

A Flame of Hope

Second Chance at Love Series
Prequel



Deanna Jewel

A Flame of Hope

Prequel to Jamie's Gift

by Deanna Jewel

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Chapter One

"I'll be back as soon as I can, hon." Rod hugged Cindy before he rushed off to the station, holding her tighter than normal, as though it might be the last time to do so, and breathed in the smell of her hair. An emergency call for a house fire had just come in requesting all available off-duty firemen. He prayed for a safe return, but one never knew what lay ahead. "I guess I'll finish dinner when I get back."

“Daddy, wait!”

Rod stopped at the door and turned to wait for his son. Jamie came tearing through the house like a firestorm, with his arms wide and Rod bent to pick him up for a hug. He remembered doing the same thing as a child whenever his own father had to leave for a fire run. Tiny arms wrapped around his neck and warm wet lips pressed against his cheek. He laughed as Jamie smeared his wet kiss and leaned back to look at Rod.

“Can I wait up for you tonight? I don’t have kindy-garden tomorrow. Please?” Jamie’s eyes filled with anticipation.

“If you be good for mommy, you can wait up for me, son. I love you. I’ll see you later.” He put down his five-year-old and tousled his blonde hair.

Cindy picked up Jamie and leaned toward Rod for another kiss. “Hurry back. Sorry you have to go out. Stay safe, babe.”

“Always. Love you.” He kissed his wife, checked his watch and headed to his truck. Another fire required his help. There must be multiple fires if the off-duty guys were being called in and he never questioned their requests. Since nine-eleven, all the guys had grown closer after losing too many of their own downtown.

Not many cars were on the road to get in his way and soon, he arrived at the station. Quickly climbing into his turnouts, the engine waited for him and one other crewman. After slipping into his jacket, he shrugged into the straps of the air tanks, grabbed his helmet and ran for the back of the rig to climb aboard with the other fireman. As the siren sounded, the ladder truck pulled from the station and screamed down the street. Rod hoped the house fire would be small and with no injuries by inhabitants or firefighters. Thoughts of his own family ran through his mind as well as worry for the guys with him.

Rounding a corner, Rod hung on tight as black smoke filled the sky ahead. Like always, his adrenaline pumped full force and his heart pounded. Other responders had arrived already and men rushed about their duties. A rescue rig parked nearby in readiness for any injured. The ladder truck stopped, Rod jumped off and hoisted the hose over his shoulder. He ran toward the back of the structure as another firefighter helped with the hose and followed behind him. His guys surveyed the situation and waited for instructions as they put on their air tanks, prepared to head inside if needed.

Quickly lowering the hose beneath his arm, he anchored his stance. Rod gripped the handle and turned on the nozzle. The powerful force of water jerked the nozzle within his hands and he aimed at the flames around the back porch and the corner of the house. The fire didn’t appear to have reached the second story and relief calmed Rod, but didn’t stop the sweat from trickling down his back.

The next hour took all of their efforts to contain the destruction so the home wasn’t a total loss. The guys stood by to make sure all was secure. Some calmed the family as they hugged the firefighters nearby. When they finished, Rod helped get the hose emptied and recoiled on the truck, then looked around for anything still needing to be picked up. All the crews made sure the embers were out before anyone left the scene, but the inspectors always stayed longer.

Back at the station, Rod showered, glad the run had not involved any injuries. As he drove home, the warm air felt good on his face and the sun was at his back. He prayed he would never have to experience a fire that involved his own family. He couldn't imagine losing Cindy and Jamie. They were his whole world and the reason he did what he did. After he'd moved to New York City to take the job at the FDNY, Cindy had been in real estate and helped him find his first apartment. Fate had taken things from there.

The big city of New York differed from the small-town living of Jackson Hole where he was raised. Cindy had offered to show him around once he got moved in and they hit it off right away. His heart had taken on a life of its own when he met her. She had a smile that reached her eyes and he loved that she cared about those around her. If it hadn't been for Cindy, Rod wasn't sure he would have made it through the nine-eleven tragedy. He'd lost too many friends that day and still had nightmares. Depression continually nagged at him, knowing he wasn't able to reach his fellow firefighters trapped inside beneath all the rubble. Even though one knows there was nothing that could have been done to save them, those left behind had to cope.

Life is never fair. We just have to learn how to deal with the events we endure.

When he stopped at a red light, a child's laughter made him look into the car next to him. A little boy teased his sister in the back seat, making him wonder if Jamie would one day have a sister. He and Cindy had tried for a few years to get pregnant with Jamie and since then, she'd not been able to conceive again. Rod smiled as the light turned green and the child squealed as he pulled away from their car.

Jamie sat at the front window and soon disappeared when Rod pulled into the driveway. He reached for the knob of the back door, but his son yanked it open and jumped into Rod's arms.

"I told mommy you were home and she's heating up your dinner." Jamie tightened his tiny arms around Rod's neck and they hugged each other as he met Cindy's eyes across the room. She laughed and shook her head. Jamie leaned backward. "Can we watch the Ninja Turtle movie, daddy? Can we? Mommy said she'd make us popcorn!"

Rod set his son down and messed up his hair. "Of course, we can. That sounds like a great way to spend a Friday night, son." He dropped his bag at the door and stepped toward the microwave to hug Cindy while his dinner finished heating.

Her soft lips met his, as they always did when he returned home. Warm fingers rubbed the knotted muscles of his back. "How bad was the fire?"

"We stopped it at the back porch from doing too much damage and it didn't reach the second floor. Water damage to the kitchen area I'm sure, but that's it. No injuries. I'll never understand people who grill on the back porch and leave it unattended." The oven chimed that his food was ready. "I'm changing into sweats for the movie. Can you pour me a glass of milk?"

Rod sank down on the leather sofa with his family. Jamie snuggled between them with the remote in hand and waited for Rod to get comfy. He finished his re-heated dinner, enjoyed the cold milk and looked forward to popcorn later. Jamie leaned against his mom as Rod admired them both. His son looked so much like Cindy with her blond hair and blue eyes. God had

blessed him well. Rod leaned toward them and put his arm over Cindy's shoulders to be closer. Memories of nights like these were stored away beside the memories of his parents he left out west in Jackson Hole. They had each other and a beautiful log home they shared on the mountainside as one of their dreams-come-true.

Chapter Two

Pressure on the mattress beside him woke Rod and he looked at his son. Jamie stared back at him as his chin rested on his little arms on the bed. Blue eyes sparkled as his son smiled, waiting for a response from Rod. “Hey buddy. Is it time to get up already?”

“Yep, it is daddy. Mommy has breakfast done for us.”

Rod reached behind him toward the empty space as he smelled pancakes and sausage. He’d not even felt Cindy get up. This was his weekend off and she always let him sleep in even though she knew he ran before breakfast. “I guess I won’t be running today then, will I?”

Jamie set Rod’s slippers at the bedside and ran toward the kitchen. “Daddy’s awake, mom!”

Rod swung his legs off the bed, shook his head and stretched before slipping into his sweats and slippers. His clock showed seven-thirty. The aroma of coffee drifted down the hall as he made his way to the kitchen. Cindy had the table set and handed him his mug while she reached for the pancakes that were done. He poured in half and half until his coffee was the right color and then savored the first sip.

As Cindy leaned over the table to plop a few dollar-sized pancakes on Jamie’s plate, Rod smoothed his hand over her backside. “I guess you wore me out last night. I didn’t even feel you get up this morning.”

She kissed him. “You just don’t know when to quit once you get started with that kind of late-night entertainment, baby. I always love the beginning of your four-days-off.” Cindy winked.

Rod sat down and grabbed a link sausage with his fingers as he watched Jamie cover his pancakes in maple syrup. “You can’t drown those, buddy.”

“They’re better when they float, daddy.”

A shudder ran down Rod’s spine as he thought of how sweet those were going to be. “I like mine with lots of butter and only a little syrup.” He proceeded to do just that and enjoyed the hotcakes.

Cindy sat with them and nibbled on a few sausages while she enjoyed her black coffee. “Our plane reservations are all completed to go visit your parents in three weeks. I can’t wait to get out there. Something about the mountains is so relaxing. Maybe it’s the lifestyle they have out there. No one is ever in a hurry.” Her hand reached toward him and her fingers curled over his forearm.

Rod met her gaze. “I know, unlike here in New York. People actually thrive on this busy city life. I just enjoy the income I’m able to earn here that makes life easy for us.”

“I’m going to take Jamie shopping with me while you’re working on the patio pavers today. That’ll keep him out of your way. Maybe you’ll get more work accomplished.”

Her soft laugh made him smile as she looked deep into his eyes. Her blond hair fell to one side and over her shoulder. Rod remembered the feel of it between his fingers as he fisted them in her hair last night. Changing his position in his chair didn’t seem to help the sudden tightness of his jeans. This woman had always had a way of getting into his head to drag his thoughts into the gutter, but he loved that about her.

“Daddy, I’m getting a new suitcase on wheels to go visit grandma and grandpa. Then I can pull my own bag. Just like you do.”

“That’ll be a huge help. You’re getting so grown up, son. You won’t need me at all pretty soon.” Rod laughed.

Jamie bunched his brows together and tipped his head sideways. “I will always need you, daddy.” Jamie stabbed another pancake, plowed it through the syrup and popped it into his mouth as he gave Rod a wide-eyed look. Syrup dribble down Jamie’s chin and his tiny tongue tried to catch it.

Rod just shook his head and remembered his own childhood. His parents didn’t get to know Jamie because they lived so far away and guilt seeped into his heart for that. Perhaps money wasn’t always the important thing. Being young, Rod wanted to earn all he could, while he could, before he got too old to be a firefighter. Healthy lungs among firefighters was a top priority at the FDNY, especially since nine-eleven. Guys who fought that day were still dying a slow death associated with what happened inside the twin towers.

Seeing his father in three weeks would be good for both of them. His father was proud that he’d followed in his footsteps and Jamie would likely do the same thing. The toy box overflowed with fire trucks, hats and miniature turnouts. He loved watching everything Jamie did, his little antics, whether he was eating or playing firefighter.

Warm fingers covered his wrist and he looked at his wife, love sparkling in her blue eyes. “It will be good to see your parents with Jamie again. I know they miss him, too. So often I’m sorry we live so far from them.”

Cindy always said the right thing to make his heart feel better. “I miss them, but I also know this is where we need to be so I can provide a good life for us the way I want to live. We’ve been able to save so much money for our future, *baby*. Back there, the money just isn’t in the job market the way it is here in the east.” He reached up to rub the back of his fingers against her satiny cheek and into her blond hair. “And I wouldn’t have met the love of my life had I stay out there.”

Her smile lit her face like an angel. “I love you, too.” Cindy finished her coffee and took away the empty plates. “Go brush your teeth and I’ll help you change so we can go to the store, buddy. Daddy’s going to work on the patio pavers while we’re gone. Maybe we can find you a new comfy chair for the patio.”

Jamie made a run for the bathroom to clean up and Cindy wiped off the table. Before she finished, Rod pulled her onto his lap and into his arms. Her scent intoxicated his senses whenever she was this close to him. She cupped his face in her hands and kissed him. Rod took advantage and laced his fingers through her hair to hold her in place as he deepened the kiss. Memories of her naked flesh last night drifted through his mind when he'd rolled her on top of him. Their love had to be *one-in-a-million* because he knew no one else could love *anyone* as much as he loved her. She tasted good, she smelled good, and she loved him back just as much.

Cindy pulled from the kiss a little breathless. "I'll not get any shopping done if we keep this up...but last night *was* amazing, babe. I'm hoping for a repeat tonight, just so you know."

"Glad I can keep you satisfied." His hands rubbed her body as he held her tight. "I can't have you telling the guys you're unhappy." He released her to finish with the table.

"You know better. Do you need me to pick up anything for you while we're out today?"

"No, I have everything. Greg is bringing the tamper over for the sand. I think we're good. Have fun today. I hope you find him a comfy chair just his size. He'll love that." Rod pushed in his chair and headed for the shower before going outside to lay the design out. He finished his shower before Cindy left so he got to kiss and hug them both as they headed out for shopping. "Jamie, don't let mommy forget to buy your chair, buddy."

He watched from the living room window as they buckled in and backed out. Greg pulled into the driveway after Cindy pulled out, honking on her way down the street. Greg was a fellow firefighter at the station with the same days off, making it convenient for him to help lay the pavers. Greg hoisted a cooler and carried it toward the garage. Rod headed to his bedroom to change.

Now dressed in jeans and tee-shirt, Rod joined Greg in the back where he surveyed the layout of stringers and spray paint. "I had time yesterday to dig it down enough for the sand to be smoothed out and tapped into place for the pavers. We should make good progress before it gets too hot. I think I have enough sand for the base. Ready to get started?"

Chapter Three

“Let’s do it.”

“I’ll get the tamper going on the ground before we lay the sand just to be sure it’s all solid.” Rod grabbed his extension cord and got the tamper going. Excitement buzzed through Rod at seeing the patio finished. It seemed he and Cindy had been discussing it for too long and now it would be completed.

Greg pulled his box cutter from his pocket to cut open the sand bags. He carefully poured the sand on the area Rod had ready, raked it into place and Rod started the tamping on the same. Greg had helped him on other projects and he’d done the same at Greg’s place. Greg bent to measure the top of the sand to the chiseled-out area above the sand to make sure they’d gone down far enough for the pavers they’d be even with the grass edging.

A few hours later, once the sand was tamped and measured, Rod began laying the brown tumbled pavers, weaving them around each other. Greg used the wagon to pull the stones within reach for Rod.

“I’m really liking the pattern you’ve got going. Hey, the sun isn’t cooperating to keep you in the shade, dude. How you doing? Ready for a beer-break yet? I’ve got a few cold ones for us.”

“That sounds good. My back needs a break, that’s for sure.” Rod stood, bent backward with his hands on his hips while Greg opened two beers. He handed one to Rod and they sat for a break. “That pattern really looks good. It locks together easy, too. Cindy is going to love it out here, especially with the new pergola we just put up.”

Rod chugged his first beer like water and opened two more beers. Halfway through his second beer, his cell phone rang and he pulled it from his back pocket. “I don’t recognize this number, but oh well...hello?”

“Rod, this is Officer Patterson. Are you alone?”

Rod glanced at Greg. “No, I’m with a friend.”

“Good, there’s been an accident involving your wife and son. We need you to meet us at the hospital ASAP, sir.”

The air got sucked out of his world. Panic slammed his heart against his chest. “I’m on my way. I’ll meet you there. Are they okay?”

“I can’t give you any information. They’ve already taken them by ambulance.” He turned off his phone and stuck it back in his pocket. “Cindy and Jamie have been involved in an accident. You’re parked behind me. You up to driving?”

Greg sat his remaining beer on the picnic table as did Rod, and he dug out his keys. Rod stopped to lock the house doors and then climbed into Greg's truck. Thankful that Greg drove, Rod's mind was on the condition his family might be in and not on driving. *How bad are their injuries? Were legs and arms broken?* They wore their seatbelts so that had to account for something and Cindy always kept Jamie in the backseat.

Traffic at the stop lights was crazy but Greg maneuvered through them all and soon they were parked and headed through the hospital ER doors. "My wife and son were just brought here from a car accident. Where are they? I need to see them."

"Please wait right here. I'll get the doctor." Rod watched her disappear around a corner. He heard alarms going off in the back and began to panic.

Greg grabbed his forearm. "Stay calm, Rod. You got this. The doctor will be right out."

The wait seemed to take hours, but soon a doctor appeared and led him and Greg into a small conference room. "Is Cindy so bad that I can't see her first?" He sat down, but that's not what he wanted right now. He stared at the young doctor.

"Rod...your son has a broken leg and one broken arm. Other than that, he appears fine. We need your signature on these papers so they can begin surgery before too much swelling sets in."

He scribbled his approval on the forms and looked back up at the doctor. "And my wife, what about her injuries?"

The doctor stared back at him for a long moment that seemed to stretch into eternity. His heart began to break into a million pieces because this could only be bad news. "Rod..." The doctor looked at Greg and back to Rod. "She was killed instantly at the scene. I'm so sorry. This kind of news is never easy to give to those left behind."

Rod's world closed in around him and things got dark as he sank his head into his hands. Deep breaths didn't come close to clearing his head. "This can't be happening. We were just talking about her shopping with Jamie. She can't be gone!" His fists hit the table several times. A warm large hand moved over his shoulders and massaged his knotted neck. He looked up and turned to Greg. "You saw her two hours ago. She was fine."

"Man, I'm so sorry." Greg stared at him. "I'm here. Whatever you need from me, just say it."

Rod looked back at the doctor. "Take me to her. I want to see her *right now*. This can't be happening."

"I understand, sir. They are getting her cleaned up. She was broad-sided on the driver's side and your son was on the other side of the car in the back, which prevented more serious injuries to him. Someone will come to get you in a few minutes. You may stay in here. I'll have coffee brought in, Rod." The doctor closed the door behind him.

Rod could only stare at Greg, hoping he had some answers or just wake him up from this nightmare. "This isn't happening. We're in a dream. My god, this isn't real. We're not ready for this, Greg." His guts knotted like never before. Even at his worst fire, his guts never did this. Yet he knew the feeling of having to tell survivors what had happened to their loved ones.

Greg rubbed his back harder. “Jamie is going to need you. Whatever I can do for you, don’t hesitate to ask me. You know that.”

Coffee arrived, two cups for each of them. Rod loaded his with cream and downed the first one without thinking. He could only stare at things around him. His mind was numb. *How will I survive without the love of my life?* Morning would never be the same. She’d no longer lay next to him at night, nor would he ever hold her again. The table blurred before him and tears welled in his eyes.

He finished his first cup of coffee and crushed the cup in his fist. Anger consumed every thought. Greg’s arms wrapped around him and Rod broke. Never in his life had he ever imagined he would have to deal with this on his own.

Not his wife.

Greg squeezed harder and never let go. “Let it out while you can, Rod. Cindy never suffered. That has to give you some peace, man. Jamie will need you.”

Rod’s body trembled and for a moment, he let it happen, but knew he had to get a grip on himself. The doctor would be back and he refused to still be in tears. He sucked in deep breaths as he wiped his face. Greg added creamer to the other coffee and handed it to Rod. His hand shook as he accepted it and looked up at his best friend.

“I’m here for whatever you need until all of this is under control.” Greg drank the other coffee as they sat in silence for a few minutes.

The door inched open and the doctor stepped back in. “They are ready for you when you are, Rod. Take your time.”

He looked at Greg. “You’re welcome to come with me.”

“Only if you need me for support. I’ll stay near the door in her room.”

Rod finished off his coffee and tossed the cup in the trash. “Let’s go.”

He followed the doctor down two short hallways to the exam rooms and the doctor held open the door. “Take as much time as you need, Rod.”

He stared at the gurney, her slender body so still beneath the white sheet that covered her to her shoulders. Rod stepped closer while Greg sat in a chair just inside the door and the doctor stood silent on the other side of Cindy. The left side of her head had taken the impact of the window. He lifted the sheet to see what the car’s door had done to her left side and was instantly sorry he’d needed to see that.

Chapter Four

After dropping the sheet, Rod moved his gaze to her tender face. Blood had smeared into her hair. He shouldn't have insisted on seeing her so soon. Her eyes lay closed, lashes laying against white skin, all color drained. Rod bent to kiss her lips, her cheeks and then her eyes. Without thinking, he laid over her body as tears and sorrow took over. He would never hear her angelic voice again or hear her putter in the kitchen.

Greg's hands gripped his shoulders and carefully pulled him up and away. "Let them take care of her, Rod. They know what's best right now. Come on, bro."

Rod shook the doctor's hand. "Thank you. I'll wait to hear from you. Shit, her parents need to know. I'll call them. They'll want to see her, too. Is that a problem? It won't take them long to get here."

"You can wait in the same room and the nurses will let you know when you can see your son."

Rod shook his head and looked at Greg. He didn't want to leave Cindy's body alone. She was cold. Then he remembered again...she would be. Hugging Greg was all he could do now and Greg held him tight. "What am I going to do? Being a single dad is not going to be easy." The more he thought about it, the harder he cried...for his lost wife and for his son now without a mother. "How do I tell Jamie?"

Greg's fingers dug into the knotted muscles of his back, trying to relax him. "Let's get you back to the waiting room so you can sit down. This is a lot to take in. I'll find us a few sodas. Come on."

Rod followed, numb to his surroundings and realized it was a good thing Greg had come with him. He went in to take a seat while Greg searched for the beverage machine. His temples throbbed and though he rubbed at the pain, nothing helped.

Then he thought of his parents...her parents. They had to be called. He pushed that thought from his mind. He'd wait until Greg returned so he wasn't alone when he called them. Dreams of the future would no longer happen for future kids to fill their home. Jamie would be an only child...without a mother.

Rod sat back in his chair and let his head bump against the wall behind him.

Greg returned with ice cold colas and the nurses had given them glasses of ice. He poured his own over the ice and took a long drink. Greg did the same and watched him. Rod met his

gaze, but could only shake his head. It seemed they sat silent for an hour, but it probably hadn't been that long.

"Would you like me to call Cindy's parents for you?"

Rod stared. He knew he should do it. Was he stable enough to call them right now? "No, I should be the one to call, but thanks." He pulled his phone from his back pocket and stared at it.

For long moments.

Finally, he turned it on, dialed their number and waited. Thankfully, her father answered. "Hey Rod, what's up?"

Rod hesitate, deciding how to spit it out. "I'm at the hospital...Cindy and Jamie have been in a bad car accident, hit by another driver. Jamie's in surgery right now. You both need to be here. I'm sorry."

"And how is Cindy doing?"

Rod's heart lurched at having to say it out loud. "...I'm sorry, so sorry. She didn't make it through the accident."

"We'll be right down.

Rod ended the call and glanced at Greg. "One down, one more to go."

"Give yourself a minute or two. Take a few drinks. I'm sorry you have to do this. My heart is breaking for you."

"I know. Thanks for being here." Rod took a few drinks and waited only a few minutes, then made the call to his mother. Just hearing her voice would give him strength.

"Hi Rod! How's it going, hon? How's Jamie?"

Air to his lungs got cut off for a moment. "Mom...I'm at the hospital...there's been a bad car accident. Jamie's in surgery right now." He paused and took a deep breath. "Cindy died at the scene, mom." Rod broke and barely heard the words his mother said. "Mom, hold on a sec..." Rod held his phone away and turned his face toward the wall. Greg had brought him some paper towels from the bathroom and he grabbed a handful. His world had shattered and it wasn't going to get better.

Right now, he hated the world and the driver who killed his wife.

Rod swallowed another deep intake of air. He couldn't get enough.

He could do this, for Jamie.

"Mom, we're waiting for Jamie to get out of surgery and they are taking care of Cindy, whatever needs to be done. I can't even think that far."

"Son, we'll be on a plane as soon as I can get it booked. I'll call you back. You aren't alone, are you?"

"No, one of the guys from the station is here with me. Cindy's parents are on their way. They're devastated, too. Thanks mom. Talk to you soon."

Rod ended the call and laid his phone on the table. Their future had crumbled in an instant and he could have lost his son as well. He clenched his fingers to stop the shaking, but it didn't help much. Nothing would right now...unless he could have Cindy back. Pressing his fists

against his eyes relieved some of the pressure in his head, but didn't relieve the pain. Both his head and his heart ached.

He prayed Jamie wouldn't remember much.

Cindy's parents would want to know all the details and see her, too. At least the doctor knew that. He didn't want to rehash it all again, but knew he would have to. She'd been their only daughter. Both of them had been so good to Jamie. Their help in the next few weeks would be a blessing, if you could call it that.

The feeling of loss seemed like an abyss...dark and scary. These feelings shouldn't scare a firefighter, yet the emptiness and loss overwhelmed him. He looked at Greg through blurry, burning eyes, glad it was him to see him cry like a baby. Rod didn't think he could have done that in front of any of the other guys. Men didn't show this side of themselves to others.

Greg's eyes pooled with tears, too. "One day at a time, man. Don't think beyond the moment right now. *What if's* won't help either, so quit torturing yourself. I can see you're doing that."

Rod stared at the pop bottle...empty, just like his life was now.

"Jamie is going to need your strength later on. You can do this for him."

"You're right. I know, but..." Rod knew he had to pull himself together. He couldn't let his son dwell on the death of his mother. Keeping the boy busy doing things is what would help. "I'm sure he'll need more counseling than what I'm capable of."

"Give yourself time. You and Jamie are close. He adores you. Bring him down to the station. That will help him, too." Greg wiped his eyes.

The door opened and the nurse stepped back so Cindy's parents could sit with them. She closed the door for privacy. Rod gave them both a hug and they sat down. The silent moments between them were hell.

Cindy's mom cried harder and her dad met Rod's gaze. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"I don't know much. I've not talked to the police yet. The other driver ran a red light and hit her side of the car." Rod's throat tightened and he had to pause a moment. "Jamie's car seat was on the passenger side in the back." He bit down on his lower lip, determined not to shed more tears in front of her dad. "My parents will call back when they get a flight booked."

Two hours later, the doctors put Jamie in a semi-private room. Luckily the other bed sat empty. Rod rubbed his son's good arm as more tears wet his face. Casts covered one small leg and one tiny arm. At least it was his left arm.

He didn't want to wake Jamie, he needed to sleep. *Would he understand what happened?* Maybe it would take him a few days before Rod would have to tell him the details. Rod would be stronger then and his parents would be here.

The doctor came in as Rod stood next to the bed. "He's a little trooper. The anesthesia will keep him sleeping for a while yet. If you want to go back to your family, we'll let you know when he's awake."

“Thanks, doc.” Rod made his way down the hall when his mom called. They got a flight out of Jackson Hole in the morning and would be there late tomorrow. He returned to the waiting room, thankful they had a door to close and weren’t out in the main waiting room. Cindy’s mom still trembled from the shock.

Chapter Five

Rod's heart still ached and he knew it'd be that way for a long time. Life without Cindy had never entered his mind, but he had to keep Jamie busy now. The poor little guy would miss her, too. Cindy's parents looked as lost as he felt. "Are you up to getting coffee in the cafeteria?"

Cindy's dad stood and rubbed his wife's shoulder. "I think it would be good for us to get fresh air, yes."

"My parents will be here late tomorrow afternoon. My mind is a blank right now. I hope tomorrow will be a little easier for all of us."

He led the way, followed by Greg, toward the cafeteria, where all of them got coffee and settled at a table back in the corner away from the crowds. The nurses saw them leave for coffee and would let them know of any changes with Jamie.

Twirling his cup between his fingers, Rod thought of funeral arrangements, obits, the long days ahead and rehashing everything at the funeral. Not what he wanted to look forward to. Thankful that Greg had been with him, he glanced up in his direction. "Thanks for being here with me. You have no idea how much you've helped me just hanging around. You don't have to stay if you need to be home."

"I called my wife to let her know. She's fine with me here helping you. No worries."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Rod finished his coffee and tried to make mental notes of what he had to do. He'd call the captain later and start his leave of absence.

Rod met his parents at the airport and took them back to his place to get settled. Having them around calmed his mind and helped him think more clearly. They wanted to see Jamie, but decided to wait until Rod picked him up in the morning to bring him home. The little guy would be so excited to see them.

Standing at the kitchen sink, looking out over the backyard, the house was quieter and made him think of Cindy too often. Everywhere he looked, her image looked back at him. *How can I live here without her?* He wiped away tears and his mom rubbed his back.

"Jamie will need you more now. The two of you will console each other and day by day, slowly move on with your lives."

He blinked away the tears. "She just purchased tickets for us to fly out to Jackson Hole."

"I think you and Jamie should still come. It'll be good for both of you."

His mom's eyes pleaded for him to agree. Rod managed a small smile. "I'll talk with the captain and see what we can work out, mom. Jamie will need more activities by then to take his mind off Cindy."

The next few weeks would be a blur and Rod was thankful for that. The funeral brought torture for his heart and so did Jamie's realization of losing his mom. Rod stayed strong in the company of others, but in bed at night, alone, the demons visited his sleep. Too often he reached out for Cindy, only to find an empty space and he prayed for peaceful sleep.

Jamie played games with his grandmother, while his grandfather carried him through the fire station when Rod stopped in to see the guys. They took his picture on the engine with Rod's dad and he knew they were making memories for their future.

The cough that his father had bothered Rod. He seemed to cough all the time, yet said he wasn't sick. Although his dad tried to be cheerful, he tired easily and Rod had never seen his father weak like this. Even when he grew up at home, his father worked non-stop and seldom dealt with colds or flu. To see him pretend now that nothing was wrong bothered Rod, yet he kept it to himself.

When his parents flew back home, Jamie enjoyed watching the planes come and go, so Rod sat with him as several other planes landed. His son's eyes lit up with excitement each time a new plane took off. When Jamie got bored, he grabbed his crutches, which he'd become quite adept at using. "Let's go, daddy. I'm ready. I can't wait to fly out to see grandma and grandpa."

"How about some ice cream, son? Let's go splurge."

Life had moved on without Cindy and he hated it. Her parents took care of Jamie while Rod returned to work at the station. They took him to see the counselor twice each week and Jamie talked non-stop about the games they played with the counselors. The reports from them stated that he was dealing well with the loss of his mother and commended Rod for the good parenting he did with his son.

Night time for Rod only brought sleepless nights. He could still smell Cindy in the room and in the sheets. Her pillow comforted him as he hugged it close and finally fell asleep, only to dream of her and make his heart ache. *Do I need counseling or will this pass?* He wasn't sure.

The next morning, Rod scanned the paper over his coffee. Maybe he needed to attend a widower group and talk to others who were now alone. That section seemed to jump out at him when he saw the day and time. It couldn't hurt and no one needed to know he was going. He'd give it a shot when they got back from Jackson Hole.

Seated on the plane with his son, the flight attendants fussed over Jamie and made sure he had all the treats he wanted. They put his crutch in the overhead for him. With his arm in a sling, Jamie still didn't let that slow him down. "We're going to visit my grandpa. He used to be a fireman like my dad!"

Rod dreaded the flight without Cindy. Time didn't make things easier. Their love was supposed to last a lifetime, yet here he was, alone. Anger at fate hadn't let up any, either. He tried to read the magazine, but his thoughts were on so many other topics. One day at a time...the only way to move forward. Rod put his head back as the plane took off and closed his eyes, but images appeared he didn't want to deal with.

Spending time with his parents would ease life a bit. He loved the mountains and so did Jamie. His son couldn't wait to get there. Wildlife always appeared in the backyard at his mom's house and he remembered so many meals just watching the deer. Living in Jackson Hole would be good for Jamie.

Maybe I need to consider property out there.

But he wasn't sure he could leave his good paying job just yet. Money for later was a necessity right now. The house seemed to be too big for just him and Jamie. Keeping up the yard and laundry, plus cleaning took all of his extra time. He'd been looking for a smaller place. That would allow him to save a lot more money for the future since he didn't know what it held for him and his son. Getting remarried certainly didn't appeal to him.

Perhaps in time.

After a full day of flying and pushing Jamie through airports, he hugged his parents in Jackson Hole while Jamie screamed his hellos. When Rod hugged his dad, he couldn't help but notice he felt thinner and his cough still continued. "Dad, have you had that checked?"

He ignored Rod and picked up Jamie so he didn't have to struggle with his crutch. "Oh, it's nothing. Probably from all the fires around us. You know how bad they've been this year."

Rod glanced at his mom, but she ignored the question, too. "I'll go with you to get the bags. Your dad will take Jamie to the car. We're so excited that you two are here. It's good for you to get away. The memories won't ever stop, but I hope the ache in your heart eases with time, hon."

"It's been hard, mom. Working while her parents take care of Jamie, then picking him up and getting dinner for us, plus the laundry. Yeah, but he's doing great with his counseling sessions and looks forward to them. I think it's actually a little easier on the kids when they're as young as he is. I know he won't ever forget though. I'll make sure of that."

Rod pulled their bags off the carousel and his mom pulled Jamie's to the car. He breathed in the fresh air, despite the fires in the surrounding states. The air still smelled better than the exhaust in New York.

"Dad, grandpa said we're having hotdogs for dinner and French fries in the oven."

"We know how you love your hotdogs, buddy." Rod ruffled his son's blond hair, so much like his mothers. He looked too much like Cindy, a constant reminder.

Damn, he missed her being around!

Chapter Six

Once at the house, Rod got their things put upstairs. He'd have to carry Jamie up here and make him understand that he couldn't try going down the stairs by himself or he'd have two broken legs. He said a silent prayer for Cindy's guidance so their son would be safe while they were here. *I try so hard, babe, but without you here...* tears welled in his eyes and he wiped them away as he gave up and sat on the bed. Now he'd need a minute before he could go downstairs with everyone.

He hated crying but it only happened when he was alone and mostly at night. Rod rubbed his face and eyes. It'd been a long, trying day. He needed to rest and relax. Being out here with his parents would be good for him. Maybe he'd drive around tomorrow and look for a nice piece of land on the mountainside that overlooked the city. Jamie could look for deer while he scouted out property.

After putting cold water on his face, Rod made his way downstairs. Jamie was jabbering away entertaining his dad. It was good to see the two of them together, but he worried about his dad. Since losing Cindy, life had new meaning for those he still had close to him. His dad was definitely a little thinner than he was a few weeks ago and he'd speak to his mom about that before he went to bed tonight.

"Ready for a beer, son, since you can relax now? I got you some of that dark bourbon stout you like." His mom's hand had already opened the fridge door.

"That sounds good, mom, thanks."

She pulled a frosty mug from the freezer and poured his beer. The flavor slid over his tongue and he savored the bourbon in it, along with the next three. Nothing had to be worried about by him while he was out here. All rest and relaxation. Life in the west was slower than back east. He hoped in a few years, he could move him and Jamie out here. Money wasn't everything, but it sure solved a few problems.

His mom curled her fingers over his forearm while they sat at the table after dinner. "I'm so glad you're here, hon. Are things getting any easier for you to handle?"

He scratched at the frost on his fresh mug. "Each day gets easier as long as I don't dwell on what's really missing. I put some of Cindy's life insurance into a fund for Jamie's college. I know she would have wanted that. The rest I just put in the bank for whatever." Rod met her blue eyes and loved the wisdom he gleaned from her. "I want to drive around the mountains

tomorrow and look for vacant property...I might find something I could use in the future. Who knows.”

Her smile lit up her face. “I’d love to go with you. That would be fun.”

Rod glanced behind him to see his dad asleep in the recliner and Jamie watching cartoons. “What’s really up with dad? He’s lost weight even since you two were at my place.”

She pulled her hand from his arm and laced her fingers together. Rod’s heart twisted like barbed wire, an all-too-familiar feeling these days. “The doctor did a lung x-ray two weeks ago and they think it’s cancer. They’re going in for a biopsy next week after you leave. I’ll keep you posted.”

Now it was his turn to touch her arm. “Mom, I can stay longer if you want me with you. You don’t need to be alone for that.”

She patted the back of his hand. “I’ll be fine. Let’s enjoy the time we have while you’re here this week. Your dad is so excited to have you and Jamie here.”

Rod nodded but his heart still twisted with pain. To lose his father so close to losing his wife might be more than he could handle. He watched his mom as her brows knitted together with worry and he knew he had to get out here as soon as he could. Yet those plans were still two years away. “I’m a phone call away mom. Anytime. Just call me.”

“I will, hon. Your dad and I have talked a lot about this. He’s ready to go and doesn’t want any chemo that will tear his body apart and make him dependent on me. He’s set in his mind on what he wants and I don’t argue with him.”

Rod shook his head but he couldn’t blame his father for not wanting to go through all the torture that chemo did to a body. A tingle shivered up his spine. He would make the same decision. *I know damn well I would.*

The next day, Rod drove and his parents enjoyed a nice summer ride in the mountains. Elk seemed to roam everywhere in the higher elevations and Rod pulled over so Jamie could watch them. Jackson Hole was known for the antler collections the Boy Scouts did. “Wouldn’t this be fun to see all the time, son? Maybe one day we’ll move out here and have a house on the side of the mountain. I think I’d even like that. We need to save money so we can buy property out here one day.”

“Dad, there are so many deer over there.”

Rod’s dad pointed out the window with Jamie on his lap in the back seat. “They live way up high where it’s cooler. They don’t like the heat so they don’t go down by the city very often in the summer.”

Pulling back onto the mountain road, Rod drove to a few spots that over-looked the city and stopped just to enjoy the view. Daydreaming of one day owning land this high up would be nice, but without someone to share it with, what was the point? If he found a good deal, he could buy it and let it sit until he was ready. That might be several years away. He pulled in his lower lip and bit, knowing tears would spill if he didn’t drive away now.

Damnit.

Why?

He shut off the SUV and got out, walking away from the vehicle to nearby trees, needing a bit of time by himself. The city lay below and at night, the lights would be beautiful. Cindy would have loved it out here. Then again, she might never have left the big city. His future could go in any direction. He'd leave that in God's hands and listen for guidance when the time was right to move.

Rod breathed in the fresh air, pine-scented, and he remembered it as a child. It was the same when he hunted out here. The smell of pine was in his heart and he knew he'd return one day, hopefully not alone.

Back in the car, he drove in silence, but Jamie chattered away with his dad, loving the wildlife they pointed out to each other. His mom reached out and rubbed his shoulder. "You'll know when the time is right, hon. Don't rush this."

"I know, mom. It is nice being back here." He put on a smile for her. "Who's ready for lunch?"

"Me, me, me!" Jamie yelled out. "Grandpa wants a hamburger and I want a milk shake, dad."

Rod laughed and headed toward town.

At a small cafe with the same log decor of Jackson Hole, Rod enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere and being with his parents. The lines of stress that seemed new on his father's face made Rod realize the strain that possible cancer had on his dad. His weight loss accentuated the cheekbones and his jawline had thinned. Rod reached over and covered his dad's frail hand. "I'm glad Jamie and I could be here this week. He loves it here, too. The last two months have been hard for both of us. Looking for property has made me consider the future a little harder."

His father's green eyes welled with unshed tears and created a lump in Rod's throat. "I'm sorry you and Jamie have had to endure what happened. I want you to know how proud we are of the job you've done as a father. He loves that you're a firefighter and so am I. Maybe he'll follow in his father's footsteps the way my son did." His dad gave a full smile. "I'm so proud that you are a firefighter in New York." He turned his hand beneath Rod's and gripped it tight.

"Thank you for being such a role-model for me, dad. I cherish the memories and often think of my childhood each time I look at Jamie...when I hug him tight before I leave for work. Thanks, Dad."

Chapter Seven

Their lunch order soon arrived and he enjoyed the meal and conversation. His dad wouldn't discuss the biopsy next week so Rod didn't bring it up. Mom would keep him posted, he just wished she would lean on him, but he understood. The strength of the woman across from him had helped to mold him into the man he was today. She kept her stress hidden for as long as he could remember and realized he did the same.

Maybe one day he could get her to confide in him more. He hated flying back home to leave her alone to deal with the surgery, doctors, and what his father would surely go through if things got worse. Rod would honor her wishes and go back home if she promised to keep him notified of all happenings.

Rod spent the next five days creating more memories for Jamie, knowing his father may not be around on his next trip out here. His dad loved fishing and they caught several huge trout which his mom fried up with spicy coleslaw. Barbeques on the back deck allowed Jamie to eat watermelon and spit the seeds over the railing, racing his grandfather to see who could spit them further. Giggles and screams made his mom laugh, too.

A week later, back home in New York, Jamie jabbered about his trip and Cindy's parents loved hearing about all he had done. His leg and arm were healing and the doctor said the casts could come off in a few weeks. Rod would have to be cautious of what Jamie was allowed to do for at least a year so the bones would heal properly. Cindy's parents were a God-send for Rod when it came to being with Jamie and allowing him to continue working. They were always available and worked with the crazy changing schedule he held at the firehouse. If it were not for them stepping in for the daycare, Rod would have had to leave his job. They didn't want that to happen.

Two months later, Rod talked with them one evening when he stopped to pick up his son. "I purchased property while we were in Jackson Hole for my future. There are definitely no plans at this point to move or build, but it gives me something for the future whether I build or sell. There's no hurry and it was a great investment."

Both of Cindy's parents congratulated him and her father commented, "You have to plan for the future and that's a good start. We want the best for both of you and Cindy does, too. Don't

close your heart to finding another woman to take her place. She would never want you to spend the rest of your life alone, Rod. Jamie will need a mother in his future, but only when it's right for you."

"I appreciate your understanding. In time, God may show me the right friendship with someone who would love my son the way I do. Thank you for everything you do with Jamie. He'll always have those memories."

Cindy's mom set down her tea cup. "How is your dad doing, hon?"

Rod took a deep breath. "The chemo treatments don't seem to help much and he hates feeling so sick all the time. He's a proud man. He hates that mom has to wait on him so often, it just isn't him. Honestly, I expect a call daily from mom to tell me he's passed. Dad doesn't want me out there. He says not to waste my time off and lose money from the job. Nothing can help at this point. Mom is stressed. I can hear the weariness in her voice."

"We're so sorry. Too often life just isn't fair."

Later that night after Jamie had gone to bed, Rod sat down with a dark beer to read through the paper. He tried not to think about his parents. *Did I make the right decision to move east?* If he hadn't, he'd be there with them to help his mom. That constant thought nagged at him daily ever since he realized his father had cancer.

He fisted the paper in his fingers and slugged down a long swallow of beer. Nights like this tormented him with too many *what if* thoughts, but what was done was done. He couldn't bring Cindy back and he couldn't take away his father's cancer. Next would be losing his dad. At least they had made awesome memories for him to hold on to.

His cell phone rang. He knew who it was before he even looked at the screen. Rod drew in a deep breath. "Hey mom...."

"You knew I didn't want to make this call, son." Her voice wavered. "Your father is now at peace, no more pain."

"Oh mom..." Rod had to be strong for her and not cave in. "Jamie and I will be on a plane tomorrow. The guys at the station knew this time would come. I'll stay as long as I can. I love you mom."

"I love you, too, baby."

"Are you okay? Call me tonight if you need to talk, no matter what time, please? I'll get online and check tickets."

"Call me back tonight and let me know. I'll be up for a while. A few friends have stopped over to keep me company. I'll be fine. I've known for a while this time would come. I think I was ready and so was he. Love you. Talk soon, hon."

Rod ended the call, closed his eyes, and laid his head back. He let the tears fall. No one would see and he so needed to release them. Knowing this time would arrive didn't make it easier to handle. He sat still for a few moments just listening to the silence.

When a hand pressed on his shoulder, he assumed it was Jamie. After opening his eyes and glancing around, Jamie wasn't there with him. Rod searched the room, but saw nothing. "Dad, is

that you? I love you and hope you're okay." He waited, half expecting an answer. "I'll be with mom tomorrow. She'll be fine. She's a strong woman, dad."

Rod wiped his eyes and relaxed back in his chair again. A lighter energy seemed to surround him. He wasn't one to feel energies around him much, but as a firefighter, most of them felt it a lot. His heart calmed some and he breathed in before booking a flight online.

Late the next day, Rod hugged his mom at the airport as he tried hard to be strong. Her eyes teared up, but that was to be expected. She'd lost her life mate and would be alone...like he was alone. At least *he* still had Jamie.

She dabbed at her eyes when she held her grandson close. Rod tried to explain to Jamie that grandpa was now with his mom in heaven and both of them would be watching over him. He'd accepted it much easier than Rod had. Young children seemed to take it in stride and he was thankful for that.

Back at the house, after Rod settled in and met his mom in the kitchen, he watched as she moved around the counter preparing a small night-time snack for them. He prayed she would be okay over the next few days during the funeral home and talking to friends. For Rod, that tore at his emotions more, but for his father, at least he no longer suffered.

In Cindy's case, she had been plucked out of their lives with no time to prepare. His mom had several months. Watching someone go through that pain makes you wish they didn't have to do any of it. Rod had seen relief on his mother's face at the airport and even here at home. She made his dad comfortable as much as she could, knowing he didn't want to be waited on and taken care. That was not his father, the backbone of the family.

Chapter Eight

His mom brought over crackers, cheese and almonds. “Having a little something at night helps me sleep better.” She sat still and looked at Rod. “It’s nice having you here. This morning, two friends went with me to pick out the casket. I know I couldn’t have done that alone. Tomorrow, all will be done. We just have to be there in the morning, afternoon and evening. We can leave for lunch and then grab a little dinner.”

“It sounds like you have it all taken care of, mom.”

“Going through his things will be harder. That will take me longer to get to. I’m not in a hurry to do that.”

“Mom, no one expects you to. Take your time and only when you’re ready.” Rod took a long swig from his beer. “You should have a glass of wine or two, mom. It will relax you and help you sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day. I hate funerals. You see people you’ve not seen in a long time. Why is that? Life keeps all of us so busy we can’t stay in touch. Kind of sad.”

Rod sat with his mom after he tucked Jamie into bed. Seeing her more relaxed made his stress go down a notch. She would be okay, he knew it.

Rod should not have been surprised by the number of guests who stopped by the funeral home for getting together with his mom and pay last respects to his dad. He’d been well-known in the valley. As Rod watched her talk with friends, he realized they would be around to help her through the next few months. She didn’t break down and cry as the day went on. Rod held pride in his heart for the strong woman his mother was. He helped guests find coffee in a separate room where some could sit and talk without being in the room with the casket. Rod appreciated that, although it seemed with each new guest, he ended up walking with them toward his father.

Rod talked with the funeral directors and made sure the service would not be a tear-jerker. He insisted on keeping it about happier times, hunting and fishing trips, and memorable stories from those in attendance.

After the burial service, the women of the church held a dinner. Rod talked with many of his mom’s friends who hadn’t seen him in years. One of her closest friends hugged him tight. “I want you to know that I will always be checking in on your mom. She has several friends and we’re all going to make sure she doesn’t lock herself away in that big house.”

Rod sat next to her, grateful for the close friendship. “I appreciate that she has friends like you. Being back east is hard enough, but knowing she won’t be alone will ease my mind. I can’t say thank you enough.”

His mom’s laughter caught his attention and made him smile. Jamie bounced on her lap and entertained those at the table. As he looked around at the crowded room, relief washed over him to see the people who came together for his parents. To know that his mom could find happiness among her friends was good to watch. Her smile gave him peace and he knew his father was also at peace.

That night, Jamie fell asleep early and Rod kept watch over his mother as they relaxed side by side in the loveseat recliners. This would be her first night after his father was definitely gone forever and she’d not see him again tomorrow at the funeral home.

Tonight, she seemed relaxed and calm. Connie’s hand rubbed his forearm. “I’m still amazed at all those who showed up that I’ve not seen in years. I really am surrounded by people who care. I hope you know they’re going to make sure I go to lunch or out for dinner. After you have to fly home, please know I’ll be okay, hon. I’m good with knowing that your father isn’t suffering anymore. My heart and mind are at peace.”

Rod turned to hug her. “I’m glad to hear that. Take your time before going through dad’s things. That part was hard for me when I went through Cindy’s stuff.” He settled back in his chair and took in a deep breath, hoping that would ward off the sob that stuck in his throat each time he thought of Cindy. Tears blurred his vision, but he didn’t want to cry in front of his mom. His sensitive side just needed to quit showing up. Tough guys didn’t cry in front of others. Rod blinked away the tears and hoped his mom hadn’t noticed.

An hour later, his mom went up to bed, giving him a chance to get online for a while. He needed to connect with the guys at the station so they knew how things went this week. Rod posted a few pictures of his son with his dad and tagged them as happy memories. A few of the guys had to work overtime to fill in for him so he’d have to pay them back when he returned.

More time away from Jamie.

Will my life ever be normal again?

Ever since Cindy’s death, shit continued to happen. Life *had* to calm down soon. When he had his first work break, maybe he’d take Jamie fishing on the coast. His little mind needed a distraction, too. He’d been such a trooper this past six months and his tiny bones had healed well. Jamie played non-stop and ran everywhere. Rod was proud of his son.

He closed his laptop and headed for bed.

At the airport, he hugged his mom, took lots of pictures with her and Jamie. “Hon, I don’t want you to worry about me once you get home. You need to get on with your life and have fun with Jamie. He needs you. Make time for him and go fishing like you want. My friends will keep me busy. I know there will be days when my mind will go backward, but I realize that. If I find myself getting down, I’ll call someone and go have lunch or shopping. Don’t worry. Please?”

“As long as you promise to do those things. Call me when you want and I’ll check in with you, too. We can do this. It’ll take time for both of us to get on with our lives, but in time, things will move into the norm. I love you, mom.” Rod hugged her and said their goodbyes.

Before he stepped onto the plane, his mom waved from the windows with a full smile for his benefit. Rod waved back and so did Jamie. She would be fine, as would he, but it would take time to heal their hearts. He buckled Jamie in and then tightened his belt for the flight home. Jamie grabbed his hand when the plane began to move and Rod squeezed his fingers. The excitement in his son’s eyes flashed like a *flame of hope* that their future would be happier.

Their future would be what he made it for them. There would *not* be a hurry to fill it with another woman at this point. When that time came, God would make it happen. He had faith in the future...and in his *flame of hope*.

The story continues in.....

Jamie’s Gift

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