are these two people in the room with you?”

“Mama and Daddy.”

“Do you still have a dog?”

“Yes, sir. His name is Buster.”

The doctor asked several questions about things that had happened a long time ago.

When he finished, Jimmy said, “You ask easy questions. I wish you could be my teacher.”

Dr. Dennard smiled. He turned toward Mama and Daddy.

“His remote memory seems fine. I’m going to avoid recent events because of the trauma. It might be best if a psychologist explores that area.”

“Susan Paris works with him at the school,” Daddy said.

Dr. Dennard nodded. “I’ll give her a call and ask her to stop by.”

“When can he go home?” Mama asked.

“He has no signs of pneumonia, and I don’t see any serious neurological problems caused by the oxygen deprivation. If he starts eating and everything looks fine in the morning, I’ll dismiss him tomorrow afternoon.”

Jimmy ate a light supper. Mama spooned the food into his mouth.

“I never got to feed you when you were a baby,” she said.

“I like it,” Jimmy responded, swallowing a bite of red gelatin. “Can you cut up my meat and feed me at home?”

Mama tilted her head to the side. Jimmy smiled.

“Was that a good joke?” he asked.

“Yes. That’s a good joke. You’re a big boy now. Enjoy this meal because the next one you’ll be on your own.”

Dr. Paris and Daddy arrived after supper. The psychologist took Jimmy’s free hand in hers and squeezed it. He glanced down at her fingernails. They were so red they glistened.

“I owe you as many vanilla wafers with peanut butter as you can eat,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because that’s what I promised God I would do if you came back safe and sound.”

“Yes, ma’am. That’s a good promise.”

Daddy placed a dictation unit on the tray in front of Jimmy and pressed the record button.

“Is that mine?” Jimmy asked.

“No, it’s an extra one. Yours is at the office. I want to record what you say to Dr. Paris.”

Daddy nodded to the psychologist. “Go ahead.”

“And I’m not afraid of water anymore,” Jimmy volunteered before she started.

All three adults registered shocked silence.

“Why not?” Dr. Paris asked.

Jimmy told about the Watcher in the water.

“I know that God is with me no matter where I go. He took away my fear.”

Jimmy looked at Mama. “I want to get baptized and next summer, I want to take swimming lessons.”

Mama didn’t answer. Two tears streamed down her face.

“Are you sure?” Dr. Paris asked. “I don’t want you to be disappointed if getting in the water makes you anxious.”

“What is anxious?”

“Shaky and afraid.”

“Before, when I thought about getting baptized or swimming, it made me shaky and afraid on the inside. Now, I don’t feel that way. I’d like Brother Fitzgerald to baptize me at our church. Is it okay if I don’t get sprinkled like you?”

Dr. Paris smiled. “That’s up to you and your parents. I’ll come watch whatever you decide to do. If you’re no longer afraid of the water, the deeper the better.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, do you feel like telling me what happened to you?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Start at Mrs. Smythe’s house.”

Jimmy stared across the room for a few seconds without responding. “I remember a lot of things, but some of it seems like a bad dream.”

“Don’t worry about figuring that out. We can do that later.”

An hour later Dr. Paris shut off the recorder. Mama left the room when Jimmy started describing what happened in the bedroom at the little house.

“I can’t bear this now. Maybe later,” she said as she started toward the door.

“I’ll stop,” Jimmy said. “I don’t want to make you sad.”

“No, go ahead,” Daddy said. “We need to get this down now.”

The next morning, Jimmy fed himself breakfast. Mama started to help him, but he waved her off.

“Being a baby again didn’t last long,” she said.

“No, ma’am. I’m ready to keep on growing up.”

The cold scrambled eggs were a distant cousin to the warm fluffy ones fixed by Mama, but Jimmy’s appetite had returned. He put the final bite of toast with grape jelly in his mouth when there was a knock on the door, and Deputy Askew tentatively came into the room.

“Good morning, Jimmy. How are you feeling?”

“Hungry.”

“That’s good news. As soon as you can, I’ll take you to the Stop-n-Go for an ice cream.”

“Maybe we could go this afternoon,” Jimmy replied. “Mama, what time do I get out of the hospital?”

“Not in time for a trip to the store, but when you do go, I’ll give you the money to buy Deputy Askew’s ice cream. He pulled you from the pond and gave you mouth to mouth resuscitation.”

“What’s that?”

Askew glanced at Mama and smiled. “I’ll let you describe it.”

“He blew air into your lungs until you started breathing again.”

“I don’t remember.”

“You were unconscious,” Askew said. “It’s like being asleep only you’re not able to wake-up.”

Jimmy thought for a moment. “Where was Jake Garner?”

“He ran off when we arrived. One of the other deputies chased him while I jumped into the pond to grab you. Garner got away through the woods, but we caught him the next day when he tried to buy a car in Dothan, Alabama. That snake tattoo on his arm made him easy to spot. He’s in jail now, and you’re safe.”

“He hit me,” Jimmy said.

Askew’s face hardened. “I know.”

“He’s not seen himself in a mirror,” Mama said. “But the swelling has gone down a lot. It’s amazing how fast a boy his age can heal.”

“What about the emotional trauma?”

“He talked through everything with Dr. Paris yesterday. It was horrible, and I couldn’t listen to all. We’ll have to see about long term effects.”

Askew shook his head. “No matter what they do to Garner won’t be enough. Everybody in town is talking about it. A hundred years ago a lynch mob would have stormed the jail.”

“What’s a lynch mob?” Jimmy asked.

“Nothing for you to worry about,” Askew replied. “I’ve brought something that should make you feel even better. It’s what saved your life, not me.”

The deputy reached into his back pocket and put a cap on the hospital tray.

“My Ready Kilowatt hat!” Jimmy exclaimed.

“It was floating on top of the water. That’s how I knew where to look for you.”

“Why did you go to the pond?” Mama asked. “Lee wasn’t sure.”

“Like everybody else, Deputy Carter and I were hoping Jimmy was just lost or missing. I’d checked a bunch of places then remembered that he and his grandpa always entered the big carp fishing tournament at Webb’s Pond. Carter and I decided to check it out before dark. When we pulled up to the pond, Jake Garner saw us and took off. Carter radioed for back-up while I ran to the pond.” Askew pointed to Jimmy’s cap. “Your hat was floating on top of the water with you underneath it. A few seconds later and it would have gotten water-logged and sunk. Your guardian angel was working over-time.”

“Yes, sir.”

Within a couple of weeks only a faint bruise on Jimmy’s right cheek remained from his physical injuries. The inner trauma didn’t go away so quickly. He could talk about what happened, but that didn’t keep him from experiencing nightmares in which Garner and the snake on his tormentor’s arm kept reappearing. Mama slept several nights in his room. When he cried out, she responded with a prayer and soothing song.

“It’s like climbing the pole,” Mama said. “We’ll keep working at it. I have faith that they will go away.”

Saturday morning Jimmy came downstairs to the kitchen.

“Could we go see Grandma?” he asked Daddy.

Daddy folded up the paper and placed it on the table. “Yes. There’s nothing I’d rather do today than spend it with you.”

“And I’d like to climb the pole.”

“Okay.”

Jimmy’s bike, although rescued from the pond, hadn’t yet been rehabilitated from the slime it picked up on the bottom. With Buster lying quietly in the floorboard of the car, Daddy drove them to Ridgeview Drive. At the front door, Grandma gave Jimmy a longer than usual hug.

“You’re getting stronger,” Jimmy joked. “You’re wiry but tough.”

Grandma laughed. “I haven’t been wiry since before your daddy was born, but I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Jimmy hadn’t climbed the pole since Grandpa’s death. He opened the back door, and Buster abandoned them to visit spots alive with new smells.

“Why do you want to climb the pole?” Daddy asked.

Jimmy looked out from beneath his Ready Kilowatt cap.

“Because it will make me feel close to Grandpa.”

Together, they walked to the shed. Jimmy took his climbing gear from hooks on the wall and sat on the front step. Grandpa always made him explain the purpose for each item, and Jimmy slipped into the familiar routine.

“This strap goes here and holds the hook against my boot so it won’t slip,” he said.

Daddy watched as Jimmy added each piece of equipment. They approached the pole. Daddy clipped on the safety harness.

Jimmy began climbing. About twenty feet in the air, he glanced down, almost expecting to see Grandpa, an encouraging look on his face, standing at the bottom. Daddy was holding the safety line in one hand; he waved to him with the other.

“You’re looking good!” he called out.

Jimmy climbed higher until he could see over the top of Grandma’s house. He felt no fear. The controlled danger involved in climbing the pole was perfect peace compared to the chaos of his abduction by Jake Gardner. Mama was right. Jimmy knew the nightmares would eventually cease.

He looked up. The top of the pole spiked against the blue sky. He took a few deep breaths and moved his hooks higher, not stopping until his head reached the top of the pole. He leaned back and locked his knees. Beneath him lay Piney Grove. He took in the scene filled with familiar places first identified when he nestled in Grandpa’s arms.

Even though he was only forty-five feet in the air, Jimmy felt he had bridged half the distance between heaven and earth. He had a deep appreciation for all that Grandpa had given him.

“Thanks, Grandpa,” he said.

Jimmy placed his hand on top of the pole. He wanted to grow up and become a man who would make Grandpa proud. The future couldn't be seen from the top of the pole, but the strength of character to face the days ahead had been forged through the influence of the man who taught him to climb it. That strength would endure to the end.

Mama called Vera Horton and invited her to Jimmy's baptism. Daddy scratched his head but didn't argue.

"If we can't get along for an hour in God's house then I guess we're doomed," he said.

Before his real baptism, Mama, Daddy, and Jimmy did a test run at a local indoor swimming pool. Daddy stood in the shallow end of the pool, and Mama held her breath while Jimmy walked down the steps into the water.

"It's gone!" Mama cried out with tears. "The fear is gone!"

"It's cold," Jimmy said, jumping up and down in the water.

"The baptismal pool is heated," Daddy said. "Brother Fitzgerald wears waders and doesn't even get wet."

Jimmy moved through the water. Mama put her hand over her mouth in amazement.

"Is there anyone who wants to get baptized today?" Daddy cried out in imitation of the preacher.

"I do!" Jimmy responded.

"Then come here, boy. It's about time."

Daddy put his hand over Jimmy's mouth and gently leaned him back into the water. Jimmy came up sputtering. Mama clapped her hands.

The real event occurred at the beginning of a Sunday evening service. Jimmy, wearing a new pair of swim trunks, slipped a white robe over his head. The organist played soft music while Jimmy stepped into the water and walked down the steps. It was warm and comfortable. Brother Fitzgerald waited for him with a broad smile on his face.

Turning toward the congregation, the preacher called out in a loud voice, “Brothers and sisters! Every baptism is special, but tonight it is my privilege to present to you Jimmy Mitchell. Jimmy professed his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ some time ago, but could not be baptized due to his fear of water. God has taken away his fear, and now he wants to be baptized and admitted into full membership in this church. Can I have an ‘amen?’”

A loud “Amen!” echoed from the crowd.

Jimmy looked toward the congregation but the bright lights kept him from seeing anybody. He knew that Mama, Daddy, Grandma, and his birth mama were sitting on the same pew with Dr. Paris on the pew behind them. Brother Fitzgerald lifted his right hand in the air and spoke in a booming voice.

“James Lee Mitchell, III, I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!”

He put his hand over Jimmy’s face and lowered him into the water. Once again, Jimmy came up sputtering. In his heart rang a familiar message.

*Behold, I make all things new.*