

One

Tuesday, May 11

The directions to the doctor's office were just gone. Doug Bolling gripped the steering wheel of his car in frustration. He swiped a hand across his mouth. His palm was sweaty. This was bad. No, he just needed to concentrate. He took a deep breath and told himself to relax. He'd been there dozens of times, last week even. If he could remember the first turn, surely the rest of it would come back to him.

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the headrest. At the end of his road he turned right. Then what? *Wait, what time is the appointment?* The appointment was at nine thirty. The clock on his dashboard said eight fifty-three.

He could miss the appointment, and claim he forgot it. Forgetting the appointment wasn't as bad as forgetting how to get there. Or he could make up some excuse for Cass to drive him. Some kind of car trouble. No, she'd see through the lie, and he wasn't ready to tell her. Not yet. Not without proof.

His only option, then, was to call the doctor's office. If he heard the directions ... if he wrote them down, maybe that would be enough. He pulled out his cell phone and thanked God that the doctor's number was on his contact list. Then he thanked God that he still knew how to use a phone. "Karen, this is Doug Bolling. I've got a nine-thirty. I, uh ... I need directions to the office ... I know, Karen. Just please ... help me out, here."

He copied everything carefully into the notebook he carried with him everywhere. It had become his lifeline. He read the directions back to the receptionist before he hung up. They were written down correctly. He could do this.

Doug paid careful attention to the street signs, the red lights and stop signs, and made it to the office. The appointment was at nine thirty. He was almost positive. The clock on the dash said nine twenty-one. Twenty-one was before thirty. He made it. Before he got out, he bowed his head and whispered, "Please God, let it be anything else. Anything."

He didn't have a chance to pick up a magazine before the nurse called him to an exam room. Another bad sign. The nurse weighed him, took his blood pressure and asked for his latest glucose readings. He had those in his notebook. She dropped his file in the slot in the door on her way out.

He hated the exam table, always had, and wouldn't sit on it until the doctor made him. Instead, he eased into the metal and vinyl chair in the corner. He got his notebook from his back pocket, slid on his glasses and read his list for the day. Today was easy—doctor, post office, then pick up the boys. He knew how to get to the post office and the school. Completely manageable.

Dr. John Stansbury opened the door, and shook hands with Doug before pulling a stool over. "How are you today, Doug?"

"That's what you're going to tell me."

"How old are you now?" The doctor laid Doug's folder on the exam table and flipped it open.

"I'll be sixty-eight next month."

"And how long have you been married?"

"Almost twelve years."

"Just the two boys?"

"No, I have a son from my first marriage, Mark. Is this some kind of test?"

"Actually yes. So far, so good. Can you count backwards from a hundred by sevens?" He scribbled on the folder's top sheet.

"Yeah ... uh ... ninety-three ... eighty-six ... sixty, I mean, seventy-nine, seventy-two ... sixty-five—"

"That's good enough," Stansbury said, waving him off. "We got the results back on the CT and MRI—"

"It's Alzheimer's isn't it?"

The doctor laid down his pen and Doug saw the apologetic sadness in his eyes. That's when he knew.

"Yes, it looks like Alzheimer's. Your scans were clean. So based on what you've told me, losing words, having difficulties with directions—"

"I couldn't find my way here. The, uh ..." He pointed to the exam room door. "The girl on the phone. She told me how to get here."

The doctor nodded and made more notes. "See, when you tell me things like that, but you don't report any other memory trouble ..." He shook his head and frowned.

"Am I forgetting that I forget?"

"I suspect you are. I need to talk to Cass."

Cass.

"I think I should tell her."

"I know. But Doug ..." He dropped his eyes for a moment. "I can't rely on you for information. We need her here with you. That's going to be the way it has to be from now on."

Doug dropped his head and looked at the notebook he was still holding with his list for the day. His boys' names caught his eye, and his stomach tightened. "How much time am I looking at, John? I mean, good time."

"A year, maybe two ... Of course everybody's different, and we can look at medications to slow things down. There are memory techniques too, so maybe you can stretch that out."

"My boys ... my boys are little. Well, not so little anymore. Jonah's almost eleven and Noah's nine."

"They'll learn to cope, Doug, just like you will, just like Cass will."

"I haven't told her, John."

"She hasn't noticed anything?"

"If she has, she never mentioned it ... or I forgot it." He smiled for an instant, then thoughts of telling his wife squeezed his heart. "I guess I can't put it off."

"Bring her in Thursday or Friday, and we'll talk about what to do next." He made another note in the folder then closed it. "You've got a lot going for you, Doug. You exercise. Your overall health is fantastic."

"My brain is self-destructing, though."

"You have structure and a routine and you've got tremendous family support. Those will all help slow this. Even so, we need to get you in with a neurologist."

"I trust you, John. I don't need a neurologist."

"I appreciate that, but they can help you more than I can. I'll handle your sugar and everything else, but let them manage your brain."

Doug turned a page in his notebook, and took the pen from his shirt pocket. "Okay, tell me again."

SIX MONTHS EARLIER

Friday, November 21

Doug couldn't deny it. The lunch with Jim Lowry yesterday shook him up. How could he forget how to get home from a restaurant he'd eaten at dozens of times? That wasn't simple forgetfulness. Something was wrong.

WebMD loaded and he stared at the screen. Now what? He adjusted his glasses, and even tipped his head back, but there was too much there. He put a finger on the screen to help himself focus, and traced over to the search box. What should he type? Not remembering ... no ... there was a word ... memory. Memory loss. That's when the word came up.

Alzheimer's.

He read carefully, rereading the signs and symptoms. Did he ask the same questions over and over? What day of the week was it? Tuesday? Or maybe Thursday? What did he have for dinner last night? They were spending Christmas with Mark in ... where was it? It was in Africa, but what was the place? What day were they leaving?

Cass booked the trip. He tried several times, but something changed with the travel site. He couldn't find the sections he needed for flights and hotels. It was like this medical website. It was too much information. He couldn't sort through it all and find what he needed.

What if he wrote things down? Would that help? Maybe that would jog his memory. He pulled the calendar from his back pocket, and began flipping pages. What day was it? He traced the computer screen looking for a date. Right there by the search box. November twenty-first. November ... that was toward the end. Twenty ... twenty-one. Breakfast? Why did he write "breakfast"? He remembered. He had a breakfast meeting with a men's group from church. What time? Eight. It was after that now, wasn't it?

He stepped out of his study. "Cass?" he called. "What time is it?"

She must have been close because she appeared from around the corner. Immediately she glanced at his wrist. "Isn't your watch working?"

"My what?"

"Your watch. You're wearing it." She pointed to his arm.

"Oh." He flipped his wrist over. "No, the battery's dead," he lied.

"It's ten thirty. Why?"

"Just curious. I was reading. Lost track of time."

"What are you reading?"

"What?"

"You were reading. Anything interesting?"

"No. Board stuff. Habitat has to file some things. I was checking over them." He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "What about you?"

"I was gone all morning. I took the boys to school and went to the grocery store. Thanksgiving is next week."

"It is?" When Cass looked at him with vague concern, he tried to recover. "I mean, it slipped up on me. You should invite Nick."

"Doug, you asked him, and Mom and Dad."

"Right." He smiled awkwardly. "Sometimes I think things, then I forget if I ever say them out loud. Getting old, I guess."

"Never." She smiled and squeezed his arm. "I'll let you get back to work. I'll call you for lunch."

"Thanks." He slumped into his desk chair. This was bad. He rummaged through his desk and found a pocket-sized notebook. He could deal with this, though. He could beat this by writing things down. It was perfectly natural to write things down. Organized, even. He pushed his calendar over to the side, but one of the entries caught his eye. Breakfast, eight o'clock. That was today?

Saturday, December 27, Mombasa, Kenya

Doug thought the surf was a little chilly this morning, but Jonah didn't seem to mind. His flip flops launched in opposite directions and before Doug could say anything, the boy was in waist deep water.

"Hey! They do have sharks here!" Doug called, but Jonah just grinned.

"I'm watching. No fins."

"Well, here's your pole, sharkbait."

Jonah hopped back through the surf and took the rod and reel from Doug.

"There's no worm."

"What?"

"You forgot to put the worm on."

"I didn't forget." But he had. "You're almost a man now. You don't need your dad getting your stuff ready."

"Cool." Jonah ran back up the sand to the tackle boxes. "The red ones?"

"What?"

"The red worms?"

The red worms ... They were for ... bass. There weren't bass here. Why did he even pack them? Did he bring the freshwater box instead of the saltwater one? He looked at his rod and reel. These were the right poles. So the boxes—

"Dad?"

"What?"

"What's on your hook?"

"My hook? Oh, uh, brown."

"Thanks!" He scampered down the sand and took his place at Doug's right elbow. The sky almost glowed with pink and gold as the gray dawn gave way to morning.

With a rod in his hand, Jonah was quiet and serious. Doug could see himself in the boy in so many ways. "Jonah, you know I love you, don't you?"

"Sure Dad, why?"

"My dad ... well ... I just want to make sure you know."

"Your dad didn't love you?"

"I think he did. He just wasn't very good at it."

"You're good at it. So's Mom."

"I think Mom's better than me." He checked his hook and cast his line again. "Do you ever wish I was, you know, not so old?"

"That doesn't matter."

"Good."

"Was your dad old?"

"A little. He was thirty or thirty-one when I was born."

"That's not as old as fifty-seven."

"No. But he died when I was only seventeen."

"That would be sad."

"But I did okay, and I guess that's what I was trying to get at. If anything ever happens to me, you'll be okay."

Jonah shrugged and cast his line again. For a long time—Doug wasn't sure how long—he tried to keep up as Jonah chattered about his video games, about superhero cartoons and DVDs. Was it just him, or did other parents have trouble keeping up? Was it his age or was something else going on?

"Hey, I was beginning to wonder about you."

Cass? Doug turned and saw his wife walking down the beach toward them with Noah trailing close behind.

"I told you we were going to fish."

"And you said you'd be back about eleven. It's twelve fifteen. Mark's back and Julie was starting lunch." She kissed his cheek, and then smiled at Jonah. "Any luck?"

"No. Just a few little ones. Dad says it's the wrong season for good fish. We need to come back in the spring."

"Well, Dad's the expert." She smiled at Doug. "Everything okay?"

"Fine. I just lost track of time."

"Did your watch quit again?"

"My what?"

"Your watch. Last month the battery died. I just wondered if I needed to have the jeweler look at it when we get home."

He turned his wrist and checked the watch. What time did she say it was? "I, uh, think, maybe I need my glasses changed. I ... the lines. The lines on the clock. I can't always tell which ones. I mean, the watch."

She studied him for a moment. "How's your sugar?"

"Fine, why?"

"I don't know. You're not making a lot of sense."

He took a deep breath and tried again. "I can't see the lines on my watch," he said. "I think I need one with numbers."

She seemed satisfied. "Analog or digital?"

"What?"

"The kind with a face or just a number display?"

"Not the face. I think that's the problem."

Jonah had dropped his pole and he and Noah were in the surf. "C'mon guys!" Cass called, then she took Doug's hand. "Are you sleeping okay?"

"I think so."

"You seem tired."

"Jet lag," he said. "It takes me a couple of weeks to really get adjusted."

"By then it's time to go home."

He nodded. The boys raced past them to the rental car. "We didn't catch anything. I feel bad for him."

"Jonah doesn't care. He just likes being with you. He gets that from his mother."

"It still amazes me."

"What?"

"You. The boys. Life."

"Soak it in." She kissed him gently. "Did you want to drive?"

"No, you go ahead."

Jonah took off back down the sand.

"Hey! It's time to go!"

"I know. We forgot the boxes. You and Noah will need 'em tomorrow."

"Right. Thanks." Doug threw his pole in the trunk and held it open until Jonah got there and dropped his pole and the rest of the gear in.

"Thanks Dad." He hugged Doug quickly then got in the car.

Doug got in the passenger side and yanked on his seat belt. "Here." Cass handed him her phone. She had snapped a photo of Jonah and him, poles in hand, the Indian Ocean stretching before them.

He smiled and handed the phone back. "Can you get me one for my desk? I want to make sure I remember the trip."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"I mean, it will be a nice reminder, a, um, a souvenir."

Tuesday, April 20

When five a.m. arrived, Doug knew he could finally get out of bed without Cass asking him why he wasn't sleeping. Two weeks ago, he had gone to see John Stansbury over these memory lapses. They were getting more frequent, harder to cover, and he couldn't find a cause for them. The crazy thing was, he didn't know he was forgetting anything. Every time Cass or the boys told him that something slipped, it was a revelation. There was no way to compensate for that.

John had begun a battery of tests, including bloodwork, and cardiac checks, but nothing showed up. Finally, he had ordered a CT and an MRI. The results would be back in two or three weeks. John said he had to rule out everything else before he'd call it Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia. Doug felt sure John already knew. The doctor just needed some evidence.

Alzheimer's. At sixty-seven. It would destroy him little by little, stripping him of everything, his memories, his ability to function, even his self-awareness, and then it would kill him. And there was nothing anyone could do about it.

What unnerved him more than the prospect of losing his memories altogether was the possibility of losing control of them. There were things buried deep inside him, things Cass didn't even know, things that shamed and pained him too deeply to drag them out again ever. What if those things were let loose by a brain that no longer knew how to filter itself, how to protect him? Then what?

He checked his blood glucose, took his insulin shot, then showered and dressed like he did every morning. A half pot of freshly-brewed coffee was waiting for him in the kitchen. He poured most of it into an over-sized mug and took a test gulp. Nice and strong, just the way he liked it.

He glanced out the back door at the gray misty fog hanging across the yard. He'd have to make sure the boys were on time this morning. He carried the coffee to the desk in the study. His Bible lay open where he left off reading yesterday. Next to it, he had Judy's Bible and a journal she kept as she faced death from cancer. In these last few months, Judy's journal was more urgently relevant than it ever had been. He had marked one particular entry where she wrote about the story of Abraham nearly sacrificing his son Isaac in order to obey God's command. What was God thinking? She wondered if her cancer was the same kind of sacrifice. Were his memory problems? If so, what was God after exactly?

Wait, he needed his glasses, his old ones. The new ones Cass got gave him a headache. He kept meaning to ask her why she got different ones. The old glasses. Much better. He checked his watch, a new one with a digital display, one he didn't have to figure out. It was twenty after five. In his desk drawer, he kept a chart comparing St. Louis time with the time in Mombasa, Kenya, where Mark was. Five ... was one. One was afternoon. He reached for the phone and called his son.

"Everything okay, Dad?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You don't usually call in the middle of the afternoon."

"Don't I?"

"No." There was a long pause. "So what's up?"

"What?"

"Did you want something?"

He did. He called Mark because he wanted something. He was at his desk ... reading. What was he reading? His Bible.

"Dad? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, I just, uh ..." His Bible. No, Judy's journal. That's it. He remembered. Thank God. "Yeah, why did God ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?"

"Wow, Dad ... uh ... We can't know the mind of God unless He tells us—"

"But you have some idea, right?"

"It's a test. It would be one thing for Abraham to offer the things he chose, the things he was willing to part with, but God asked for what was most precious to Abraham."

"God intervened, though. He ... the old man ..."

"Abraham?"

"Abraham, right. He didn't have to go through with it."

"No, but he was willing."

"What if God doesn't intervene?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if God asks you for something, but He doesn't ... you know, and you have to go through with it?"

"Then you have an opportunity to glorify God in your obedience."

"What if you don't have a choice about obeying?"

"Dad, what are you asking really?"

He wasn't telling Mark. Not yet. "Your mom ... God asked her to go through cancer. He asked her to give up health, her ... her future. She didn't have a choice. She had cancer and it was going to kill her."

"Everything we offer God is already His, but what matters is our heart, and our willingness to surrender. God can take it, and be justified in doing so, or we can give it freely, and in doing that, it becomes a supreme act of worship."

Doug stared at the Bible open in front of him. God was asking for his health, his independence, his future. God could take it from him or he could offer it. Mark said that was worship. Getting Alzheimer's wasn't worship.

"Dad? You still there?"

"What? Yeah. Trying to process."

"It's a heavy lesson. Don't worry about getting it all today."

"I won't." His eyes fell on his calendar. "How long do you get to decide?"

"Decide what?"

"Decide whether you're going to offer what God asked for?"

"I don't know, but I'd say sooner is better."

"Figures," Doug muttered. "Thanks, Mark."

"Anytime."

Doug returned the phone to its cradle. *God, I don't want to do this. Isn't there something else I can give You? It's not about dying. I could drop dead right here at my, at my desk. But this disease, it's not just me ... It's Cass ... and my boys ... Do You have to test them, too? What if they don't understand what You're doing? What if they get bitter toward You?*

He knew that bitterness better than anyone. God had to protect them from that. He would do that much, wouldn't He? He rested his forehead against his fists, elbows propped on the desk, his eyes squeezed shut. *That's part of the surrender, isn't it? I have to give them to You, too. I can't do this on my own. I can't. I've never been, but I'm afraid now. It's fear, fear that I'll fail. How could ... the old guy ...* He just read his name. Mark just said it. He just said it. The old guy in the story who sacrificed his son. His name was ... A ... Abraham, Yes. Thank you. *How could he not protest? How could he get up early the next morning and go?*

Doug opened his eyes slowly. Morning light was filling his study, and he could hear the creaks and pops, letting him know that his family was awake. He had just a few minutes before Jonah or Noah burst through his door, calling him to breakfast.

He pulled his Bible close and chased a cross-reference to Hebrews eleven. Abraham knew God's promises were unconditional. God would keep those promises no matter what, regardless of what He asked Abraham to do in that moment.

So that's what it all boils down to. Do I really believe God's promises ... or do I just say I do?

Tuesday, May 11

Doug's stomach began to churn as soon as he saw Cass's car in the driveway. He pulled out his notebook and reviewed everything John told him one more time, then he stuffed the notebook back in his pocket and got out of the car. He stood for a moment holding onto the door, making sure his knees wouldn't buckle under him. This was going to devastate the woman he loved.

He came to faith in Christ because of Cass. Judy became a believer after she got sick, but he was so angry and bitter, he wanted nothing to do with a God who would strike that way. Cass's conversion came after he had the nerve to sue for custody of Mark's children. He won temporary custody, and while the kids lived with them, everything in his life unraveled. Cass found faith, and moved out, and he nearly destroyed himself. God intervened, though, and gave him a blessed second chance at everything.

He married Cass, sold his construction business and poured everything into his new family and his growing faith. For twelve years, he lived a perfect life. Today, however, John Stansbury confirmed it was the beginning of the end of that perfect life.

He called her name as he came into the kitchen from the garage. He called for her again at the staircase, but the house was silent. He finally found her on the deck, stretched out on one of the lounge chairs, heavy book in her hands.

She hadn't heard him open the backdoor, so he stood silently watching her. He wanted to freeze time right here so she would always be blissfully untouched by his news—before memory loss, and drug treatments and a nursing home became a part of their lives.

She was not yet fifty, her blonde curls pulled back in a loose ponytail. Mark's son, Ben, had called her 'drop-dead gorgeous' when he met her years ago. It still fit her. Their age difference never bothered her, although they got some odd looks when they were out with the boys. She walked away from a career as a successful interior designer to be a wife and mother. His wife. The mother of his children. She gave it up for him. Now he'd have to tell her what that decision would cost.

As soon as he looked in her eyes, the gut-wrenching dread spiked inside him. "I wonder what the poor folks are doing today," he said, trying to cover by teasing her.

She laid her book aside and swung her feet around off the lounge chair. "I knew you'd be home soon, so yes, I was taking a break."

"You should spend your life reading by the pool. That's why I built it."

"You built it because it would improve the resale value of the house, Doug." She pushed her sunglasses up on her head, and smiled at him. "How'd did it go? Free from doctors for six more months?"

He sat on the edge of the lounge chair and took her hands.

"I don't think I like this," she said, frowning.

"Cass ..." How was he supposed to do this? Was there any way to soften it?

"What's wrong?"

"I, uh ... I have Alzheimer's disease."

She squeezed his hands and whispered, "No, you don't." She pulled back, stood and paced away from him. "What gave John such a ridiculous idea? Because you forget a name here and there? I do that! That doesn't mean anything!"

"Here." He handed her the notebook from his pocket.

"What? What's this?" She flipped through it. "Making a to-do list is brilliant. So?" She snapped the notebook back to him.

He opened to the front. "Do you see this? These are directions ... to John's office. I had to call ... the girl ... with the phone ..." *Not now ... I can't lose words now ... I need to explain this to her.*

"Karen, the receptionist."

"I had to call her for directions, because I couldn't remember how to get there."

"Everybody forgets things. I hate to break it to you, Doug, but you *are* almost seventy—"

The rest spilled out. "I've had a CT scan and an MRI. There's no other explanation."

He hadn't told her about the tests, and he watched her face pale, her eyes brim with tears.

"You did this without telling me?" she whispered. "How could you keep this from me? How could you do that to me?"

"Because I wanted things to be normal as long as they possibly could. Because I hoped I was wrong. I hoped it was something else."

"How long have you known?"

"I've suspected it since late last year. I saw John early last month about it."

She turned her back to him. "It's incurable ... isn't it?"

"Yes." He slipped his hands around her waist and pulled her close, but she was stiff, resisting him. "I have been in your place. I know what it's like to hear news like this, and I am so sorry." There was no sound, but he knew she was crying. There was never heaving or sobbing. She did it with dignity, like she did everything else.