

Part One

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written,

“FOR YOUR SAKE, WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED.”

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8: 35 ~ 39 (NASB)

Nede, Texas

June 4, 1993

Clay Westin's eyes stung as the blood bay colt trotted past him in the round pen. Jubilee moved with bold extravagance, tail flagged, dark eyes alert, inside ear fixed on Clay awaiting the next step.

At three years old, Jubilee no longer looked coltish. His powerful mahogany neck glistened under a mass of black mane; his body rippled with masculinity.

Clay inhaled and stepped backward inviting the young stallion inward. Jubilee responded immediately, whirling toward him.

Clay moved lightly forward and exhaled, pointing his finger to the left. Jube pivoted in the same direction, tossing his head; full of play. *Breathtaking.*

Goosebumps tickled up Clay's arms as he gave himself entirely to the dance. The horse found his stride and cantered around him, closer and closer until Clay could have reached out and touched him.

A monster horsefly buzzed the colt's hindquarters. Jubilee's focus shifted to the insect which had landed at the dock of his tail, in a strategic spot, where the colt's frantic swishing could not reach.

Flies. Clay hated flies.

A fierce protectiveness burned in his belly, and he stepped backward to draw Jubilee near. "Come here; I'll get it." But Jubilee, too focused on the fly to notice the invitation, took off toward the edge of the round pen at a gallop.

Clay waited. He knew what would happen. The colt would try on his own to escape the attack. Jube bucked, spectacularly, skidded to a stop and threw his head around in a futile attempt to bite the bug. The insect stabbed its needle-like mouthparts into Jube's blood-rich skin.

Jubilee took off again, slashing his tail and kicking out. After several moments, the colt began to look for help.

Clay caught the colt's eye. He stepped back again and opened his arms, offering himself. Jube spun in toward him, then pivoted to present his hindquarters.

Clay slapped the fly – hard. He opened his hand to ensure total extermination, then wiped the blood and fly guts on his jeans.

Jubilee released a huge sigh, turned around and pressed his forehead against Clay's chest. He did not push, he simply stood.

The threatened tears fell as Clay rubbed the stallion's face. "Oh, how I will miss you," Clay whispered.

His connection with Jube was stronger than any other horse in his 68 years. Except one – long ago. But he did not want to remember her today.

Today was a happy day.

They exhaled in unison, and Clay moved to stroke Jube's sweat shimmery neck.

"Whew. It's hot." He turned toward the arena gate, suddenly dizzy. He bent over, dropping his Stetson in the sand. He stayed that way for a moment until the pounding blood drum in his head dissipated, then he snatched his hat and straightened. Jubilee nuzzled him from behind.

"Let's get inside." Clay motioned to the colt to follow.

An overfed German shepherd waiting by the gate fell in behind Clay.

The air in the barn felt twenty degrees cooler. Clay opened the stall door for the colt and flicked on the overhead fan. Jubilee plunged his nose into the automatic waterer and splashed around before drinking. Clay smiled. The colt never did anything small or quiet.

He gazed at the horse and shook his head. Jubilee had finished up just shy of 16 hands of magnificence. Built for performance. Perfect for Josh.

Clay's swollen fingers kneaded at his chest as he paced through the massive threshold of the new barn. His heart hesitated, then bumped hard twice to catch up. The arrhythmia bothered him when he was younger. Scared him spitless if he was honest. Now the palpitations came so frequently he barely noticed them.

Dr. Purcell's voice had been gentle at last week's cardiology appointment. He asked Clay into his office after the exam. Never a good sign.

"We knew this was coming, Clay. You are in the final stages of heart failure. Could be a couple months, maybe more. It will depend on how well you take care of yourself." The doc looked sternly over his glasses. "You are gonna' need to slow down Clay. You'll have more edema. Might be time to take off that wedding ring. She's been gone more than 20 years. I'd hate to have to cut it."

It was already too late. Clay couldn't budge the band even with soap. He stared into the mirror over the sink and sighed. He would rather lose the finger.

He'd made his peace. He was just waitin' on the boy.

Clay glanced back through the breezeway. *The barn turned out amazing.* Better than he'd hoped. He couldn't wait to see Josh's face.

Waiting. Clay hated waiting.

No sign of the red truck. He glanced at the dog, alert but quiet.

One more thing to do.

He returned to Jubilee's stall to apply the final detail. His hands shook so hard he had to use both to turn the final rotation of the screwdriver. The arthritic thumb burned, but he ignored it. He pocketed the tool, lurched upright, and took a careful step back to admire the silver name plaque he'd attached to the colt's stall door.

Perfect.

He took a couple more steps back and sank onto a large tack trunk, eyes fixed on the plate. Black letters popped against the luminous sterling. "Joshua's Jubilee." He spoke louder than he meant to, and his words seemed to hang in the humid air.

The dog whined and pushed his wet nose into Clay's palm. "He'll be home soon, Samson," Clay said, cradling the dog's gray muzzle. Age-clouded eyes blinked back, and Samson's head grew heavy.

Clay hadn't noticed the opaqueness before.

When had the dog grown old? "Seems like yesterday," he swallowed hard, "you were a pup."

Samson was Josh's 16th birthday gift. It seemed impossible that so much time had passed.

Samson wagged his tail apologetically and slumped to the floor, his head propped against Clay's boots.

Clay rested his own head against the polished timber of the barn, closed his eyes, and tried to relax. He inhaled the sweet fragrance of alfalfa hay mingled with horse sweat and cedar shavings.

Lord, he loved the way the new barn smelled, especially the alcove with the office and library. Like paint and varnish and books with unbent spines. Amenities Clay would never have chosen for himself. He could *see* Josh leaning back in the leather swivel chair, feet on the oak desk, perusing the *Merck Veterinary Manual*.

Bales of hay in the loft, pristine tractor, overflowing tack room. All Josh needed to do was fill the stalls with mares. And he would have the money to choose the best.

What will he say when I give him the keys? The thought made his fingers tingle. It would be better than Christmas morning, watching the boy rip into wrapping paper.

A nest full of hatchlings chattered with hunger as their parents swooped in. Clay opened his eyes then and smiled. It was good luck to have swallows in a new barn. Josh loved swallows. Took after Evie that way.

The foreman ducked through the back door of the barn, empty buckets clanking. "They're sayin' thunderstorms tonight, Mr. Westin. I moved the big tractor into the shed. You want me to close this door in case it rains?"

"No, Billy. I'll get it. You go on home to your family." Clay pushed to his feet. "I'm just waitin'." His throat closed around the words, and he shoved his quaking hands into the pockets of his jeans before the young man could see.

"I'd better close it, sir. The track is pretty sticky. Might want to mention it to the builder." Billy dropped the buckets and threw his considerable weight into the wood frame of the sliding door. The massive structure creaked in protest, then gained momentum and clicked into place. "Nothin's gettin' through there," he grinned, his pink cheeks mounding up into his blue eyes. Billy smiled with his whole face.

Jubilee's nameplate sparkled in the sunlight like a tiny beacon and caught Billy's notice. He pointed at the plaque with his well-fleshed chin. "Nice touch, Mr. Westin."

"Thanks. First of many, I hope. Put in a standing order with the jeweler in town. Josh will just have to call with the names."

Billy's grin grew wider. "I figured you'd be getting more horses now the barn is done. And Jube comin' along so well. Alls you need is some good mares – you'll be back in the horse business."

"Not me, Billy. Josh. He's got the best colt I ever bred; he'll have the pick of mares. He'll be set up right."

Billy's smile faded, and he cocked his head. "You going somewhere?"

Clay's insides turned to water. His heart hammered with his glorious secret. He needed to tell *someone*. He raised his eyebrows conspiratorially, inviting Billy to probe.

Billy rearranged his tobacco wad and stepped closer. "What are you up to, sir?"

Clay returned to Jubilee's stall and reached to scratch the colt's withers. The deep russet hair under his fingers felt slick and clean. He rested his forearms on the stall door and stared for a moment at the dust as it danced in the shafts of late-day Texas light.

"I'm givin' Josh the ranch." He turned his head to watch his words make landfall.

Billy's mouth gaped perfectly. "Everything?"

Clay nodded just once. Warmth spread through him, smooth as honey.

"That's some graduation gift." Billy removed his sweaty ball cap in reverence.

Clay straightened and allowed one side of his mouth to curve upwards. "I want him to have what I didn't. And I want to *see* him enjoy it." Bitterness pinched Clay's heart, and his lips went stiff. He pushed the memory of his father aside to focus on his boy.

Not a boy anymore. He's a man. 22 years old. College graduate.

"When are you gonna' do it?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, at the graduation party." Clay mopped his forehead with a grungy bandana.

"Guess that means I'll have a new boss."

"Yup, but don't say anything 'til I tell you." Clay turned and patted Billy on the shoulder as they strolled to the parking area. "I'll be around. It'll be the two of us. The J.C. Ranch. I've ordered a new sign. One of them big metal ones you put on phone poles at the end of the driveway. Everyone'll see it as they go by."

"The J.C. Ranch," Billy repeated. He smoothed his damp hair and replaced the cap. "That sounds right," he nodded. Billy climbed into his Chevy and rolled the window down. "Have a good evening, sir. I'll see you and Josh in the morning."

"Thank you, Billy. And remember," Clay held his finger to his lips.

"Secret's safe with me," Billy grinned and drove.

Clay returned to Jubilee's stall. The colt snatched a mouthful of hay from the pile and came to the door. Clay ran his hands down the colt's face, over the soft brown eyes, down to the velvety muzzle. The colt leaned into his hand, and Clay had to pull the bandana out again.

Something about Jubilee made tears spring up every time. Something about the whole Jubilee bloodline. Maybe it was their eyes. Large, wise, doe-like.

What if the boy has made plans in Houston? The thought burned through his joy.

Full-blown panic liquefied his knees, and he grappled with the door like a drowning man. His lungs felt brittle enough to shatter. He coughed hard and thumped his chest.

Lordy, he was gonna' give himself another heart attack.

Jubilee whirled around to stare out the back window of his stall and stood motionless, a long strand of hay suspended from his mouth.

When Samson took off, barking like crazy, Clay knew. *He's home.*

He tried to keep it to a walk but couldn't. He broke into a jog, wincing every time he landed on his left leg.

Tomorrow, at Josh's graduation party, Clay would give his son the keys to the house, the barns, the ranch, the oil. *My son will never want for anything.*

Clay burst through the door of the barn just as Josh hopped out of the truck. Their eyes met, and Clay's knees went weak again. He grasped the door and steadied himself. Those eyes, grey-green, and shaped just like hers. *Oh, Evie, you'd be so proud. He's a man. A good man.*

Clay tottered down the walkway, grabbed his boy and squeezed tight. His ear just reached Josh's chest. How he and little Evie Mayfield had produced such height never ceased to delight him.

Clay listened to his boy's strong, slow heartbeat for a moment, then drew back so he could take in Josh's face. "How was the drive?"

Josh's shoulders collapsed, "Long, Dad. I'm glad to be home."

Samson bayed in ecstasy, dancing and slobbering all over their shoes. Josh rubbed the dog's ears while he surveyed the barn. "Where's Jube?"

"Last stall on the left." Put him there so you'd have to see the whole barn.

Josh wandered up the stone walkway to the entrance. "The place looks great Dad. You finally finished." Josh caressed the wood as his gaze followed the massive cedar beam into the high gabled roofline and the hayloft. "Amazing woodwork, and the light. I've never seen so many windows."

Jubilee whickered from the far end of the barn.

"Hold on; I'm coming."

Clay hung back. *Will he notice?*

"Whoa!" Josh dropped a knee to examine the plaque. "Dad, it's beautiful."

"That's Jubilee's graduation gift from me," Clay folded his arms over his thumping heart as he sat on the oak trunk. "You'll have to wait a bit for yours."

Josh slipped into Jubilee's stall and threw his arms around the colt's neck. "No need. Good grief, Dad. You paid for school. Most of my friends have student loans up to their eyeballs."

Clay shrugged, but could not suppress a smile.

Josh ran his hands over Jubilee's well-muscled back. "He looks great." He grinned at Clay. "Really filled out. I can't wait to get him under saddle."

"Tomorrow. Let's eat. I've got somethin' to ask you."

Josh poked his head under Jubilee's neck. "I'm all yours."

Clay grabbed the duffel bag from the front seat and headed to the house, noting the dark wall of clouds and cool edge to the wind.

Storm's coming. Hope I get the steaks grilled before it arrives.

•

Josh pushed his chair from the table and unbuttoned his jeans. He had eaten quickly and too much. He lounged back, stretching his long legs.

He wasn't looking forward to telling his father about the internship in Dallas. He knew Clay wouldn't be angry, just quietly injured.

His father's plans for him were no secret, and he was excited about the potential he saw in Jubilee, as a competitor, and as a legacy stud.

Josh wanted more.

He'd witnessed the life-changing difference horses could make with prison inmates. His heart yearned to share real life with the young men he'd met through a prison ministry at school.

He leaped at the opportunity for a summer-long internship. He could see himself immersed in a program combining all aspects of horsemanship.

The future ranch would be self-sustaining. The staff could teach the inmates to really *be* with horses. To learn how to build relationship with them, and with each other. To care for the horses, campaign, breed and find that perfect person for each horse.

Josh wrestled with the timing. He was expected to report to the ranch in a week, and he wanted his dad to be excited with him. If his father had not planned the huge party, Josh would have gone straight on to Dallas.

Tonight probably wasn't the night. His dad seemed preoccupied with something. *Maybe the crowd coming for the party tomorrow.* His father liked privacy, solitude.

Josh watched Clay fiddle with his food. I wish I could help you love people the way you love your horses.

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Clay rose from the table, unable to sit a moment longer. He'd fussed with his steak, cut it into pieces and pushed it around. The salad and potato remained untouched.

"How was my cookin'?"

"Great, Dad. Way better than school food."

Samson waited between them, his tail fanning the floor, eyes bright with expectation.

"Hope you saved room," Clay stacked Josh's plate atop his own and carried the pile to the sink.

He tossed his still meaty T-bone to Samson who clamped on it mid-air and carried it to a retired sofa cushion in the far corner of the kitchen.

"I picked up one of Dot's cakes. Chocolate with chocolate."

"Can we have it later?" Josh rested his hand on his belly. "I think I ate enough for both of us."

"Yep. Later it is." Clay wiped imaginary crumbs from the counter, into the sink.

"You feeling all right? You didn't eat much."

"I need to ask you somethin'." Clay pushed the curtain from the window over the sink to peer at the barn. As he watched, darkness activated the security light in front of the barn and gave him a sense of peace.

"Sure, Dad. What?"

Clay turned around and pressed his back against the sharp edge of the granite counter. It gave him something to focus on, made his spine strong. *Josh, how I love you; need you home.* Clay

swallowed hard. "I know Eli has been talking to you about working with the youth group at church. If you could do anything - money didn't matter - what would you do?"

Clay took a sip of water and resisted the urge to close his eyes as he waited.

Josh sat up, elbow on the table, two fingers holding up his chin. It was his thinking pose. Clay had seen it often. The boy pursed his lips several times as though sorting his thoughts. Or trying to figure the best way to say something.

Don't say you're leaving. I need you here. Just for a little while. Just need you for a little while.

The boy breathed out, and Clay could see he'd decided. "I'm glad you asked, Dad. I've been volunteering at a prison near school."

Clay's eyes widened, but he forced an encouraging smile.

Josh continued, passion igniting in his face. "Some of the men - they're younger than I am - are about to be released on a work program."

Clay's heart swamped as Josh began using his hands, visualizing. The boy could see it.

"They think life is all about money, survival, getting ahead." Josh's enthusiasm flamed and he hopped his chair toward Clay. "I want to start a ranch, Dad. A place where these guys could live and apprentice. I want to bring in top-notch farriers, trainers, and veterinarians.

"I want them to have a chance to learn about a real relationship with Jesus and work with horses, the way you taught me. I want to offer them something different. Something *true*." Josh clasped his hands around the last words and drew them into his chest.

This could work. Clay's mouth relaxed. He hadn't realized he'd stopped breathing. He returned to the table, pulled his chair out and faced Josh. "Where do you want this ranch?"

"Don't know yet. Been offered an internship over the summer at a place near Dallas."

No.

"It's a great opportunity to learn the ropes. I need to report next week. I'll be there 'til September."

Too long. Clay's panic slithered up into his throat. "What about here? Could you do something here?" The words barely escaped.

Josh blinked hard. "You mean *after* the summer?"

Clay shook his head - couldn't help it. But forced his tongue to say, "Yes."

God help me.

Josh stared into space for a moment. "I don't know." He cocked his head. "I hadn't thought about here. It would mean lots of guys, activity. I didn't think you'd enjoy that."

"I prob'ly wouldn't," Clay admitted. "But I'd get over it." He softened his shoulders. "Think about it. I could help you, with the horse side of things, for a little while anyway." *I don't want to die in this house alone.*

Josh leaned forward, his eyes soft but squinty with questions. “Are you okay?” He squeezed Clay’s forearm gently. “I know you’ve missed me, but Dallas isn’t far. Two hours. And we’re only talking about a couple months.”

Clay patted Josh’s hand and looked away. He wanted to tell Josh how proud he was, how he loved him. But he couldn’t.

He couldn’t.

Just thinking about it made the pounding behind his eyes build. He chewed on his lip, tried to get hold of himself.

What if I give him the keys now?

No. Clay didn’t want to pressure him.

He would stick with his plan. Josh would do what was right. He always did. Took after Evie that way too.

Tomorrow. It will all be clear tomorrow.

•

Clay pushed back in his recliner and flipped through the channels. “C’mon. Gimme the weather.”

“It feels strange,” Josh started his words at the end of a huge yawn. He was stretched out on the leather sofa; Samson snoring under his bent knees.

“What’s strange?” Clay pulled away from the evening news.

“No Hebrew to memorize. No alarm clock.”

“Good.” Clay said and turned his attention back to the television. “Party under the tent – or outside?”

A thunderclap rattled the windows. “I’m thinking tent,” Josh said, swinging his long legs over Samson.

The dog whined and scrambled off the sofa.

Clay felt it first, a creepy tingling sensation, then a deafening bright white explosion followed instantly by an earthquake-like concussion.

He ducked instinctively in the same instant the lights and television died.

“That was too close,” Clay whispered in the dark.

Samson whimpered and began to pant.

“It’s OK, old man,” Josh patted the dog’s side.

The lamp flickered on, and they stared at each other, listening. The air-conditioner resumed its steady hum, and the electric clock on the wall picked up its lost rhythm.

Clay exhaled, and his neck relaxed a smidge. He clicked the remote, but the TV remained dark. “Bet we blew a fuse on that one.”

"I'll check, Dad. You sit." Josh headed down the hall to the circuit box, Samson at his heels.

Clay pulled his glasses off and placed them over the arm of his chair. His adrenaline had begun to dissipate, and his arms were dead weight. His eyes itched something terrible, but he suspected that once he closed them, he'd have a hard time getting them open again. He gave in, rubbed them just for a moment, then let his head sink back against the velvety cushion.

The metallic din of trashcans clattering against concrete startled him awake. "Dang coyotes. I'm gonna' put an electric fence around them cans." He strained to see the clock. He'd dozed for about 30 minutes.

No sign of the boy or dog. Must have gone on to bed.

Clay pushed the recliner forward hoping the momentum would help him up. He half-rose, but his legs wobbled, and his knee ached. He sank back into softness. Why fight it? He'd had a full day. Clay pushed the La-Z-Boy back and closed his eyes. Tried to recall what he had burned at supper.

What is that smell? Another sound reached his ears. A car alarm?

Clay squinted. Felt for his glasses. He stopped in mid-reach and cocked his head.

What is that?

His scalp prickled, his mind suddenly alert.

It sounded like a train. No. It sounded like - Oh, Lord - he could smell it.

Clay lunged from the recliner and stumbled into the kitchen.

Over the sink, frenzied orange light ricocheted in through the window.

He flung wide the back door, and the roar of hell itself met him. He launched down the stairs and froze. It seemed the whole earth had stopped.

Flames from the barn surged into the sky while thousands of white ashes floated around him, soft as snowflakes.