

The
CHOICE

DAN M. APPEL

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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK...

To my three best friends

My wife, Charla, and my two sons, Dan, Jr., and David

Being their husband and father is a privilege that I surely do not deserve and for which I gratefully praise God every day. They suffered through interminable rough drafts and some phenomenally weird and disturbing happenings while this book was being written. Their encouragement, love, and patience are limitless!

And to

My parents and my sister

Who believed in me
in spite of knowing me my whole life.

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand *against the wiles of the devil*. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but *against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places*. Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and haveing done all, to stand.”

EPHESIANS 6:10-13

Chapter 1

Stan Adkins looked around the room, shook his head, and couldn't stifle an ironic smile. The scene was almost macabre, as though written by Alfred Hitchcock or Stephen King—a young pastor sitting alone in the shadows cast by a flickering fire in the study of a deserted Tennessee church; thunder rolling as lightning strobes across the churchyard; and a branch of a wild cherry tree, like one of Edgar Allan Poe's ravens, tap, tap, tapping against the window.

It had been a very strange evening, and Stan was having a hard time making sense of it. Making it worse, right outside the window, just past that cherry tree, was the cemetery where he had buried a number of people. Actually, Claude Ott had dug the graves and filled them in after the services, but it was Stan who had recited the words of the commitment that consigned their bodies to the ground. Sometimes, after saying the familiar "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," he'd quietly add to himself, "If the worms don't get you you're bound to rust." Not irreverently, mind you, and not loud enough for anyone to hear, but just to help him keep his perspective.

Now with every gust of wind and rain that wailed and moaned through the trees, it sounded as if the denizens of the churchyard wanted into the warmth and security of Cherry Pit Community Church and away from the thunder and flashes of light bright enough to wake even the dead. Stan was glad that years ago Perry Parker had installed gas logs in the fireplace of the church study. Hurrying out to the back shed for more wood on a night like this would have been . . . well, let's just say that the fire would probably have gone out.

Not that Stan was afraid of ghosts. After all, he had always believed that when you died, you died. They lowered your body in a wood or metal box into the ground, and you were supposed to stay there. That's what he'd always thought. Your spirit or soul or whatever it was went to heaven or hell, or purgatory if you were a Catholic and there was some confusion over where you should go. After that, no one was sure what happened to you.

He guessed you burned or you billowed (isn't that what you do when you sit on a cloud?), depending on whether you went up or down, until Jesus came back and you were resurrected to face the judgment. Then you were sent to heaven or hell for eternity to continue to billow or burn. It

didn't make a whole lot of sense when you thought about it, which Stan up to this point had preferred not to do. But one thing he had always known or believed or assumed was that once you were gone, you were gone. Until tonight at prayer meeting, that is.

Brenda Barnes had come to the midweek service at Cherry Pit Community Church with that special glow one has when they've fallen in love. They all saw it and assumed that Brenda's mourning was finally over. A year is a long time to grieve, and now it looked as if some lucky man had finally broken through the wall of sadness around her heart. It was time. In fact, it was long past time, and when she stood during the time for testimonies everyone eagerly waited to hear her speak.

Brenda had never looked lovelier, not even all those years back when she was crowned homecoming queen. The smile on her face made them all want to laugh. The color in her cheeks resembled someone who'd just come in from a long walk—a healthy flush that made her seem like a new bride. She looked around at the people who had nurtured her through so much pain. Her giggle brought to mind the tinkling of a thousand silver bells as she said, "I have the most wonderful news to tell you all. Johnny's back!"

Johnny Fletcher Barnes had died nearly a year before.

Cherry Pit Community Church hadn't been built large enough to contain the crowd that came to say their last goodbyes to Johnny Barnes. People who'd never been seen in a church were there, even Terry Hart, who'd always said the roof would fall in if he ever darkened the door. They'd had to open the windows to let the stragglers hear as best they could, and the police had been forced to close Cherry Pit Road to traffic because of the cars parked for more than a mile on the side of the road. Old Marge Peterson said it was the biggest funeral in the history of the town—even larger than Judge Bollinger's after the mine workers lynched him in 1911 during the strike.

"Johnny didn't go easy!" Gene Muncey had sobbed after the service as the guys drank beer and cried at the Sports Barn Bar and Grill.

It hadn't taken long. Johnny's stomach had been hurting for about a month. At first they'd thought it was indigestion, then maybe an ulcer. The guys even diagnosed it as an allergy to Brenda's cooking. But when his docs finally did a CT scan and saw the tentacles wrapping themselves around Johnny's liver and pancreas, they knew.

It had been the middle of the season. The softball team was counting on him to come in and save games the way he always had. His family was counting on picnics in the park, camping trips to the Indian wilderness area, and old movies in front of the fire at home. His boys were counting on him to teach them his secret pitch and to be there at graduations. They

needed to have those man-to-man talks that dads and boys have when a girl leaves you for a Dennis Atkins or a Mike Esposito. Brenda was counting on being held and loved, and on Johnny's being there when she needed to smile, or the washer needed fixing, or the popcorn bowl needed retrieving from the top shelf in the pantry.

The doctors sadly told them there was no hope, but oh, how they still had hoped. All the experts said that cancer of the pancreas was incurable—that the doc just signed your death certificate when the diagnosis was certain. But they didn't know Johnny Fletcher Barnes. He'd always been a fighter. That's why the softball team had loved him the way they did. He'd never say die, and his pitching had saved more games than they were able to remember.

First they tried surgery. "A 10 percent chance of lengthening your life," the doctor told him. Then chemo. When that didn't work they tried wheat grass juice, New Age diets, and a doctor in Mexico who claimed a 90 percent cure rate. Next someone told them about a man in Montana who ground up a mixture of herbs that Johnny said was the worst-tasting garbage he'd had in his mouth since he was 5 and tried to eat his grandpa's chewing tobacco.

By then everyone realized that the cancer eating away at his pancreas and liver and then his kidneys and intestines was unstoppable. It grabbed its victims like a pit bull and shook them and ate them alive. The pain was like no other pain on earth.

Johnny had been in a morphine-induced coma for about a week when he suddenly awakened, struggled to sit up, and looked at Brenda wild-eyed with terror. He was still at home, where he wanted to die and where she had promised that he could. She took him in her arms and rocked him as he faced death. Brenda saw it in Johnny's eyes and felt it in the terrible trembling of his fragile body as she held him tight. He looked deeply in her eyes, searching her soul for her love, and gasped, "I'll see you, kitten." Then straining against the terrible pain, he died. And she had sat quietly rocking him and crying, until the hospice nurse came and together they bathed him and closed his eyes for the last time.

It was July when they found out what was causing his bellyache, and in February he was gone. February 14, to be exact. They engraved it on his tombstone next to a large heart that said "Loved" and "Resting in Jesus." It was ironic that, on the day of love, all of the love had gone out of Brenda's life.

And now Brenda had just announced, "Johnny's back!"

The silence thundered in the room. Time stopped. Deacon Warren's head jerked up and startled little Cassie Stenrud, who jumped and dropped

her doll. Popping out of her arms, the doll hit the floor and tumbled down three rows to look up at Jennie Downer, who sat bolt upright, neck stiff, eyes darting wildly back and forth. Sylvia Bergstrom at the organ almost fell off the bench. Harold Downey coughed twice and looked over at his wife to see whether he'd really heard what he thought he'd heard. Sally Davis stopped chewing gum for probably the first time in her life. And Stan Adkins, whom nothing ever bothered, reached over for the corner of the Communion table to steady himself.

"Johnny's back?" he finally stuttered. "What do you mean, Brenda?"

"He's back, that's what I mean!"

"How . . . ? How . . . ?" Stan could think of nothing else to say. "How . . . ?" he tried again with no more success.

"He just came back," Brenda told them, her face shining like the sun. "One night I heard his key in the lock. I was in bed. It was almost 11:30. Johnny had this thing on his key ring. It was a memento of the first slow-pitch game he ever won. Carry Norton of the Rangers swung so hard that when he missed, the bat came out of his hands and flew foul into the parking lot. Bill Stadelmeyer, the team sponsor, had parked his Mercedes right next to the fence on the left field side. Carry's bat hit the hood and took off the ornament. Johnny found it after the game and added it to his key ring. He said it was his good-luck charm. It was so big he couldn't put his keys in his pocket anymore, so he bought one of those dumb things you hang on your belt that stretches out on a chain so you can use your keys.

"I hated the thing," Brenda said with a laugh. "Every night when he came home it made a weird noise as he pulled it out to unlock the door. And then that Mercedes hood ornament rattled against the sash as he turned his keys. We had to repaint the door several times because of the scratches. We buried the awful thing with him, along with his keys, and I felt so guilty, feeling so good about that whole ring going in the ground with him.

"Anyway, I was lying in bed one night, thinking about Johnny, when I heard his keys." She looked from the pastor to the congregation, willing them to believe her. "You couldn't mistake it. *Zing, rattle rattle*, then *clunk* as the deadbolt turned back.

"I was so scared I couldn't move. I could hardly breathe. Then I heard nothing for a minute or so until I heard the water in the sink.

"Johnny's throat was always dry when he came home from work. And he had this thing about drinking 12 glasses of water every day. So first thing when he came home, he always had a big glass of water. When he was done he'd rinse the glass, turn it over, and set it on the drainer to dry. It was like this routine he had. Every night the same