

Saving Rev. Parker

A Story of Faith, Friendship, Family, and Forgiveness

Karen McCleskey

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The author takes full responsibility for any and all mistakes, errors, typos, poor sentence construction, awful grammar, goof up's, and the entire absence of passive voice in this book which is actually a good thing.

# Saving Rev. Parker: A Story of Faith, Friendship, Family, and Forgiveness

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Laura Clark would never call herself the snooping type, but there was just something off about Tom Parker. Why would a highly educated and intelligent man from Wisconsin become a minister at a small rural church in about as deep as you can go in the South?

Brother Tom, as he had come to be called, had been at the Lake United Methodist church around 4 months and Laura just couldn't take it anymore. She knew there was more to all this than Tom was letting on. He deftly avoided any questions about how he'd been able to talk the United Methodist Church Administrators into letting him come to the South. Generally, new ministers stayed close to where they lived.

*Being allowed to move to Mississippi is kind of unusual, so he must know someone, someone pretty high up in the church. Well, who you know can make a big difference in how your life goes. If he knows somebody, that's fine. But why Mississippi?* she wondered.

As guilty as she felt about it, she Googled Thomas Parker.

There were several Thomas Parkers and Laura kept looking until she found the Thomas Parker she was looking for. One hit about his award at an engineering company, one about his decision to become a minister, a hit referring to his ordination. "Lord," Laura thought, "why can't what you're looking for being the first or second thing listed." She knew why but was still feeling impatient as she continued to scroll. A hit about being assigned to a small, rural church in the deep South; an interview with him about it. "Wisconsin seemed really impressed that Tom would make this choice," she mused. *He was top in his theology class and though a novice, he could have certainly have been assigned to a more prestigious and closer church than this one. I know there's something here. It just doesn't make sense.* Then she figured if Tom wanted people to know he'd tell them. Maybe there wasn't anything to tell. *Maybe if there is,* she thought, *I've*

*got no business trying to find out what it was. She considered that, then made her decision. I'm invading Tom's privacy and I'm going to keep invading it* and she continued her search.

About 20 minutes into her search, something caught her eye. An obituary in a small local Madison newspaper for a young man from there who had gone to Philadelphia, Mississippi during the Civil Rights era to work for social justice and was murdered. She continued to read and was appalled that even with eye witnesses, the man accused of the murder had been acquitted by an all-white jury that had deliberated less than 30 minutes. At the end of the article she saw the words that made things clear. 'Robert is survived by his parents John and Estelle Parker and a brother, Thomas.

*So that's it, she thought. That's what brought him here. But another question nagged at her. Now that he's here, what's he going to do?*

The answer came much more quickly than she'd anticipated.

Two weeks later Eleanor Parker stopped by Laura's pharmacy to say hello. They talked for a while about how Eleanor and her family were adjusting to life in a small town. Off-handedly, Laura asked, "So where's that husband of yours?"

"Oh, Tom's off to some meeting he said he had to go to up in Philadelphia."

Laura's stomach dropped. She immediately realized what that meant. *Oh, God, not Philadelphia.*

"So, what time did he leave?" Laura asked casually.

"I think about half an hour ago, maybe a little longer."

"Eleanor, I just remembered something I've got to do at the courthouse." She yelled for Janice, her pharmacy tech, to come up to front counter.

"Something's come up and I've got to go to the courthouse," said Laura, words running together. "You're in charge while I'm gone. I'll be back soon," she said as she looked around for her purse, pulling out drawer after drawer. Janice nodded, eyes as wide open as her mouth. What in the world did Laura Clark need to do at the courthouse?

“Laura, is everything alright?” Eleanor was concerned given the way Laura had announced her urgent need to get to the courthouse.

“Fine,” she said, making no eye contact with her. Her mind was elsewhere. On a highway leading to Philadelphia and on a man she was terrified was on his way to do something there would be no undoing.

Laura found her purse and ran out the door. Eleanor was left speechless and she stared at Janice who shrugged her shoulders. “Must be something pretty important. I haven’t seen her move that fast since she had the run-in with the rat in the storage closet.”

Laura sprinted to the parking lot in the back of the building and jumped in her car. Tom didn’t have that much of a head start on her; she felt confident she could reach him before he did something that would ruin the lives of everyone he cared about.

She’d thought she’d see him on the road and follow him, just to be sure that he really was in Philadelphia for church business, but now she was getting scared because she hadn’t seen his car.

Laura exited the interstate and drove into town on Main Street. A few stores and shops on either side of the street, most of them closed, made the area look a little shabby and sad. She let out a sigh of relief when she saw Tom’s car parked a block down the street. She slumped down in the seat as she drove by looking to see where he might be. She figured he wouldn’t be far from his car and she was right. She spotted him in a small café and pulled in to a parking spot across the street, sliding even further down in the seat, hoping he wouldn’t notice her.

He was drinking a cup of coffee or maybe holding a cup of coffee was more accurate. She watched and he didn’t move for over 5 minutes. He was obviously thinking hard about something.

She saw him take a big sip of his coffee, lay some money on the table, walk out of the café and down the street to a gun store. Laura was confused. Even in Mississippi you can’t just walk in and buy a gun and walk out in 10 minutes which is about how long Tom was in the store. She noticed a small paper bag in his hand and then she realized what he had done. He’d bought bullets. Her whole body went numb and she felt sick. *Get yourself together, Laura, get yourself together.*

She watched him go to his car and get in. Then she saw him reach down as if he were getting something off the floorboard.

*Oh, God, he's getting the gun.*

Laura dashed out of her car, ran across the street without looking either way, got to Tom's car, threw open the front passenger door and jumped in, breathing heavily and looking terrified. Her not so gentle entrance into the car had terrified Tom as well and he pointed the gun at her.

"Good God, Laura," he yelled. "I could have shot you. Good thing it's not loaded."

"Not yet, anyway." She glanced down at the paper bag on the floorboard.

"Oh, that, the bullets, yeah, need them for the gun. Going to do some hunting," he responded with absolutely no eye contact.

*He's a horrible liar. Guess that's a good trait in a preacher.*

"Really? Oh, o.k. So what kind of hunting are you planning to do?" she asked, her head tilted.

"Never mind that. What are you doing up here?" he asked having no idea what her presence might be about.

"Never mind what I'm doing here. Answer my question. What kind of hunting are you planning on doing?"

Tom paused and seemed to think about it. "Quail," he announced. "Yeah, I'm up here to hunt quail. That's it. Quail."

"Tom, let's look at a couple of things here, o.k. Are you ready?" Before Tom could reply, Laura began. "This quail hunting thing you said you're up here to do. First, you don't hunt. Second, you wouldn't know a quail from a chipmunk. Let's see what the third thing could be. Oh, that's right. It's not quail season. Next, you don't hunt quail with a pistol and last, Tom, nobody goes hunting in polyester pants and dress loafers." She raised her eyebrows. "So, still up here to go quail hunting?"

Tom put his head down on the steering wheel and gripped it with both hands and began to sob. The gun was on the seat between them and Laura slowly moved her hand over and picked it

up. Turning quietly, she put it on the backseat floorboard. Then she reached for the small bag on the floor and noiselessly slipped it into her purse.

“What are you doing here?” he asked again. His voice was filled with anger and his eyes were filled with tears.

She tilted her head slightly as she held his stare. “You being down here just never made sense to me. A highly educated man, first in your seminary class. I just couldn’t figure out how a man like you would get sent to our church, so I did a little checking on you. I read about your brother and now it all makes sense. I know why you’re here, Tom. To kill the man who murdered your brother.”

“You’re right. That’s exactly what I’m doing. Going to do. It damned sure is, and what’s wrong with that, Laura? Isn’t that what you do when justice doesn’t happen?” Tom snapped.

Laura deftly dodged the question and asked, “Alright, just so we’re clear here, you want revenge because the bastard who murdered your brother got off scott free. Is that it?”

Tom nodded.

“Well, that makes perfect sense to me,” Laura said without a moment’s hesitation.

Tom stared at her. She continued.

“Tom, you’re one of the smartest men I’ve ever known. I’m pretty sure you’ve thought all this through, haven’t you?”

Tom nodded again.

“Obviously you know where to find him.”

Tom nodded.

“I’ll bet you know a whole lot about him, too.”

Tom nodded for the fourth time.

“Well, here’s what I’m thinking. You and I should go out to his house so you can meet him before you kill him,” she said sounding very practical.

“What? Have you lost your mind? Have you gone crazy? You don’t go meet someone you’re going to kill,” Tom yelled at her.

“Oh, sure you do. What’s the big deal? I think you should meet the man you’re going to kill. Come on, I mean, why not? Think about how long you’ve waited. What’s another couple of hours?” Laura sounded so nonchalant about it all.

“There’s no need to meet him, Laura.” Tom was calming down and now trying to appeal to her rational, sensible side.

“You’re telling me that you’re not the least bit interested in meeting a man who’s capable of taking another man’s life, the man who murdered your brother? Aren’t you just a little curious about him, you know, see what he’s like?” Laura prodded.

“Don’t make light of this, Laura,” Tom said angrily.

“I’m not making light of this at all. I’m very, very serious. You’ve got a gun, you’ve got bullets, you know everything about this man, I’ll bet you have a well thought out plan, don’t you?”

“Your point being…?” Tom asked sarcastically.

“My point being that I think you should have the guts that he didn’t have when he murdered your brother. Face him. Let him see you, let him see the coldness in your eyes, and you get to see the fear in his. The man was such a coward that he shot your brother in the back, didn’t he?” she asked. Laura had no idea at all if that was the way it had happened, but she figured it was a pretty good guess. She was right.

“Yes,” Tom said, barely containing his emotions. “From behind, in the back. He never saw my brother’s face. He just came up behind him and pulled the trigger.”

“Well, that’s not how this is going to be handled. You’re going to see this man and look him straight in the eyes and I’ll be right there. I just need you to promise me something.” She didn’t wait for him to ask what. “I want you to tell me when you get ready to pull the trigger so I won’t see you do it. That way I won’t have to perjure myself, should it come to that. Also, I’ve never seen someone murdered right before my eyes and I don’t ever want to. So, you promise to give me the head’s up so I can turn around and leave before you pull the trigger, o.k.?”

“What?” He couldn’t believe what he’d heard. There was some mistake. He was so overcome with emotions that he figured he’d misunderstood her.

“Oh, you heard me, Tom,” Laura said irritably. “Didn’t you?”

Tom nodded. In a shaky voice he said, “Yeah.”

“Oh, almost forgot. Make sure he’s dead because if he’s not, as a licensed pharmacist, I’m bound by oath to work on him,” she lied. “I guess that’d be kind of ironic. You try to kill him but he doesn’t die and I end up saving his life.” She shrugged her shoulders. “That’d make all this a real waste of time. So, promise me on all this, o.k.?”

Tom stared blankly at her. His thoughts were swirling and couldn’t seem to be separated into areas that he could think through. The last clear thought he remembered having was that maybe she was right; he needed to have the guts that the man who murdered his brother hadn’t had.

“I promise,” he said in a weak voice.

“Good, then let’s go. We’ll just leave my car here and we’ll go together in yours. No sense taking 2 cars. Now, which way?” and she started looking around for possible roads Tom could take.

Tom started driving west, going through several turns, twists; directions changing and then changing again. It had gotten to the point that Laura thought they were lost. But just as she was about to ask Tom where they were and if he was sure he knew where the man lived, Tom pulled over on the side of the dirt road they’d been on for over a half hour. He pointed at a small house about a hundred yards or so down the road and on the left. “That’s his house.”

“Tom, are you sure? It looks more like a chicken coop that got hit by a tornado.” She wasn’t kidding. Some of the front steps were missing, and the ones that were there were all crooked and leaning, some right and some left. Laura couldn’t even count how many boards were missing from the front porch. The porch reminded her of a piano keyboard in a strange kind of way. The screen on the front porch door was ripped and hanging on to the frame by a thread. Half the shingles were missing from the roof. The worst part, thought Laura, was how much garbage,

some bagged, but most not, was piled up next to the house and in various places throughout the yard.

“Tom, are you absolutely sure this is where he lives? It’s not fit for a pig, much less a person.”

“I know this is where he lives,” said Tom flatly.

“Pretty nasty,” observed Laura.

“It looks like where someone like him would live,” said Tom with revulsion.

“*Dear God,*” prayed Laura, “*please let this be the right thing to do. Help Tom,*” then added “*and me, too.*”

She took a deep breath. “Alright, let’s go meet this guy. Ready?” she asked as she put her hand on the door handle. Then she paused.

“You know, Tom, I’m wondering if you’ll recognize him, I mean if you’ll know him when you see him. He’s pretty old now. The last picture you saw of him may have been from back in ’69.”

“No, I mean, yes, no. I’m confused. Yes, the last picture I saw of him was the one right after he was acquitted. But I promise you I’ll know him when I see him,” Tom responded through tight lips.

“Just checking. I don’t want you talking to the wrong man and then end up murdering him by mistake.” Her hand was still on the door handle and she made a slight move to open it.

“Laura, what are you doing? I told you I don’t want to meet him or talk to him,” Tom said adamantly.

“Well, we’re going to because that was our agreement, remember?” Her voice was firm and indicated there was nothing to be negotiated.

“But I don’t want to meet him, I don’t want to talk to him.” He sounded like a 10-year-old who didn’t want to go to bed.

“Well, we all have to do things we don’t want to, now don’t we?” said Laura as if she were talking to a 10-year-old.

She opened the car door and got out. Noticing she still had on her white pharmacist coat, she said, “Guess I better take this off. Don’t want any blood on it. Plus it’s got my name on it.” She took it off and threw it on the backseat floorboard making sure it covered the gun.

Tom was still sitting in the car staring straight ahead.

“Tom, dammit, get out of the car. Right now. I mean it. Right now,” she said, sounding out of patience with him.

As Tom opened the door to get out, he asked almost timidly, “What am I going to say?”

“Come on,” and she started walking toward the driveway and she kept walking and talking, not slowing either pace at all. “Are you telling me you haven’t thought about what you want to say to him yet?” She sounded dumbfounded.

“Well, I had been considering ‘Rot in Hell’,” he said sounding very unsure of his answer.

Laura stopped and pursed her lips. She squinted her eyes and looked like she was considering that answer, evaluating it. Then she turned to Tom and said, “Well, it’s clear, concise, right to the point, easy to understand, just not a good conversation starter,” she pointed out and began walking again.

“Look, I keep telling you that I don’t want to meet him or talk to him. I don’t want a good conversation starter. Are you listening to me at all?”

“Well, too bad, because you are going to meet this man. And, yes, I am listening to you. I’m just tired of you whining.” Laura kept thinking how much he sounded like a scared little boy.

Tom froze with his eyes wide open and his jaw nearly reaching his chest.

Before he could say anything, Laura continued. “Tom, for God’s sakes, gut up. And why are you asking me what you should say anyway? How would I know? You’re the one who wants to meet the man he’s about to murder,” Laura said in her best *‘You’re irritating me’* voice.

She realized he had completely forgotten he wasn't the one who brought up wanting to meet the man and that he'd forgotten about the gun. "*Dear God, please don't let him remember it, please,*" Laura prayed.

Laura picked up her pace like she was running from a rabid dog. "Come on, you've got things to take care of." She was in a hurry to get him moving as far away from the car as possible before he remembered the gun and before he had time to remember that it was her idea, not his, that he meet the man.

Tom stopped abruptly and began running his fingers through his hair, over and over. He looked around. "We're leaving the car here?"

"Well, I don't think we ought to pull up in his pitiful excuse for a driveway. I don't think somebody seeing your car is a good idea," Laura pointed out.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. So we just walk up to his door?" That didn't make sense to him.

"Tom, people just walking up to someone's door happens all the time down here."

Tom looked confused.

"You're in the South, remember?"

"Oh, uh, yeah, o.k." It still didn't make sense to him that people did that, but that's what Laura said and she'd know the ways of the South.

"Well, alright then," and she began walking, hoping to hear his footsteps behind and she did.

When she got to the edge of the dirt drive way, she stopped. "Now, what's his name?"

"Hawkins, you know that."

"No, I mean his given name."

"Eli."

"Eli. Eli Hawkins." She seemed to be rolling his name over in her mind when Tom interrupted her thoughts which were not about Eli Hawkins' name.

"Aren't you going to try to talk me out of this? Remind me how this would hurt my family?"

“Is that what you want me to do, Tom? Tell you things you already know?”

Tom had his hands in his pockets now and was rocking back and forth, staring at the house of the man who murdered his brother.

“I don’t know anymore. I need to think. I need to sit down,” and he began walking back to the car.

The last thing Laura wanted was Tom getting back in the car, afraid he’d think about the gun so she said, walking faster than he was so she could reach the car first, “Come on, I’ll show you how we sit Southern style,” and hopped on the hood of the car. She patted a place next to her, indicating for him to sit there. He looked puzzled, but jumped up on the hood.

“You said you need to think, so go ahead. Let me know when you’re done,” she said and began tapping the bumper with her shoes.

Tom stared at her. *“Who the hell is this woman? It’s not the Laura I know or maybe it’s a part of Laura I’ve never seen, or maybe this really is Laura and I just didn’t know she was crazy. Maybe she’s not crazy. She could just be temporarily out of her mind or maybe she was right. About. Whatever she said. Oh, God, what did she say?”*

He nodded his head and said “O.K.”. It was the only thing he could think of to say.

Tom sat with his head in his hands, looking down. Then he leaned over and put his hands together between his legs.

Laura wondered if he was praying. She knew she sure was.

A solid 30 minutes went by. Laura never said a word, she just kept swinging her feet against the bumper, waiting.

Then Tom cleared his voice, pulled up his head and glanced at his surroundings. “I’ve always liked pines, always loved the way they smell.”

He seemed calmer, more in control of his thoughts. Laura waited, saying nothing in response to Tom’s observation of the pines.

Tom ran his fingers through his hair one time, took a visibly deep breath, then looked at Laura, and said, “O.K., I’m ready, let’s go.”

He jumped off the hood of the car and began walking back toward the driveway. This time, though, he didn't stop, he just kept on walking down the dried mud dirt driveway as he and Laura made their way to the shack of a murderer.

A million scenarios, some good, some not so good, raced through her mind as they cautiously climbed the steps to the front door of the house.

Tom lifted his hand to knock, then hesitated, then continued. He knocked 3 times, firmly, and waited, his hands folded over the front of his pants, the way a minister does at a funeral.

Laura and Tom heard a shuffling sound and then the clink of a walker, followed by hesitant and slow footsteps.

"Hold on, I'm comin'." The voice was gruff like someone who'd smoked all his life and like someone who didn't like people bothering him.

Eli Hawkins appeared at the door. Tom recognized him immediately, although he had changed considerably in the decades after killing his brother. Tom's mouth went dry, his heart began to pound, and he could feel beads of perspiration forming on his forehead.

*Get a grip. This is what you've been planning for years. Buck up.*

"I'm looking for Eli Hawkins," he said with much more confidence than he felt.

"Well, you got him. Whatcha wont 'cause if you're sellin', I ain't buyin'." Not a drop of courtesy or friendliness on his face. Just a cold hard stare.

He waited for an answer and he got impatient when there wasn't one.

"What are ya, one of them dummies that cain't hear or tawk?" He pushed the screen door open to see them better.

Tom spoke up firmly and calmly. "I'm here to kill you."

Hawkins's expression showed no fear.

"Hmmm. Well, o.k." He paused. "I reckon we probably need to sit out here on the porch and you can tell me why you're gonna to kill me. I'd kinda like to know 'fore ya do it." His curiosity

was real. He didn't seem concerned at all that someone who wanted to kill him was standing directly in front of him. His only thought was why.

Tom and Laura exchanged surprised glances. This certainly wasn't the response they'd expected.

Hawkins maneuvered his walker through through the door. His oxygen canister was in the front basket and a small plastic tube ran from it to his nose and was held in place by a band that ran over the top of his head. Laura was afraid the old man and his walker were going to fall through one of holes in the floor of the porch, then found herself wishing that he would.

She smelled him the minute he had come to the door. She almost gagged, wondering what could make someone smell like rotting garbage. Streaks of grime and dirt covered most of his overalls. She covered her mouth to keep from throwing up as she looked at his t-shirt, stained with pieces of dried food and underarm sweat. Over the band that was around his head he wore a baseball cap that said "HELL, YEAH" with a picture of a Confederate flag on it.

"I'm sittin' here," he said, pointing at a green lawn chair. Laura saw that his nails were long and filthy, as if they hadn't been cut or cleaned in months. "You two sit wherever you wont, don't make me no difference."

Laura sat on the porch swing and Tom sat down on a torn brown lawn chair directly across from Hawkins, looking down quickly to be sure he was on a piece of the floor that remained.

Hawkins looked at Tom. "Say ya come here to kill me, huh?" He rubbed the stubbles of a week-old gray beard and seemed to be thinking. When he ran his hand through his virtually non-existent hair, Laura watched in disgust as a snowfall of dandruff floated to his pants.

"Well, I reckon that's fine with me. Would like to know why ya wanna kill me, before ya do it, I mean." He looked off, like he was trying to figure something out. Then he started talking, but it sounded more like he was talking to himself.

"It ain't for money. I think ya can tell I ain't got any. I sure as hell don't have nothin' worth stealin'. I didn't screw your wife, or did I? No, 'cause that's probably her sittin' on the swing and I ain't never screwed her. Did I steal somethin' from you?"

Tom and Laura realized that these were genuine questions. These were real possibilities to Eli Hawkins.

“You murdered my brother,” stated Tom flatly.

The old man looked puzzled. “I ain’t kilt nobody ‘cept for that one time way back in the ‘60’s when everybody and their brother from up north come down here to get up in our business.”

“Do you remember who it was that you killed?” Tom asked, looking directly at Hawkins.

“No, cain’t say that I do.” It was as if he’d been asked the last time it rained. He spit tobacco juice out toward the yard. “Should I?”

“I would think you’d remember someone you killed,” said Tom, still so calm that Laura was beginning to worry.

“Oh, I remember that I kilt him, alright,” he said matter of factly, “I just didn’t know who he was. Why should I? I kilt him. That’s all there was to it. He come down here showin’ off how much better he was than all of us hicks. Knew that’s what he thought we all was. And worse, he started messin’ with our colored people, gettin’ um all riled up. We told the idiot to leave or we’d kill his sorry ass. Gave him fair warnin’. But he stayed,” he said, shaking his head as if that was unimaginable. “I don’t understand why people don’t heed a warnin’,” he said. Then Hawkins looked up as if a 40-watt light bulb had gone off.

“You musta been kin to that boy. You was, werncha?”

Tom continued to stare at Hawkins. “Yes, he was my brother,” he said quietly. “His name was Robert. You walked up behind my brother and you shot him in the back.”

Hawkins was unphased. “Yeah, that’s what happened.” He spit out more tobacco juice.

Laura noticed a thin line of juice rolling down his lip. She felt sick, not just because of the juice that was drooling from the old man’s mouth, but because of everything she’d seen and heard and smelled since she and Tom had arrived at Eli Hawkins’ house.

“Why did you say you wouldn’t mind if I killed you? Do you feel a need to be punished for what you did?” Tom asked quietly.

The man guffawed. “Hell, no. I don’t feel no need to be punished and I ain’t sorry I did it.”

At this admission, Laura became terrified that Tom would reach for the gun he thought was in his pocket. But Tom made no move.

“You still haven’t told me why you don’t care if I kill you.”

“Got lung cancer. Cain’t hardly breathe,” and he pointed at the oxygen canister. “I’m gettin’ ‘round on a damn walker, look like a fool. Almost forgot. Hell, I cain’t remember the name of it, but there’s some other kinda thing wrong with me that’s gonna kill me. I’m in some awful pain. Docs say it’s just gonna get worse. Sayin’ I’ve got about 3 months, so the way I figure it, you’re a Godsend. You can just kill me now and put me out of my misery and the misery that’s comin’.” His tone said he was serious and he sat up a little straighter and pointed at the center of his chest. “’bout right here oughta do just fine.”

Tom stood, staring down at the man who had taken his brother’s life. “Mr. Hawkins, I’m not going to kill you because I no longer want to kill you. We’re leaving now. I thank you for your time.”

Tom looked over at Laura and nodded. She rose, didn’t look at Hawkins at all, and followed Tom.

All the way to the car, they heard the old man raving and ranting. “You’re nothin’ but a fuckin’ coward.” Tom kept walking. Even more loudly, Hawkins yelled, “You’re a sorry piece a shit, cain’t even revenge what I done to your brother, what’s his name, Ronald?”

Tom kept walking. He and Laura could still hear the old man’s voice, although they couldn’t understand his words.

When they reached the car, Tom walked around to the passenger side and opened the door for Laura. She seemed pleasantly surprised. “Thank you, Tom.”

Tom walked around to the driver’s side and got in. He turned to her with tears welled up in his eyes. “Thank you, Laura.”

He reached over and held her hand tightly. What they had shared had created the strongest of bonds and both knew it. They looked at each other, grateful for something they realized they

had had in common since the first day they had met: integrity. And now they were grateful as well for a deep friendship that would remain and grow for the rest of their lives.

Two weeks later Eli Hawkins lost his T.V. and his life. An intruder shot him in the back as he tried desperately to hobble to the back door, hoping to escape. Blood seeped from his wound and formed a red outline of his body.

The thief tucked his gun in the back waist of his jeans, picked up the T.V., and left.