

# INTENSIVE CARE

by

Richard Reinking

Copyright © 2017 Richard Reinking

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 0692862730

ISBN 13: 9780692862735

For my children, with love, Amy, Rachael, and Daniel.

# Prologue

Sam Harper pushed open the double doors of the one-room country church to stand on the wooden porch and see if his visitor was coming. The parking lot was empty. Harper pulled out a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the July sweat off his bald head. He checked his watch. It was almost time.

The church building behind Harper, its white clapboard topped by a traditional steeple and cross, was ninety years old. After faithfully serving three generations of Muskogee County Baptists, Harper had purchased it, paying \$30,000 in cash and renaming it the Church of the Redeemed Believers. The gravel parking lot in front exited through a narrow gate and onto an asphalt two-lane county road. The road cut through a natural woodlands of oak and cottonwoods and eventually led to the state highway about a mile away. As Harper waited, not a single car or farm vehicle passed by. People seldom traveled in the remote location of their property, and most every one of those who did, Harper knew.

Harper wore a white shirt with a thin black tie, the same he wore every Sunday when he preached. Wrinkled black slacks fit snug over his stocky frame. His shoulders and arms were massive, a result of toiling as a manual laborer many long days in dusty fields. He looked more like the common farmer he had been his whole life than a simple rural preacher. Three years earlier, when he reluctantly attended a local tent revival at his wife's urging, Harper had seen "the light" and was baptized in the muddy Arkansas River. Now he pastored a flock of forty or fifty souls, most every one a farmer like Harper, and all living within a few miles of his small church.

Harper seldom complained about the Oklahoma summer heat, born and raised a stone's throw away, but even for him the temperature, approaching 105 degrees, was becoming almost unbearable. He loosened his tie and pulled at the wet shirt clinging to his chest. From the dense scrub oaks nearby, a chorus of cicadas interrupted the Sunday peace with a high-pitched, piercing sound. Harper took a few steps off the porch and looked up and down the road in both directions, but there was no sign of him. After waiting a few minutes, his impatience growing, he returned indoors to busy himself collecting the discarded bulletins from the morning worship service and replacing the hymnals in the pew racks. Humidity from a brief early morning shower

steamed the windows along both sides of the sanctuary, the condensation obscuring the view of the forest that surrounded the property. He rose up as he heard a truck enter the parking lot, throwing gravel as it skidded to a stop. A door outside slammed shut, and seconds later the front doors to the church were flung open. A teenager walked in.

“Hi, Jimmy,” Harper said, glancing at his watch.

“Hi, Pastor Harper,” Jimmy said, raising his hand in greeting.

Jimmy was barely seventeen, lanky, with cropped hair and a severe case of acne. He was dressed in a dirty white T-shirt, mud-caked sneakers, and faded blue overalls. He looked around the church nervously.

“No one’s here,” Harper said.

“Just like you wanted. I was hoping I was on time.”

“You are. Do you have it?”

“It’s in the truck.”

Harper followed the teenager onto the porch. Once outside, Harper fished in his pocket for his keys, locked the church, and set the alarm. After briefly examining the contents in the back of the truck, Harper climbed into the driver’s seat and started the engine. Jimmy opened the door on the passenger side and slid in.

The church property, called the parsonage by Harper and most of the members, totaled 120 acres and was located near Taft, a rural town of four hundred, roughly ten miles due west of Muskogee. The area was heavily wooded and surrounded by a barbed-wire fence, with only the church and its parking lot visible from the county road. Harper drove the truck around to the back of the church to the gated entry of a narrow private lane gouged out of the trees.

Harper stopped, unlocked the padlock, and removed the bulky chain before swinging the gate open. He drove the truck through and locked the gate behind them. When they had traveled about two hundred feet, the road opened into a clearing. In the center stood a single-story house, box-shaped, painted white, with a screened-in front porch and a one-car detached garage, typical of the farmhouses in the area. Nearby, extending fifty yards to the left, was a pistol range with six targets opposite a covered firing line. Behind the house were four dilapidated outbuildings of various sizes. The largest was a weathered-wood barn, leaning precariously to one side.

The preacher guided the truck down a narrow path beside the barn and stopped. Tucked tightly to the rear of the structure was a metal shed, approximately ten feet square, sitting on a

cement base and padlocked with a heavy-duty combination lock. The shed, unseen from any of the open areas of the property, sat only a few feet from the edge of the forest thick with underbrush and fallen debris.

“Unload the bags there by the shed,” Harper said, pointing to the ground as he climbed out of the truck. “I’ll take care of them later.”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy said. “I don’t mind putting them inside the—”

“No,” Harper interrupted sternly, still pointing. “On the ground there is fine.”

Jimmy opened the tailgate and lifted a blue plastic tarp off the truck’s contents.

“The poor women of your church will appreciate these bags of fertilizer, Pastor Harper,” Jimmy said, picking up the first forty-pound bag.

“It’s a small gesture,” Harper said flatly, “for those who grow their own food.”

Jimmy began unloading the dozen bags, 480 pounds of nitrate fertilizer, placing them in a neat stack near the shed.

“You weren’t seen, right, Jimmy?”

“Oh no, sir. I snuck them out of old man Jefferson’s barn about three o’clock in the morning, just like you suggested. He ain’t got no dog or nothing. Not a sound.”

“Good job, Jimmy.”

“He won’t miss them. Don’t look like they’ve been touched in twenty years, covered by an inch of dust. Nothing in that barn’s been touched in a long time.”

When Jimmy had finished, Harper pulled out two twenty-dollar bills and offered them to him.

“No, sir,” Jimmy said, raising his hands to refuse the money. “I feel good about doing this.”

“Son, I insist.”

“No, sir. I don’t want the money.”

“Okay, then,” Harper said, slipping the twenties back into his pocket. “Let’s get you home.”

“Pastor, are you sure you don’t need help delivering these?”

“No,” he answered. “I’ll do it later.”

“I told my mom what a great thing you were doing.”

The words had barely left the teenager’s mouth before Harper was in his face.

“I told you to tell no one,” Harper snarled. “No one!”

Harper’s anger caught Jimmy off guard, and he stepped backward, nearly stumbling. Harper moved forward, his face red with anger. Jimmy backed away until he felt the hot metal of the truck against his back.

“It was...just my mom,” Jimmy stammered. “I...I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“You said you understood.”

“I know, but—”

“God hates liars,” Harper hissed. “The Bible says, ‘He that speaketh lies shall not escape.’”

“I’m...I’m sorry,” Jimmy said. “Gosh, Pastor Harper, why would you keep this a secret?”

Jimmy felt Harper’s strong calloused hands encircle his neck, the force of Harper’s arms pinning him against the truck. Jimmy’s eyes betrayed his sudden fear.

“Hell’s eternal fire is for those who disobey God,” Harper said coldly, tightening his grip.

Jimmy’s feeble attempt to scream was prevented by the pressure on his throat. His stomach welled up into his chest.

“God smites the disobedient. He destroys the wicked.”

The preacher’s hot breath stung Jimmy’s face. The teenager closed his eyes, and the blood rushed from his body. Jimmy’s heart pounded, his anxiety consuming him. His lungs begged for air.

“The angel of God is merciful. His justice measured.”

Jimmy heard the voice as though at a distance, fading from his consciousness. He felt his legs wobbling, his muscles growing weaker, giving way. His head began swimming, his thoughts disjointed. He couldn’t feel his hands—they had seemed to go numb—but he hoped they were pushing this man away, hoping they were pushing, fighting for his life.

Finally, his knees buckled, his body collapsed, and all went black.

# Chapter 1

Dr. Paula Barrett tried her best to ignore the commotion in the intensive care unit around her so she could finish her progress note and enter the lab and medication orders. Paula's patient, a retired Presbyterian minister, had arrived at the emergency room the evening before with pneumonia. The seventy-year-old had always enjoyed good health, working full time, playing tennis three times a week, and traveling to mission sites around the world. A visit to a sick child in his congregation had given him the infection, but he had delayed seeking medical care for several days, and the illness had become overwhelming. He was now on a ventilator in critical condition, avoiding death, but just barely.

Paula sat at the doctors' desk, clicking medical entries on a computer screen. She was the only female pulmonary doctor on staff at Saint Luke's Hospital, and despite women having long claimed their place in medicine, a woman physician in the ICU was not a particularly common sight. Paula was petite, five feet two inches tall, with olive-tan complexion, brown eyes, and brown hair tied into a single long braid, traditional Cherokee style. She wore a white jacket over a dark-blue dress, modest and conservative. Most people thought she was a nurse. She hated that.

Fatigued from a weekend on call, Paula was anxious to complete her Sunday evening rounds in the hospital and go home. The minister was her last patient. She had examined him, reviewed his lab results, and adjusted the ventilator. Her final task was documenting findings in the electronic medical record. When she finished, she could leave. Hopefully, she'd have a quiet evening, go to bed early, and start the week rested. It wasn't likely.

Paula was so tired that the screen was getting blurry. Computer monitors, typing orders, digital medical records—all were relatively new. It wasn't that long ago when charting on a patient was much easier. Even just a few years earlier, when she was in training, she'd jot down a brief note of her findings on a piece of paper in a plastic folder and then pick up a phone to dictate her complete report. The dictation would be typed and show up the next morning. Quick and efficient. Now she entered the entire patient's information by clicks on a computer. It took longer, and at times she felt like a data entry clerk instead of a doctor. Progress!

The most critical and challenging patients at Saint Luke's Hospital were treated in the intensive care unit, and this was Paula's favorite area of the hospital. Remodeled three months

earlier, it was designed with ten patient rooms on the perimeter of a large open area. A sliding glass door and blue curtain for each room provided privacy for the patients, though for practical reasons they were seldom closed. In the center of the unit was the nurses' station, surrounded by a desk for the doctors' and nurses' charting and phone calls. Paula noticed the unit was crowded with people, not at all unusual for seven in the evening on a Sunday night, made up of mostly ICU staff, family members, friends, and visiting clergy. The intensive care unit, Paula thought, was a busy place with the ten sickest patients in the hospital, always seriously ill, each and every one with a life-and-death drama—sometimes a miracle and sometimes a disaster. Paula's patient, the retired minister, was critical, and the next twenty-four hours would tell if his personal drama would be a success or failure.

One of the ICU nurses walked up to the counter across from Paula and waited for her to finish her note. Paula looked up.

"I believe Mr. Pettigrew," the nurse said, "needs more furosemide."

The nurse, Toni Perkins, looked to be in her early twenties, probably fresh out of school. She wore green scrubs rather than a nurse's uniform, which was a common practice among the intensive care nurses.

Paula didn't particularly like ICU nurses. They were the best nurses in the hospital, no one disputed that, but were as a rule difficult—aggressive, sometimes even abrasive. Paula rested forward on her elbows and waited. The nurse had more to say.

"He sounds wet to me," Toni continued. "I hear rales in both bases."

The nurse's tone was condescending. She was implying that Paula had failed to notice her patient needed a diuretic to remove the fluid from his lungs. Paula had spent hours and hours in intensive care training at her pulmonary medicine residency program in Oklahoma City and had daily rounded on the most complex, intensive patients for the two years she had practiced in Tulsa. This case, though his infection was significant, was actually fairly basic. One of her absolute pet peeves was some new-grad nurse telling her how to practice medicine.

"He sounds wet in both bases because he has bilateral pneumonia," Paula said patiently. "Furosemide would dry out his lungs, which would make his pneumonia worse."

"So you don't think there's a chance of heart failure?"

"Not very likely, Ms."—Paula paused as she read her name tag—"Perkins. Not impossible, but the fluid sounds you hear are common with pneumonia."

“Are you ordering an echocardiogram?”

“Not at this time. We’ll see how he does.”

Nurse Perkins stood for a moment as if she wanted to say something else, but instead she turned and walked away.

Paula shook her head, returning to her note. She glanced up and saw Toni talking with the nursing supervisor near the stairwell while pointing in her direction. She took a deep breath. The nursing supervisor’s name was Sally Carpenter. Paula recalled several conversations with her, and none had been pleasant. Originally a nurse on the night shift, she had risen quickly, an assertive and confident manager, through the ranks of the nursing staff to become the supervisor of the intensive care unit. She wasn’t particularly liked by the medical staff, and she knew it. The rumor was that she tended to call physicians multiple times at night for minor problems, targeting those doctors who had crossed her. Paula didn’t doubt it.

Paula’s shoulders stiffened as Sally left Toni and walked toward her.

“Dr. Barrett?”

“Yes, Ms. Carpenter?”

“Your patient in room three with pneumonia is in critical condition.”

“Yes, I know that.” Paula pushed away the computer keyboard and straightened in her chair. “Reverend Pettigrew is progressing as expected.”

“Are you on call tonight?” Sally said. “Ms. Perkins is on the night shift, and I’m sure she’ll contact you if there’s any change.”

“That would be fine,” Paula said calmly.

“Then you don’t mind if we call you.”

“Of course not. If there’s a problem that needs my attention, since I’m the physician in charge of the case, I should be called. Don’t you agree?”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Thanks. Anything else?”

“No, Doctor. That’s all...for now.”

It was a threat, and Paula didn’t like it, but she held her tongue. No point in creating an issue.

Paula watched the nursing supervisor walking away, and then turned back to the computer screen. When she started to type, her pager began a soft, steady beeping. As soon as

she heard it, she knew she had forgotten to call. She entered the number on her phone and waited.

“Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms,” a female voice said.

“Is Matt Nicholson there?”

“Just a moment. I’ll check.”

Paula had been dating Matt Nicholson for almost six months. They had met through a mutual friend who had set up a blind date, and she had almost backed out. The last thing she wanted then was a relationship—she had sworn off men—but he was intelligent, charming, and entertaining, and she had enjoyed his company. Besides, as her friend had assured her, he was actually good-looking—tall, trim, and handsome, with stunning blue eyes. She liked him, which was exactly the consequence of dating she had feared in the first place.

Now she wasn’t sure where their relationship was going. She sensed Matt wanted to discuss their future, a subject she was trying to avoid. Fortunately for her, when he acted ready to broach the topic, their schedules never seemed to match. She worked eighty hours a week, was on call every fourth night and weekend, and had an erratic, unpredictable life.

His was as bad. He was a special agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and he worked as many hours as she did, always on duty, taking emergency calls twenty-four hours a day. Before joining the Tulsa ATF office, he had served ten years in Washington—the first five years undercover with illegal gunrunners and the last five as a hostage negotiator. Though now based in Tulsa, he often traveled around the country, negotiating some of the ATF’s most serious hostage situations.

Tonight was one of the rare occasions when their schedules coincided, and he had invited her to dinner. They had planned to meet at the restaurant at seven. She was embarrassed. She had forgotten.

“Hello?” Matt’s voice came on the line.

“Hi. It’s Paula.”

“Hey, I was just checking. Are we having dinner?”

“I’m so sorry. I got stuck in the intensive care unit.”

“I just finished with a meeting myself. Can you get away?”

“Not until eight or so. Maybe we should pass tonight.”

“You might as well come and eat. They’ll still be cooking food when we get there.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind waiting?”

“No problem. But it’ll be tough on me. I’ll have to go save us a table, eat those chips, and stuff down some salsa.”

“Sounds terrible.”

“Come on, let’s go. The change of pace will do you good. Besides, it’s your chance to have dinner with the best-looking guy in the restaurant.”

She laughed. “Okay, you’re right. See you there in a few minutes.”

Paula hung up. She typed a few lines to complete her notes and entered a couple of orders before clicking on the sign button to close the chart. Before leaving the intensive care unit, she stopped by room 3 for a final check on a sleeping Reverend Pettigrew.

*My life is unsettled*, she thought. She preferred stable, predictable, even ordinary. Though her friends often joked she was just plain boring, she saw herself as dedicated and focused. Her medical career came first. Years of study, long nights on call, the mental abuse of senior residents, the financial sacrifices—all were wasted if she didn’t apply her knowledge and skills to practice medicine. More than that, she thrived on it. She loved the gratification of helping others, the intellectual stimulation, and the prestige. What else could she want?

Every once in a while when she was on call, wide awake and all alone in the quiet darkness, she felt an overwhelming sense of emptiness. She was missing what so many others took for granted—a part of life she thought would be natural and beautiful. She was missing the feeling of closeness, of commitment, and even of passion.

Matt was likable enough, and she enjoyed being with him. But was she ready to commit herself? Was she falling in love?

She didn’t like her life unsettled.

Paula watched the ventilator breathing for Reverend Pettigrew for a few moments. *He’ll be fine overnight*, she thought. The nurse’s threats to call her didn’t bother her. They’d call if they needed her, and she hoped they’d leave her alone if they didn’t.

She expected a long night.

# Chapter 2

The women of the Church of the Redeemed Believers sat rigidly in worn wooden pews, stern-faced, waving at the heat with cardboard fans, their eyes fixed on Harper standing at the pulpit. The women wore plain cotton dresses, and their hair was braided and pinned up under simple hats or head coverings. Children of various ages were permitted, but were required to sit quietly. The men were dressed identically in white shirts and thin black ties, each man clean-shaven with hair cropped short military style. They outnumbered the women, which was uncommon for a Sunday evening religious service in rural Oklahoma. Sober and unsmiling, the men were silent except for an occasional forceful affirmation of the preacher's fire-and-brimstone sermon.

Sam Harper stood immobile with his hands gripping the sides of the pulpit, having paused for a good thirty seconds. His eyes were diverted upward, as if he were communing directly with heaven. Small beads of sweat on his forehead formed larger drops that rolled off his face, splattering the pages of his open King James Bible.

Suddenly, he raised his fist and slammed it down. "Eternal damnation!" he shouted, "Eternal damnation for the God-haters!" With his left hand Harper thrust his Bible high above his head as he slowly swept his right index finger across the church. "Who will escape God's anger?" he asked. "You are sinning against God with your deceit. You are rejecting his truth." Harper stepped from behind the pulpit and approached the pews, his eyes burning. "God hates sin," he said. His voice thundered over the congregation. "The Bible says in Romans, 'For the wages of sin is death.'"

"Amen!" several called out.

"God hates disobedience! As in First Corinthians, 'Every man's work shall be revealed by fire!'"

"Preach it, Brother Sam!" they cried out, clapping. "Praise the Lord!"

"Tear away your rotten flesh," the preacher said, raising both hands toward heaven, "the flesh that the maggots eat, infesting you, leaving you spoiled. Cut it away!"

Harper held his arms in the air, his Bible upward, his dark eyes darting back and forth, his face showing his disappointment, displeased by their failure, weak and unworthy. Disgusted, he slowly turned his back on them, shaking his head, and returned to the pulpit.

“The prophecy of the Lord is clear to the anointed,” he said, leaning forward. His voice was calmer. ““Thy wrath is come and shouldst destroy them which destroy the earth.””

“Amen!” the people cried out. Several women jumped up with their hands raised, speaking in tongues. The men stood and clapped loudly, and within seconds every person was on their feet, clapping, praying aloud, and uttering unrecognizable words.

“God *will* destroy those who dishonor their own bodies,” he shouted over them, “men who lust after other men, women who lust after other women. God will destroy the abortionists who murder babies. He will destroy them all!”

Harper again grabbed both sides of the pulpit and stopped, and the people immediately grew quiet. He pulled a handkerchief from his rear pocket and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He motioned for them to sit. A quick glance signaled the pianist, sitting in front of an ancient upright Baldwin to his right, and she began playing “Onward Christian Soldiers.” As Harper’s faithful pianist, Jane Harper had heard her husband preach three services a week for three years. She sat straight, her braided hair knotted into a bun, dressed plainly, unadorned with jewelry or other pagan ornaments. She was the perfect preacher’s wife, supporting him without complaint, just as she had been the perfect farmer’s wife for more than thirty years, since the day he married her, a shy young girl of fifteen.

Harper wiped his face again before stuffing his handkerchief back into his pocket.

“God has sent an angel,” Harper said, his voice now almost a whisper, “to keep thee in the way.” He shook his head. “Who will listen to the angel? Who here will obey the word of the Lord?”

Harper rushed toward them, his jaw clenched tight, his eyes narrowed, his hands drawn into fists beside him. Sweat flew from his face.

“Who will destroy the God-haters?” he roared.

“We will!” they yelled back.

“Stand up,” he said, motioning upward with his arms. “Stand up if you’re willing to obey God!”

Instantly, the congregation was on its feet, clapping and cheering.

“God will bless the anointed! He will bless the Redeemed, the defenders of God! You are the true patriots!”

As his wife pounded out the chorus, Harper waved his arms back and forth like a choir director, singing, “Onward Christian Soldiers, marching as to war...”

The people joined in, clapping their hands as they began the familiar hymn. Harper sang the loudest, walking in front of the pulpit, pumping his arm in the air with every word. When the congregation finished all four verses, Jane stopped playing. In silence Harper returned to the pulpit and bowed his head in prayer.

“Almighty God,” he prayed, “God of the New Israel, give us the strength to follow your perfect will. Make us fearless when your mighty sword delivers your perfect justice, *smiting* the flesh of the spiritual forces of evil, *destroying* those who hate you. Bless your anointed ones, the true believers, and bring us into your eternal light. Amen.”

The people called out, “Amen!”

Harper lifted both of his arms over the congregation for the benediction. “Now may the God of power and justice reign over the lives of the Redeemed. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

As the congregation repeated the hymn’s last verse, Harper walked down the side aisle to the back of the church. At the end of the song, the forty men, women, and children quietly filed past the preacher as he greeted each of them and shook their hands, exhorting them by name to be faithful. His wife packed her music in a vinyl folder and sat on the back pew.

Three men hung back, stopping near Harper, waiting for the others to move past and out the door into the evening sunlight. The men were in their late twenties and dressed identical to the other members.

When the entire congregation had left, the tallest of the three men spoke first. “Is it ready?” he asked in a low voice, glancing around.

“Almost,” Harper said, whispering. “I’m going to test it soon.”

“Do you need help?” the second man asked. “We could—”

“No,” Harper cut in. “If I need your help, I’ll ask for it.” Harper glared at the three men and said nothing. They stood still, increasingly uncomfortable, until Harper was ready to break the silence. “Is that clear?” he said finally.

“Yes, Pastor Harper,” the tall man said quietly. “We will follow your orders. When do we meet next?”

“Tomorrow night,” Harper said. “Nine sharp.” He gestured toward the door.

The three men immediately understood that both the Sunday evening church service as well as their conversation with Harper were over.

\*\*\*

Paula found her car in the doctor's parking lot, worried for a moment that she had forgotten where she had parked it so early in the morning. She opened the door and felt the rush of hot air. Even though she had parked in a covered garage, the temperature inside the car must have been 120 degrees. Having spent the entire day in the air-conditioned hospital, she hadn't remembered it was one of the hottest days so far in July. Someone had told her 107. She slid in, started the car, and turned the air on high to cool the interior as quickly as possible, knowing that by the time the temperature was reasonable she'd already be drenched in sweat. It was typical for summer in Tulsa.

Paula needed to call Matt but hated picking up the phone. She wanted to go to dinner with him, not disappoint him, but it was too late, and she was exhausted. An unexpected issue with an asthma patient on the general medical floor had delayed her. She dialed the number of his pager and entered her phone number. Within a few seconds he was calling.

"Hey, Matt," she answered.

"So it's a no go?"

"How did you know?"

"I figured it's late, and you must be completely beat."

Paula laughed. "I'm so predictable."

"No, unfortunately your circumstances are predictable. Instead of a restaurant we could go fast food if you want. You may not know it, but it's still light outside."

"I'm so sorry, Matt. I just can't."

"No worries. Are you doing okay?"

She appreciated him asking. "Just tired is all. Busy weekend, very little sleep, I'm still on call tonight, and tomorrow's office is already packed."

"Then a rain check, okay?"

"Sure."

"So how about tomorrow night? I don't mean to be corny or anything, but I sure enjoy our time together."

“That’s sweet.”

“Then it’s a yes? Tomorrow night? My treat?”

“I’d like that,” she said. *If only I could make definite plans*, she thought, *like an ordinary person. Say yes and be certain it would happen.*

“Me, too,” Matt said. “I’ll call you.”

“Okay, talk to you tomorrow.”

After they both disconnected, she sat a moment feeling the cold air blowing on her face. She knew she was right about tonight. She was running on fumes as it was, and there was no guarantee she’d get a minute of sleep on call. It was the nature of her chosen occupation.

Yet a simple dinner. A night out with a friend. A chance for a relationship. Was that so much to ask for?

Paula backed her car out of its space and headed for the exit of the parking garage. *Yes, tonight*, she thought, *the best I can hope for is a good night’s sleep.*

\*\*\*

Sam Harper slid the thick cardboard box to the center of the plywood and Styrofoam raft. He checked the electrical wires of the detonator attached to the radio receiver on the box’s top. Green to black. White to red. Each wrapped tight. Careful—no mistakes. After meticulously examining every connection to confirm it was correct, only then was he satisfied. All was set. He extended the radio receiver’s antenna to its full height and gave the raft a gentle shove. It floated away from the bank of the pond and out toward the middle.

The summer evening had little breeze, and the surface was glassy smooth, disrupted only by the motion of the awkward raft. The water reflected the fading sun, its pink light broken and scattered on the surface, filtering through the branches of the surrounding scrub oak forest.

The raft stopped in the dead center of the pond, about twenty yards from shore. Harper scrambled up the bank and positioned himself behind an ancient blackjack oak about thirty yards from the water’s edge. Its trunk was thick and stout and would protect him.

Harper looked around and listened carefully. The leaves of the dense forest rustled softly all around him. A lone whippoorwill cried sweetly in the distance. Besides these typical sounds of a country woodland, he heard nothing.

In his hand he held the radio transmitter that would send the signal. The red light indicated it was on. Harper pulled the transmitter's antenna to its fullest position, looked and listened one last time, and then pushed the button.

A flash like a bolt of lightning rushed past him, immediately followed by a blast that knocked him backward. Leaves and water from the sky rained down around him. His ears roared, and he lay still on the ground, his hands covering his head. Gradually, the roar softened to a high-pitched whine. He stood slowly, testing his balance. At first unsteady, he regained his equilibrium, and then headed for the edge of the water to look at the result.

The pond was half empty. Dead fish were floating on the surface and lying around the perimeter. The leaves of the nearest trees were missing, and several large branches had broken off. The raft and bomb packaging were gone.

He had used what he thought was a small amount of nitrate fertilizer and fuel oil in his test. Impressive. What pleased him most was that the radio-controlled detonator worked perfectly—an essential part of his plan.

He sat on the bank, his skin tingling, soaked with water and covered with leaves, and he smiled. This was perfect. This was absolutely perfect.