

The Only Solution

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Chapter One

Mike Bates called out in his sleep, “Drop the gun Hennesey!” Then the loud sounds of two handguns firing multiple times woke him up as it always did.

He sat up in bed and pushed his too long brown hair out of his eyes. It was the same dream every time. As he looked around his bedroom . . . for the hundredth time, the thought hit him that it was a good thing he didn’t have a wife to wake up every time he had that dream.

He turned his upper body, leaned over to reach both armrests of his wheelchair, and pulled his body painfully into it. Once he settled himself in the chair, he waited a moment for the pain in his back to lessen. Once it did, he wheeled into the bathroom to repeat the procedure there.

He finally wheeled himself into the kitchen and managed to pour himself a cup of coffee from the coffeemaker that the weekend girl had programmed yesterday before she left.

He hated Mondays. Mondays were his worst days. He always felt so grubby on Mondays. But he wasn’t even going to think about the fact that it may be all his fault.

He wheeled his chair up to the gap at the table, leaned his elbows on it, and sat there sipping his coffee and thinking.

What would his life be like right now if not for that bullet that was lodged against his spine? What would he be doing right now if he hadn’t been in the wrong place at the wrong time?

He knew very well what he would be doing. He had been up for a transfer to somewhere in South America, that’s what. It probably would have been Colombia too and that would have been a fantastic assignment. But now he’d never get an assignment like that.

He looked up at the clock on the wall, only seven o’clock. Randy wouldn’t be in for another hour. He felt the need to be clean, especially his hair. But why bother? He hadn’t really felt clean or normal in any other way since that night six months ago. Nothing had felt right since that night, especially his back. Nothing would ever be right again because of that night.

He spent the next half hour with black thoughts such as those chasing each other around in his mind. Just as he began to sink into the pit of despair that he spent much of his time in now, the doorbell rang. Who could that be? It was still too early for Randy. Well, he’d just get rid of whoever it was. He didn’t want to talk to anybody.

The peephole was too high for Mike, but there was a long narrow window to the side of the door and when he pulled the curtain back, he could see a big man in a tan uniform standing there with his back to the door. The dark red hair showing under his cowboy type hat confirmed to Mike who he was.

Mike didn’t want to talk to that pushy, bothersome sheriff right now. In fact, he didn’t really want to talk to anybody now . . . or later.

Mike knew that the man wouldn’t go away until he let him in. So he reluctantly opened the door and rolled backward so the huge man could enter.

When Floyd closed the door and turned around to face Mike, he whistled and slapped his right hand against his thigh. “Man you look like you just crawled out of a garbage can. And look at that hair. It’s hiding your ears and falling down into your eyes.” He snorted. “I thought that guy Randy took better care of you than this.”

It was Mike's turn to snort now. "He doesn't come on weekends."

Before Floyd could reply, the doorbell rang again and he turned around to see who it was. "Looks like that's him right now."

Floyd opened the door and let the slender young caregiver in.

Randy took one look at Mike and said, "I knew it. It's a good thing I came early today. I knew you would have gone without a bath over the weekend again."

Mike turned his chair and started wheeling it toward his bedroom but Randy caught up with him. He stopped the chair by grabbing the handgrips then turned it around to face him.

"Why won't you let Peggy Sue help you with your bath on the weekends?"

Mike knew his voice had risen to where he was almost shouting now. "Because I'm not about to let that little teenybopper take my clothes off. That's why."

Randy shook his head. "If it's because she's a female, so is Stella."

"No it's not just that and you know it. But Stella's my doctor and that makes a lot of difference."

When Randy didn't say anything, Mike looked at Floyd who was still standing near the door grinning at him.

"What are you grinning about McCracken? You wouldn't want that creepy little girl dressing and undressing you either. She must have ten pounds of metal in all those piercings not to mention all the tattoos too."

Floyd was laughing now, a big booming laugh that made Mike even madder than ever.

"If all you're going to do is stand there and laugh at me Sheriff, you can leave right now."

Floyd wiped the grin off his face and said, "Now, Mike, you know that I don't mean anything by it. I'm your friend, remember? And I might add one of the few you haven't chased off yet."

Mike shook his head, "Just because I saved your mangy hide when I took this bullet, doesn't make us friends, McCracken."

Randy looked at Floyd and said, "Is that what happened?" He tilted his head toward Mike. "He's never told me."

Floyd had to have noticed the angry look Mike directed at him. Instead, he gave Mike a defiant look and ignored him.

"Yeah. Back in January, this escaped convict who had vowed to kill me when he got out kidnapped my daughter and lured me out into the woods where he had her."

He blew out a breath and Mike took that opportunity to say, "Shut up McCracken. If I wanted the whole world to know I'd of told them myself."

Floyd continued to ignore him just as Mike had known he would.

"Well, you see, Hennesey, that was the escaped con's name, had the drop on me and before he could pull the trigger, Mike here jumped out of the woods and they shot each other."

Randy still had a puzzled look on his face. "But why? Was Mike one of your deputies?"

Floyd shook his head. "Nope, he was a fed, a DEA agent."

Randy's eyes grew huge and he just said, "Oh!" Then he turned to stare at Mike. "Wow!"

Great! Mike knew he'd never hear the end of the questions from Randy now. "Thanks a lot McCracken."

This time when he wheeled toward his bedroom, Randy didn't stop him but followed him through that room into the bathroom.

Mike threw over his shoulder, “McCracken, you’d better not be here when I come out.”

But he was, just as Mike had known he would be.

As soon as Randy left, Mike wheeled his chair into the living room where Floyd was sitting on the sofa.

“All right McCracken what did you want this time?”

Floyd laughed and said, “Do you think you’re getting to know me that well Mike? Do I have to have a special reason for coming over here to see the man who saved my life?”

Mike gritted his teeth and waited for it to come out. He knew Floyd had something to tell him. He would just have to wait for the big sheriff to get around to it.

“Well, I just thought you might want to know that Hennesey died at the federal prison hospital in Springfield last night. They said that the brain tumor gave him an awful lot of pain all the way to the end.”

Mike didn’t know what to think. His mind went blank, almost numb. What had he expected to feel when the man who had shot him died? What did he really feel about the man who’d put him in this chair?

Floyd seemed to be waiting for a response so Mike said, “What did you expect? For me to celebrate? I don’t think so. Undoubtedly, the man deserved to die, maybe not for what he did to me but for the three murders that we were finally able to pin on him. But . . .”

He looked Floyd in the eye. “I don’t really feel anything.”

When Floyd continued to stare back at him, he blew out a breath and said, “It doesn’t change anything.” He slapped the armrests with both hands. “I’m still in this thing and probably always will be.”

Floyd kept looking at him for a long time before he rose and spoke very softly, “I wish it’d been me instead of you.”

With that, he quietly let himself out the door leaving Mike floundering in his own mixed emotions.

* * *

Daisy Thomas liked Mondays, she always had. She never could understand why so many people always groaned and complained about them. She loved starting the new week off fresh after a relaxing weekend and a meaningful worship service the day before.

She looked around the rec room at all of her family. After all, she truly thought of them that way. The six residents of the home she ran were so much like her own children even though most of the special needs adults here were close to her age and a couple were even older. Then of course, right next to her was her own four-year-old angel, Lucy. Her little Lucy with long light brown hair just like her mother’s only shinier and thicker.

They were all watching Bert and Bobby playing ping-pong. Lucy was constantly giggling at their antics as they hit or more often missed the ball.

Daisy marveled, as she often did, how the two boys, really men in their late twenties, could play a game such as that without the need to keep score or ever getting upset with each other. They were such sweethearts.

On the other hand, her four girls or women were just a little moody at times. They were sweethearts too, in their own ways, just not always as cheerful as the boys were.

As she often did, Daisy stopped right then and said a little prayer for each of her seven charges. She was so thankful for all of them.

Just as she finished her silent prayer, Bert and Bobby both laid their paddles down and came over to the sitting area where the rest were all sitting on the various sofas and armchairs.

Bert sat on the sofa where Daisy and Lucy were sitting. He leaned forward to look past Lucy, which he really didn’t need to do since he was several inches over six feet tall.

Daisy waited, knowing that he had something on his mind and there was no way to get it out of him until he worked it out.

He grinned, scratched his head, and then placed his hands on his knees. Finally, he said, "I miss Mister Mike."

She knew there was more coming from the way he was still grinning at her.

"Could I go see Mister Mike, Miz Daisy? Do you think I could?"

Daisy smiled at Bert and thought of how he'd helped Mike when Mike had been an undercover DEA agent. Everyone had thought that Mike was just a history teacher at the high school. Bert, in his innocence, had overheard a conversation between two men, which had led Mike to discover who the new head of the drug ring in the county was.

Of course, that was all before Mike had been shot and become a paraplegic. She knew that Bert idolized two men in town Mike and the sheriff. So she decided that even if Mike hadn't invited them, they would still go pay him a visit. She had heard that he wasn't very receptive to visitors lately especially unannounced ones. But surely he wouldn't turn Bert away, would he?

"Okay Bert. Let's go."

She wasn't sure which one was more excited Bert or Lucy. Her daughter didn't really know Mike. She just seemed to want to be around men lately. Daisy had been so surprised at how well she had taken to her uncle, Daisy's older brother, when he had visited recently.

Even though Lucy didn't realize it, her little girl sure missed having a father around. Daisy shook her head to keep it off any more of those depressing thoughts. She couldn't go there especially now. She had to be upbeat for Lucy and Bert too.

They all three piled into Daisy's five year old subcompact and headed over to Mike's house. Lucy kept up a steady chatter all the way over. She had her baby doll with her and carried on an intense sounding conversation with her.

When Daisy turned the car into Mike's driveway, the sheriff was backing out and he stopped next to her. When he rolled his window, she rolled hers down too.

He called out, "I hope you three have better luck with him than I did."

Daisy didn't know what to think. She didn't really know the big sheriff very well. He seemed to have a serious look on his face though.

"What do you mean Sheriff?"

He laughed and said, "Daisy, you've lived here several years. Don't you think you could call me Floyd by now?"

"I guess so."

He laughed again but sobered quickly. "He's not in a very good mood this morning. I think he had one of his nightmares again last night. It's one where he relives the shooting."

Her spirits took a nosedive but Floyd laughed and said, "Go on in anyway. Maybe you three will be more successful than I ever could be. I know he likes Bert."

"Hey Mister Sheriff."

"Hey Bert." He smiled and continued. "Just be careful especially with your little one with you."

He motioned to Lucy who was strapped into her car seat in the back still chattering to her doll.

When the three of them were standing at the door, Daisy hesitantly reached up and rang the doorbell. She didn't know what to expect especially after what the sheriff . . . Floyd, had just told her.

There was no sound from the other side of the door and she was about to ring the doorbell again when she heard a muffled shout.

"Go away. I don't want to see anyone."

She wasn't sure what to say but opened her mouth to say something when Bert said, "Hey Mr. Mike it's me Bert. I've come to see you."

No answer. Daisy didn't know what to do now. The August heat combined with high humidity was becoming almost unbearable especially exposed to the sun the way they were.

Finally, after what seemed like a long time she heard the deadbolt slide and the door opened a few inches then nothing. Now what should she do?

Taking a chance, she reached out and gave the door a gentle push. It opened all the way to reveal Mike sitting in his wheelchair about five feet away with his back to the door.

This certainly wasn't starting out the way she'd planned it. She looked at Bert who was giving her a puzzled look with his head hanging to one side.

She nodded her head toward Mike and Bert grinned and nodded his head emphatically. Then he walked around the wheelchair, stopped in front of Mike and grinned down at him.

Daisy held her breath but finally had to let it out slowly as nothing happened for a full minute. Bert just stood there grinning down at Mike but she couldn't see what kind of reaction he was getting in return if any.

Daisy couldn't help but notice how long and shaggy Mike's hair was. Having been a federal agent and also a teacher in the high school, he'd always kept his hair short and nicely groomed. Now it was long and out of shape.

Finally, Mike threw over his shoulder. "Might as well close the door and keep the hot air out."

Daisy shut the door softly and turned back toward Mike. She was reminded that Lucy was with her when the little girl slipped her hand into her mother's. She looked down and couldn't imagine how her four-year-old would react to this little scene.

"Mommy, is the man mad at us?"

"No sweetheart, maybe he doesn't feel so well."

That was when Mike turned his wheelchair around to face them. "I didn't invite you here."

She knew that the sensible thing to do would be to grab her daughter and run as far away from that angry, bitter man as she could get. And she was about to do just that when she saw the look of despair, even hopelessness in Mike's eyes.

That glued her to the spot. She was a nurse. To her going into nursing had been a calling that God had given her. And she had always taken that calling seriously. She had sworn to heal and she suddenly realized that the man sitting in front of her glaring at her needed to heal. No! She wasn't going anywhere. He would have to throw her out first.

* * *

Mike just wanted for everyone to leave him alone especially after what Floyd had told him a little while ago. He knew he shouldn't dwell on the fact that the man who had shot him was now dead from an extremely painful illness. But it had left him in a daze nonetheless.

With all that in mind, he just wanted to wheel his chair into his bedroom and close the door. And he especially didn't want to deal with that do-gooder who ran that place where Bert lived. He knew she was used to running the lives of all those who lived there. Well, she wasn't going to run his life, no way.

When he realized that Bert was talking to him, he turned his head back to where the tall skinny kid was leaning over him with his head tilted to one side.

"Mr. Mike, I've been listening real good to what people been saying around town."

He leaned up and scratched his head. "But I ain't heard a thing new lately though."

After a long silence, Mike realized that he should say something. The kid seemed to be waiting for some kind of response from him.

"That's okay, Bert. But you should really be telling the sheriff anything you hear from now on. I'm not an agent anymore."

Bert looked over at the Thomas woman and then back at him. "What's an agent?"

"A cop Bert. That's what I was before, okay?"

"Sure Mr. Mike. I knew you were a cop just like Mr. Sheriff."

Mike didn't want to sit there and talk with Bert. Sure, he liked the guy. After all, he had given Mike a big lead before. It's just that it took extra effort to talk to Bert and he really wasn't up to putting forth that kind of effort right now.

He looked over at the Thomas woman and caught her staring at his hair. His hair was none of her business. He could grow it down to his knees if he wanted to.

Then he looked into her eyes. He didn't see condemnation, what he did see looked like compassion. Well, he didn't need her compassion or anyone else's for that matter.

Somehow, she must have recognized his predicament because she grabbed Bert by the arm, led him over to the sofa, and sat down with him. That was when he realized there was a little girl with them. He took a second look and realized the little girl looked exactly like the Thomas woman only a smaller version.

She must have caught him staring at the little girl for she said, "Mike, this is my daughter, Lucy." She looked down at the little girl. "Lucy, this is Mr. Bates he's a teacher."

"Not anymore I'm not."

He surprised himself with the amount of bitterness and hostility that came out of him with that denial. He wouldn't be surprised if she didn't grab the kid and run out the door after that.

But she didn't. In fact, she kept staring at him and Mike couldn't see any anger or even surprise on her face. She just sat there staring at him with her features calm and not angry.

When she finally spoke, it was so softly that he had to strain to hear her. "When was the last time you really talked to someone Mike?"

He didn't know what to make of that question. He didn't want to answer it though, but somehow he couldn't stop himself especially when he looked into those big almost green eyes.

"McCracken comes by and pesters me several times a week."

She smiled and it lit up her face. "But do you really talk to him? Or does he do all the talking like I'm doing right now?"

Mike wanted to get angry at her interfering, know-it-all attitude but he couldn't. He kept looking into those big expressive eyes.

He didn't know how long he just looked at her before the little girl said, "Mommy, TV?"

He shook his head to clear it but still couldn't keep his eyes off the woman's expressive face.

She looked around the room, smiled at him again, and said, "Do you have a family room with a TV in it?"

He didn't want the kid to watch his TV. He didn't want to talk to the woman. He didn't even want any of them here. He just wanted them all to leave so he could suffer in peace and quiet.

Before he realized what he was doing, he waved toward the kitchen behind him and said, "Through there on the other side of the kitchen."

He sat there almost in shock as she led the little girl into his family room with Bert following along behind them.

She came back a few minutes later alone and sat back down where she'd been before. He kept his eyes on his hands in his lap. He didn't have to look up to know that she was staring at him though.

After a couple of minutes of that, he finally looked up at her and said, "What? What do you want?"

There was that smile again. "I just want to help you Mike. Is that too much to ask?"

He could feel the flush coming from his neck up to his face. He didn't need her to help him. He didn't need anybody to help him. He was doing just fine without them.

"I don't need any help from you or anybody else for that matter. I just want to be left alone, okay."

She seemed to draw back slightly from his angry outburst that came out as almost a shout again. He could tell that she was beginning to struggle but somehow she managed to keep that smile on her face though.

She didn't say anything for a long time. Now she was looking down at her hands in her lap. Then she began to move them around in each other kind of like it was a nervous habit.

Finally, she looked up at him and said, "There was a time when I needed help just as badly as you do and I fought everyone off for a long time too."

She chuckled without smiling and wiped a tear from her eye. Now look what he'd done. He'd made her cry.

She must have seen the look of panic on his face for she said, "No, Mike. It's not anything you said or did. I was just remembering that really bad time in my life."

When he didn't say anything, she said, "I don't usually talk about that time but I think it might do you some good to hear about it though."

She paused again and when he looked up, she looked deep into his eyes.

"Would you allow me to do that, Mike? Please?"

He couldn't find his voice so he simply nodded his head and she started talking.

"Three years ago, I came here to get away from what was left of my former life. Lucy was barely a year old so she doesn't remember any of this."

She stopped, looked toward the family room, and seemed to be and listening. Then she turned back to him.

"You see, Mike, I had a wonderful husband and an adorable little boy who looked just like his father. He was three years old."

Mike noticed that the tears were really coming now and she seemed to be looking for a tissue in her purse. He cleared his throat and pointed toward a box on a table on the other end of the sofa from where she was. She slid over there, pulled out several, and began to wipe her eyes.

"It was the first part of August just like now. We were all planning to go to Richard's parents' house for Sunday afternoon dinner, but Lucy had a cough and I stayed home with her. I never saw them again. A drunk driver hit them head on killing all three of them."

She stopped then to wipe her eyes again and this time she blew her nose too.

Mike didn't know what to say. How could he? He'd never had anything like that happen to him. In fact, he'd never known anyone who'd had something like that happen to them either.

What could he say to her? He had no idea. So he just sat there like an idiot but he couldn't keep his eyes off her teary face.

"So that's why I moved here from St. Louis. I felt that Lucy and I needed to get a new start somewhere else without all the memories hitting me every time I turned around."

He still couldn't say anything. She looked up at him with tears still in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Mike, but I can't talk anymore today."

She stood and started walking toward the family room but stopped and turned back to him. "But could I come back another time? I really do want to help you."

He started to tell her no but when he looked into those teary eyes that were so full of suffering, he couldn't. He nodded his head then softly said, "Yes."

That was all he could say right then. Somehow, he knew that she understood for she simply nodded and went on into the family room. Moments later, she went out the door quietly with Bert and her little girl.

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When Daisy pulled away from Mike's driveway, she had every intention of going straight back to the home so she could try to pull herself back together in the peace and quiet of her apartment. But somehow the car just went downtown and before she knew it they were going into Best Friends. The real name for the coffee shop was The BFF Coffee Shop but it was usually just called Best Friends. Two local women had purchased the shop back in January and after changing the name were running it together.

Daisy really liked Mary Jo Turner and Sue Ann McCracken. She'd watched how both of their lives had changed drastically over the past year or so. Jo had owned a bar and grill that burned down then she wound up marrying the new pastor of Daisy's church. Even more shocking was that Sue Ann had married the sheriff, Floyd McCracken.

And now, Jo was due to have her first baby any day now. Daisy had to smile at that. Pastor Gil had gone completely crazy about this baby. She wondered how he would be when the baby actually arrived. He and Jo really were a cute couple.

When she entered the coffee shop with Bert and Lucy in tow, Daisy noticed Jo Turner immediately. She was sitting at a table near the counter. Even though she was a small woman, she was easy to pick out. Her stomach seemed to be as big as the rest of her. Daisy smiled to herself at the sight.

"Good morning Daisy, what can we get for you three this morning." Jo was always so cheerful and that was one of the things that Daisy liked about her.

She hadn't really thought about what they could have. She had just needed to stop somewhere before going back to the home. She needed to decompress after baring her soul to Mike before she could be with the other residents.

"Mommy, can I have a strawberry milk . . . please?"

Well, at least her daughter knew what she wanted. She looked at Bert and he said, "Me too Miz Daisy."

She turned toward where Jo was still sitting and said, "Well, I guess we'll all have strawberry milkshakes then."

Daisy was glad when Sue Ann McCracken appeared from the kitchen, made their shakes, and brought them to the table.

She was just as glad when Lucy and Bert carried on a conversation about which TV shows they wanted to watch that evening. She was thankful since it left her to her own conflicting thoughts.

Had it been a good thing for her to tell Mike about Richard and Richie? Had she gotten through to him at all? She knew the signs. He was just moping around every day feeling sorry for himself. She'd been there too. And if someone or something didn't knock him out of that destructive behavior, he would probably sink into a deep depression.

And suddenly, she knew that she didn't want that to happen to him, but why? She barely knew the man. She'd only met him a few times through Bert when Bert had been telling him what he was hearing people say around town.

So why did she care? If she were honest with herself, she knew it was more than just the fact that she was a nurse and wanted to give him professional help. No. It was more than that. But what was it?

Just then, Jo waddled over to their table and sat in the empty chair next to Bert.

"Hello Bert. How are you today?"

He just grinned at her and said, "I'm fine Miz Jo."

She turned to Lucy and said, "Hi Lucy, what's your baby's name?"

Lucy turned shy and ducked her head. Finally, she said, "Miley."

Jo smiled and said, "Oh, after the singer?"

Lucy nodded and Jo turned to Daisy. She seemed to know that she wasn't going to get any more from Lucy.

"So, Daisy, how are you today?"

Before Daisy could answer, Jo looked closer at her eyes and said, "Oh my. Do you need to talk to Gil?"

Daisy waved her hand between them. "Oh no. It's just my allergies acting up today."

She could tell that Jo didn't believe her but was gracious enough not to push. That was when she noticed Lucy staring at Jo's huge belly.

"Lucy. Jo is going to have a baby any day now. That's why her stomach is so big. She's keeping her baby safe until God is ready for him or her to be born."

Lucy's eyes grew huge but she simply said, "Oh!"

Jo laughed and said, "That was a beautiful explanation. I'm going to have to remember that one."

As several people came in, Daisy looked down at her watch. It was lunchtime and she needed to get Lucy and Bert back to the home for lunch.

Jo reached across the table and patted Daisy's hand. "If you do need to talk, Daisy, Gil is the best. Don't be afraid to give him a call."

With that, she struggled to her feet, waddled over to the counter, and sat on a stool behind it to begin waiting on customers.

When they made it back to the home, lunch was just being served and Daisy almost laughed at the panic on Bert's face when he realized he'd almost missed it. Poor Bert had an insatiable appetite. He could eat all day long and still stay just as skinny as he'd always been.

When Bert dashed into the dining room, Lucy chased after him with her laughter ringing in the hallway. Daisy followed at a more sedate pace.

Once one of the girls, Julie, had asked the blessing, it grew noisy as they all began eating and talking loudly while they did.

They all took turns saying the blessing. She thought about how all six of her residents were strong in their faith and members of the Baptist church. It was so nice when all eight of them walked into the building together on Sunday mornings.

Daisy thought back to their visit with Mike, if you could call it that. He sure hadn't been very receptive. But what had she really expected? Although, she did think that he had softened up maybe a little after she had told him about Richard and Richie. Too bad she couldn't have continued after that. But there was no way she could have. She knew she would have been too emotional to think about what she needed to say to Mike in order to help him.

She just hoped that the next time she went there, he would still be receptive. And there would be a next time. She was planning on it. Those thoughts led her to stop and quickly pray for Mike in her mind.

When she opened her eyes, she felt so much better.