

Loss of Carrier



Russ White

We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple. As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments! Psalm 48:9-11

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I dedicate this book to my Mom, who instilled in me a love of reading, especially mysteries.

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Prologue

Pain exploded in his side. He doubled over, his hands pressed to the skin where the sucker punch had landed, a coldness remote and fleeting at his neck. He started to straighten, but a thrust from behind propelled him into the rack of equipment, a searing pain in his head joining the pain in his side. A foot, blurry, appeared below him. A kick, and his feet lost their grip, slipping out into the air.

He grasped at the wire around his throat. It was useless. There was no way to unwrap it, to lessen the constriction. His fingers dripped blood from the effort to unplug the cable. It was no use. The pain in his side was still resonating through his body, fueled by the panic of his lungs working against the noose around his neck.

He pushed his arms out, trying to grasp something, anything. The cables around him didn't offer any purchase, and he couldn't find the handles he knew were there. He kicked. His toe gained purchase, but his arm wouldn't pull back out from the tangle of wires. He pulled his arm harder, and his foot slid off the tile floor into the hole again.

Footsteps. Silence. Rows of light, shutting down one at a time. Soon it would be dark, the total darkness of a room with no windows. The darkness of a coffin. He tried to cry out, but no sound came. Every movement he made tightened the wires around his neck, closing his throat against the air he needed.

*Why? What have I done? Tomorrow I will die, not today. Pray.
But what? To what? I'm not ready to die. Tomorrow I can ask Jess.
I can't...*

Darkness.

Chapter 01

Jess nudged his truck into his usual spot. A new sports car, its maroon paint polished to a deep shine, put his truck's dull green paint to shame. Short swatches of rubber, passing for tires, stood in contrast to wide whitewalls and garish polished chrome wheels against polished hubcaps.

The new car must be Carl's. It was just like the car he'd bought last year. And the year before. And, in fact, every year since he'd met Carl. How could Carl afford to buy a new car every year? He sighed and bumped his truck's door closed, carefully sliding the key into the lock and turning it until he could feel the click. There was no way the paint on his truck was ever going to look like the polished surface on Carl's car, but still, no point in adding new scratches.

As he turned in behind the tailgate of his truck, he glanced over at the new car again. Water spots marred the polished surface. "Water spots? How did it get wet?"

"Talking to yourself again?"

Jess's keys dropped to the asphalt at his feet as he turned and found himself facing his boss's secretary. "Linda! I didn't see you there. Good morning."

"Don't be jealous of Carl. He has his own problems, you know, new car every year or not."

He frowned. "It's just puzzling."

“And no puzzle can rest unsolved around Jess Wirth, can it?” After a moment of silence, she continued. “He lives with his parents in Chapel Hill. No rent, no bills. Other than that car, and, of course, all the dates he brags about, he doesn’t have to pay for much of anything.” She sighed. “You’d think a twenty four year old man would be a bit more grown up. You’re about the same age, and you act like a gentleman.”

“Maybe that’s because I’ve lived a bit of a rougher life than he did.” The corners of his mouth reversed direction, forming a smile. “You’re like the class mom, aren’t you? You should pop him across the knuckles with a ruler. Maybe he’ll come to his senses.”

She turned and looked at him. “Are you saying I’m old?”

“Well, I had noticed a little gray recently—”

“Lo’mighty, my hair’s been gray since you were just a child. But now the ruler idea, I might take you up on that. If I do, you better watch your knuckles, too.” She laughed.

Jess laughed with her and shook his head. “I would never call you old, Linda. Perhaps aged to perfection would be a better description. Anyway, I was just wondering why Carl’s new car is wet.”

“It rained?”

“Not while I was on the way in to work. Carl is usually very careful about allowing his car to get dirty, especially just after he’s bought it.” They climbed the steps at the front of the building in silence, Jess glancing at the small logo engraved on the glass doors as he held it open for Linda. The little letters below the logo proclaimed, “OptiData Management,” and then, “We manage your data, you manage your business.”

As Linda continued towards the elevators, Jess made his way through the maze of cubicles, finally turning in at his

doorway. As he stepped into the space, he wondered how he’d ever ended up in network engineering. He considered the life he would have preferred, working outside in forests and fields as a county agent, like his grandfather.

His thoughts turned to the boat show, opening at the state fairgrounds first thing in the morning. At least a boat show would brighten up his weekend. Especially since this weekend he was going to look for a new personal watercraft. A boat was always possible, but the feel of the motorcycle allowed him to have something on the water that he never allowed himself on the road since his rougher days had passed.

He dumped his laptop case on the desk, wound his way along the cubicle walls, and stopped to rap on Carl’s whiteboard.

No answer. Carl wasn’t anywhere to be seen, although his laptop, the screen dark, was cabled to the desk. Jess walked in and touched the case—cold plastic met his fingers.

In the break room, Jess’s morning turned bad quickly; not only was there no coffee made, but the pots weren’t even in the machines. He pulled them from the little drying rack the cleaning lady, Benita, put them in every night, settling them in their rightful places on the dark brown burners.

After dumping fresh grounds from a little sack into the machine, he wandered back over to his cubicle, hating to waste time waiting for the coffee to brew.

Back in his cubicle, Jess slid his laptop out of its case and pulled its locking cable through the center of an old brass propeller leaning against the side of the cubical wall. It would be funny to watch someone try to steal his laptop with that brass propeller attached. They wouldn’t be able to run very fast, anyway.

Popping up a Web browser, he checked the weather for the weekend. Then he skipped back a day and replayed the maps from the night before. It had stopped raining at the office around one in the morning. His mind raced back to the parking lot, thinking about the water spots on Carl's car.

Breaking his train of thought, he punched the messages button on his phone. An all-too-familiar, and all-too-annoying, voice popped out. "Jess, this is Jamie in network operations. We got a problem, row fifty-three, rack twenty. I've poked it from this side, but no juice, so it looks like it's on your end." More information about the server followed, along with a trouble ticket number.

His phone rang. The number on the screen was Linda's. "What's up?"

"Hey, Jess. I'm going home. There's nothing going on around here today. Gerard left a message on my voice mail saying he wasn't coming in. He stayed out late at the spring bash last night. He sounded like he was in rough shape."

Jess pressed his palm onto the desktop, irritated he had forgotten the yearly bash Gerard threw. "I can't believe I forgot that. This place is going to be empty today. I drove all the way down here for nothing."

"I forgot, too. You and I never go to it, so why would we remember? It's silly he does it on a Thursday night, anyway."

"Yeah, I know. Well, I'll see you on Monday."

"You okay here by yourself, Jess? Don't stick around long."

"Are you crazy, Linda? If no one else is coming in, I'll clear up this one server problem the network operations folks called me about, and then I'll get out of here and head to the lake. That server probably just needs a reboot—shouldn't take but a

minute or two to clear it up. I'll have my cell phone with me if anything comes up."

After dropping the receiver on the cradle, Jess headed over to the elevators. As he waited for the elevator to arrive, he wondered where Carl could be. He must already be down in the data center.

Jess considered his distorted reflection in the elevator doors. Jess was medium height. Carl was definitely on the short side, but what Carl lost in height, he made up for in almost everything else—the top part of an exclamation point, wide at the top, a thin waste, and powerful muscles bulging under whatever he wore to cover them.

Jess stared at his own clothing in the reflection. The corners on the collar of his polo shirt were definitely starting to fray since it had seen better days. Frumpy cargo shorts, close-cropped hair, little round glasses, and hiking boots completed the picture. While he didn't think of himself as out of shape, he certainly wasn't one of those ripped weightlifters like Carl or the guys he saw showing off on the lake all the time.

But then, Jess liked himself just like he was. He didn't have any reason to be showy, like Carl. Who wants to spend every waking moment worrying about what you look like, anyway? Aren't there more important things in life?

The doors slid open, breaking the mirror in half, leaving the emptiness of the elevator in front of him. Jess stepped in and pressed the button labeled B. He'd always thought the button should be labeled D, for dungeon. And they should supply oxygen tanks, like divers wear, for the trip down. He sighed. Without the data center, though, he'd be out of a job.

Within a few seconds, Jess stepped off the elevator and walked up the ramp onto the raised floor, stopping at the door

leading into the data center. He pulled his badge away from the yo-yo on his belt and slapped it against the card reader next to the door. While he waited for the door to click, he read the signs posted nearby. The first one said, “Danger! Halon fire extinguishers in use. If the alarm sounds, please exit this room as quickly as possible to avoid suffocation.” They were asking people to please avoid being suffocated by the halon in the fire extinguishers? Did anyone really need to be asked politely to not suffocate themselves?

The second sign said, “Danger! Class 3 lasers in use. Do not look directly into lasers used on equipment.” At least this one didn’t say “please.” The light on the card reader turned green and emitted a low beeping sound to signal access granted. A few seconds later, the door clicked. Jess reached over and pulled it open. He stepped inside into a world of darkness, lit only by thousands of multicolored twinkling status lights.

As he moved his foot forward into the dark, it hit something. “*Ouch!*” Whatever it was, it skittered across the floor, leaving a throbbing pain in Jess’s toe.

Wondering why the lights hadn’t come on automatically, he felt around the wall beside the door. His fingers moved across the roughness of the wall, finally finding the cool plastic of the switch panel. Jess started moving the switches around, trying to figure out what combination of the switches would turn the lights on.

As rows of lights started popping on, a dreary world of gray floors and gray racks in a windowless gray room replaced the darkness. He knelt and untied his boot. While he massaged his toe, he considered the switch on the wall. The sensor that was supposed to turn the lights on automatically appeared to be

working, a little red light blinking occasionally to say it knew the room was now occupied.

As his eyes adjusted to the increasing light, Jess stared, concentrating on odd shapes littered around the normally smooth raised surface. Large floor tiles, each one about two feet square, were piled up all over the room, leaving gopher holes in an expanse of gray yard. Within each hole, a subterranean city was exposed, a rat’s nest of wires, bundled neatly enough, but running at all sorts of odd angles, making a maze of huge proportions.

Why are there so many tiles pulled up? Jess wondered. Every person who got access to the data center had to go through the safety briefing, which included a big point about not pulling more than one up at a time. His toes didn’t seem to be hurt, so he slid his boot back on and started tying the laces. The source of the pain in his toe was directly in front of him—a set of mouse ears. It was a simple device, two suction cups joined by a metal bar, used to lift floor tiles into and out of place. Why had the mouse ears been left in front of the door?

Jess sighed. It would take hours to clean this mess up, and there was no way he could leave before it was done. He’d have to fill out a safety report adding a half an hour to his time in the office, at least. At least Gerard wouldn’t be screaming at him for this mess. Retrieving the mouse ears from where they lay, he knelt close to the door, suctioned the first tile, and set it in place.

Staying on his knees, he slid across the cold, smooth floor, towards the next tile upended out of its spot. The work was slow, and the tiles were heavy, but he plodded down the rows of racks, finally reaching the last out-of-place tile at the fifty-second row. Jess’s shoulders complained as he lifted himself

from the floor after setting the last out-of-place tile in the main corridor back into place. *Now for a look at that server so I can get out on the water.*

He rounded the corner into row fifty-three, focusing on the rack numbers, looking for the failed server. A tangled mess of cables poured out of the rack the server was in, a floor tile removed and leaning against the rack on the opposite side at an odd angle. It looked like...

“Hello?”

No answer. Jess was drawn down along the confined space between the racks of equipment, afraid of what he was going to find, but certain he needed to discover what was there in that tangle of cables.

Long, dark hair, pulled back in a ponytail. Shirt sleeves pulled up so the little red eyes of a tattooed dragon looked out at him, as if the dragon could offer some protection for its owner. The dragon's owner, Carl, was suspended by a pair of twisted and deformed Ethernet cables, his brightly polished shoes hanging in the air above an opening left by a pulled up floor tile. Scratch marks, angry and red, welled up along Carl's neck around the cables. His arms were buried in a mass of cables on either side, as if he had reached out to grab on, perhaps to try and hold himself up in some way. The cables were strong enough to hold his weight, but they were not easy to grab and hold on to. A smashed cell phone rested on the floor by the rack.

Slipping from his hand, Jess's coffee cup fell to the floor and broke, splattering coffee and ceramic shards back up onto his legs. He backed out of the narrow space, rushed over to the corner of the data center, knelt there, and threw up. He stayed there for a moment, trying to calm down, to make his

stomach settle, to think, to stop shaking. His mind returned to the scene of death.

Bright yellow cables against a blue shirt? Carl never would have approved of *that* color combination. Why was his face so white? His eyes should be closed, not open. Why hadn't one of the security guards seen this and reported it to the police? The lights were off, and the cameras were useless in the dark.

Of course, the cables wrapped around Carl's neck explained why the server wasn't working. Loss of carrier. How did those cables end up plugged into the wrong jacks? One end should have been in the server, rather than both ends being plugged up high into the patch panel along the top of the rack.

He needed to do something.

Mechanically, he pressed the buttons for 911 on his cell phone, but nothing happened. He tried again. Jess let out a breath. *Slow down. Think.*

Cell phones never worked in the basement of the building, especially in the data center. His hand released the phone, and it fell to the floor with a dull thud. He looked at his hand, shaking, empty. The cell phone didn't break. Why had Carl's cell phone broken? This floor wasn't hard enough to shatter a cell phone that way. Who would want to murder Carl? What if the killer were still in the data center, watching Jess now, waiting for a chance to...? Goosebumps lined Jess's arms, and a cold chill washed across his forehead.

He needed to do something.

The door. There was a phone there. He could call the police. His stomach wretched again. He hurried through the grayness, trying to get the images of Carl out of his mind. Finally, he was close enough to pick up the phone; he reached out towards the receiver.

Then he remembered this phone didn't handle emergency calls correctly. He would need to know the address for the building when the operator answered. What was the address? Five minutes ago he could have rattled it off. The memory nagged at the back of his mind, sitting there. He couldn't reach it.

Jess jumped clear out of his skin as the phone rang, the forceful sound loud above the low hum of the equipment. He lifted the receiver and placed it against his ear. His heart thumped loudly.

"Jess, this is Brian. I was just going through the cameras for my morning check and saw you running towards the phone in the data center. Is everything okay?"

"Carl's down here, Brian. He's dead. You better call 911." Jess heard his own voice speaking, but it was distant, mismatched from the thoughts in his head.

Silence. And then Brian said, "Wait! What did you say? I thought I just heard you say Carl is dead. Are you feeling okay, Jess? You don't sound good. You're not pulling one of your practical jokes, are you?"

"*Brian, hang up and call 911. I'm serious!*" he shouted. Then he added, more softly, "Carl's dead, Brian. Please call the police." The phone clicked. Dial tone. He stood staring at the signs on the door, fixated on the incongruent "please" printed there in bold red letters. Did he really need to say "please"?

Chapter 02

The door pulled out of Jess's hands unexpectedly, leaving him sliding down the ramp, grabbing desperately for the handrail to regain his balance. It clicked closed behind him, a touch of finality in his race to get out of the data center. He held on for a moment and then moved forward again, bumping into a box at the bottom. The entire stack tumbled onto the floor in front of him. There was no place here to sit and wait for someone else to arrive; he would have to keep moving.

The walls seemed to press, hemming him in, his stomach churning at the thought of being stuck in the basement with Carl's body. The elevator doors, reflecting the light, beckoned, but there was no time to wait for the car to make its way down from wherever it currently was. The stairs at the end of the hall would be faster.

He climbed, his knuckles white on the cold steel railing, eyes fixated on the light coming from above, avoiding looking through the spaces between the stairs where risers would normally be.

Brian met him as the stairs emptied out into the hallway, helping Jess out through the doors, supporting him as they passed through the lobby and finally out onto the patio, into the fresh air.

Jess sat heavily on the steps in front of the building, the coolness of the Carolina morning flooding his lungs. Each