

the
Other
Brother

carole towriss



The Other Brother

COPYRIGHT © 2016 CAROLE TOWRISS

All rights reserved.

ISBN

Cover photos by Vadymvbot and icsnaps (basketball player)

Cover fonts: Allura, designed by Robert E. Leuschke;

Existence Light by Yeah Noah;

and Anavio, designed by Paul James Lloyd.

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book (except for excerpts for reviews)

may be reproduced in any form

without written permission from the publisher.

Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW
INTERNATIONAL VERSION ®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by
International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan.

All rights reserved.

Any emphasis to scripture quotations is added by the author.

The Other Brother is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,

and incidents are either a product

of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,

events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

the
*O*ther
Brother

*To Kendra, BSN, RN,
And her Marc, whomever he may be.*

*You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.
You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.
~Psalm 139:1-6*

one



“I’M SORRY, CAN YOU REPEAT that?” Marc Hudson croaked out his sentence after being jarred awake at one in the morning. His sister-in-law’s words echoed in his head. He had to have misunderstood her.

“It’s Sarah. There’s been a terrible accident.” Her voice was shaky, breathy. “And Mike is...Can you just come?”

“Tell me where again?” He fumbled in his nightstand drawer, searching for a piece of paper and something to write with.

“Um...4th and Broad.”

“Did you call 911?”

“Yeah. But I’m not leaving until you get here.”

“Are you hurt? Is Mike hurt? You should do what they tell you.”

“Just hurry.” Was she crying?

“I’m on my way. But if they need to take you or Mike to the hospital, go, and then call me and I’ll meet you there. OK?”

“We’re not going anywhere.” She sobbed and the line went dead.

What did that mean? It couldn’t be good, whatever it was.

Marc picked up the jeans and sweater he’d thrown on the chair at the foot of his bed and put them on. He jammed his bare feet into tennis shoes, snatched the note with the address, and sprinted to the front door. Grabbing his keys from the hook by the door with one hand and twisting the doorknob with the other, he bolted outside.

He jumped into his Chevy Avalanche and raced to the address she’d specified, driving too fast and praying he wouldn’t be stopped. What were they doing out at this hour of the night? This was late, even for a Saturday, even for them. Flashing red and blue lights met his field of vision long before he reached the intersection. He counted—one, two, three, four emergency vehicles.

This was bad, so bad.

A police officer, her cruiser blocking the intersection, tried to wave him into a left turn, away from the crash. He slowed and she motioned more fiercely. Marc rolled down his window and glanced at her name tag. "Officer...Henderson? That's my brother and sister-in-law's car. She called me."

The young woman turned toward the busy scene and then back to him. She said nothing, but her eyes relayed compassion. "Park over there and then come back here." She pointed to the lot in front of a grocery store behind her.

Marc parked his Avalanche across two spaces and raced back.

"Go see the tall man over there, Sgt. Madison, and let him know who you are. Tell him I waved you through." She offered a small smile.

He weaved between another Newtower, Indiana, police cruiser, a fire truck and more emergency workers until he reached Sgt. Madison.

"Hey, you can't be here." The senior officer started to send him away, but Marc quickly explained himself once again. The sergeant gave Marc the same sad expression, then led him to the ambulance.

A gurney with a zippered body bag atop it waited nearby. Marc's breath caught in his throat, and his feet refused to move. Was that...? *God, please, no.*

The usually perfectly coordinated Sarah sat on the back steps of the ambulance, disheveled and dazed, her silk shirt covered in blood. Whether it was hers or another's was unclear. An EMT was applying a bandage to her forehead.

"Marc!" Sarah jumped up and threw her arms around him, her very pregnant belly nearly knocking him down. "He's gone, Marc. Mike's gone." Sobs wracked her body, and he held her as she cried, unsure what else to do.

The EMT approached. "We really need to get her to the hospital, but she wouldn't leave until you arrived."

"Is she injured? What about the baby? What's all the blood?"

"The blood's not hers. She has no injuries we can see, but she should be checked out. The baby seems to be doing fine at the moment, but a shock like that can have consequences later." He grasped Marc's

bicep. “She *really* needs to get to the hospital,” he restated, as if it were somehow Marc’s fault she hadn’t yet gone.

Marc peeled her away from him and held her at arm’s length.

“Sarah, honey. Let them take you. I’ll be right behind you. OK?”

“But what about M- Mike?” She gazed longingly at the body bag beside the vehicle.

“They’ll take care of Mike, too. I promise. I’ll take care of everything. Just go with these guys.” He transferred her to the EMT.

“You’re coming?”

“Right behind you.”

“A-All right.”

The EMT helped Sarah into the ambulance and strapped her onto a gurney.

“Mercy Community?” There was only one hospital in Newtowner, but Marc needed to be sure they weren’t taking her to Blairsville’s larger facility for some reason he wasn’t aware of.

“Mercy,” a second EMT confirmed as he slammed the back door shut. “Go to the Emergency Department and they’ll let you know where she ended up. They may want to keep her overnight. Doctors tend to be extra cautious when the victim is pregnant.”

“Fine by me.” No need to take any chances.

Marc crept toward the body bag. Even in the bag it looked like Mike. Tall, strong, big, built like the basketball star he was. Or had been.

He spun around slowly. What had happened? Their brand-new SUV, a replacement for Mike’s sports car, sat maybe twenty yards away, the driver’s side crushed like a soda can. He stepped toward it, longing to see it, terrified of what he’d find. Pebbles of glass covered the asphalt around the vehicle. He tiptoed around the mess. The passenger’s side was far less damaged, which explained Sarah’s relative lack of injuries. The blood on her shirt must have been Mike’s.

He peered into the back seat. The baby’s car seat, installed only a week earlier, remained strapped in, untouched. Marc’s stomach roiled.

He noticed Sgt. Madison in the middle of the action, eyes searching, taking in everything, jotting down notes in a small notebook.

Marc approached the older officer. "Sergeant?"

The man, obviously in charge of the scene, looked down at Marc. His piercing gaze softened. "Yes?"

"Do you know what happened here? What happened to my brother?"

"Well, this is an open investigation, so I can't tell you much. But I will say it appears your brother and sister-in-law were hit by a drunk driver."

"Was anyone else hurt? Besides my brother, I mean?"

His jaw clenched. "No. The other driver walked away." He touched Marc's shoulder. "I'm sorry for your loss. If you'll excuse me, I need to secure the crime scene."

Crime scene. The words felt like a punch to the gut. He'd never expected to hear those words used in connection with someone he loved.



KENDALL THORNTON TUGGED ON THE hem of her pink scrubs and bounced her knee. She tried to hold her supervisor's cold stare but those eyes... She concentrated on the clock on her desk flashing seven forty-five a.m. instead. After twelve long hours in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, the NICU, it was hard to focus on anything.

"You do understand you can't do that here, right? This may be the Midwest, but we're not quite as backward as you might have thought. Keep your beliefs to yourself. Maybe in... where was it again?" A manicured nail skimmed down the paper on her desk and came to an abrupt stop. "Maybe in Western Hills, Arizona, you could get away with that kind of behavior, but not here. Do that again, and you'll be fired. For now, you're on probation until the end of the month."

Kendall's jaw opened a fraction before she caught herself and closed it. Could they really do that? Wouldn't that be illegal? Or would it? They weren't saying she couldn't pray, just not aloud.

Still, it felt wrong.

But there was nothing she could do about it. Nurse Frey ruled the Women and Children's Department with an iron hand. At least the RNs.

No one breathed without her permission.

Kendall stood and smoothed the front of her scrubs, pulled in a calming breath. “I understand.” She left Nurse Frey’s office on the fifth floor, the administrative division. It wasn’t until she reached the elevator that her bottom lip began to quiver.

She fisted her hands.

Losing this job was not an option. She was one step closer to her dream job—a level four NICU—with this position. Since she could remember, all she’d ever wanted was to work with babies. Even as a teenager, she’d watched those shows about delivering babies on TV for hours every week. She’d gone to college, earned her RN degree, and gone back home. The hospital in her tiny hometown in Arizona only had level one—well-baby care. Sometimes they would care for an infant with unstable glucose levels or jaundice, but basically anything more than that and the baby was stabilized and sent off to a level two or three. Then there were the babies like... Jessica. She still cried every time she thought of that baby. Thank God the nearest level four had only been an hour away. The pediatric surgeons and nurses there had saved her life. She wanted to do that—be like them. Make a difference.

She couldn’t risk losing that. So if she had to pray silently, that was a small price. God would still hear her.

“Come on, come *on*.” Why were the elevators so slow this morning? She took the stairs instead, went to her locker, and grabbed her backpack. On her way out, she passed the chapel. That was one place they could never tell her she couldn’t pray. Perhaps some time alone with God before she went home would help.

Ducking inside, she took a seat in the first row of blue chairs. She loved this room. Now meant for all faiths, there were no crosses or any other symbols on the walls. The main wall was a bank of windows, letting in abundant natural light. The opposite wall showcased a water display, water falling between two sheets of glass, filling the room with soothing sound. How could anyone could sit in this room and not feel the presence of God?

Bowing her head, she tried not to let her despair overtake her as

she poured out her frustration to God. It was, after all, only probation. She still had her job, doing what she loved. She simply had to keep her prayers to herself. Not that she was shouting them to begin with.

When she opened her eyes, the crimson, gold and fiery orange leaves on the trees outside reflected the morning sun. On the third floor, she had a perfect view of their dance in the autumn breeze. She let God fill her heart with His peace.

Thank you for giving me back my perspective.

She stood to go, slipping on her backpack.

Across the aisle, a lone figure caught her attention. The man must have been there the whole time, but in her self-pity, she hadn't noticed him. His head buried in his arms, he was praying, crying.

On his knees. A Gideon Bible lay open on the seat in front of him.

What had happened to him?

Was a loved one dying? Or had he already lost someone? In a hospital, it was quite possible. Even probable.

And here she was, worrying about a job.

She set her backpack down, reached into a side pocket and pulled out a small three-inch by two-inch card. Slipping her purple pack over one shoulder, she stepped closer to him and set the card next to his Bible, and tip-toed out.

She'd been warned about that, too, but he had a Bible. Giving him a little card that said, "I'm praying for you" shouldn't get her in too much trouble, should it? Besides, did he even see her?



MARC AWOKE FROM HIS SPOT in the chapel, a crick in his neck. He must have fallen asleep while praying for Sarah and the baby. He stretched his arms and groaned as he rolled his neck. His brow furrowed, he picked up the card next to his Bible. A tiny kitten sat with its paws together in a basket. "I'm praying for you." Where had that come from?

Marc turned the card over. Nothing on the back told him who had left it. Just a tiny card that reminded him someone cared.

Nice to know right about now.

He stuck the card in his pocket and replaced the Bible in the wire rack under the seat. When he stood, his knees reminded him he was no longer a teenager. Or even a twenty-something. Not much older, but enough.

Time to check on Sarah. Hopefully she'd gotten a little rest last night. She'd been up so late, crying. And Marc couldn't think of much to say that would comfort her.

God, what do I do for her? As much as he grieved for Mike, her sorrow must be a thousand times worse. She'd lost her best friend, her husband, her baby's father. Several years younger than Mike, she was barely twenty-five, and she'd soon be a widowed single mother.

How could he possibly help?

Pray. All he could do was pray.

He wandered down the hall, looking for room 304.

He gently pushed the door open, unwilling to wake her if she were still asleep.

She was. Her Asian heritage always gave her skin a porcelain appearance, but today it looked even paler than usual. Some kind of monitor illuminated the tip of her index finger, and a blood pressure cuff wrapped loosely around her arm. An IV protruded from her forearm.

He picked up a chair and brought it closer to her bed and continued to pray.

A nurse entered. She logged into the computer on the wall near the head of the bed and pressed a button. The blood pressure cuff inflated and Sarah shifted, her eyes fluttering.

"Good morning. How are you feeling?" the nurse chirped.

"Like I was hit by I truck. Oh, wait. I was." Sarah rolled her eyes.

"I'm Susan. I'll be taking care of you today." She placed her stethoscope under the cuff and picked up Sarah's wrist. When she finished, she took Sarah's temperature. All of this went into the computer.

"We're watching you closely to make sure you don't go into labor early. But in case you do, we're giving you steroids to help baby's lungs develop more quickly than normal."

She scrolled through several screens. “You don’t have anyone listed as next-of-kin. Whom should we put down?”

Sarah blinked several times. “I don’t know.”

“Parents? Siblings?”

“No. Why does it matter?”

“You need to have someone who can make decisions for you in case something happens to you or to your baby.”

“And if I don’t?”

“The doctors will decide.”

“Can he do it?” She pointed to Marc.

Marc sucked in a breath. Why would she pick him?

The nurse eyed him, as if appraising his worthiness. “And he is?”

“My brother-in-law. My husband’s brother.”

“Anyone you want can do it. You should pick someone you trust to make the decisions you think you would want them to make.”

She nodded. “Good. Marc then.”

“All right.” Her fingers flew over the keys. “Your name, sir?”

“Marc, with a *c*. Marc Hudson.”

She typed a few moments longer, then pressed a button and the screen darkened. “I’ll print these out and be right back.”

Marc cleared his throat. “Sarah?”

“Yeah.” Her voice was barely audible.

“Why did you pick me?”

“Why not?” Her voice was flat.

“What about your family? I know they’re in Japan but that’s about it. Wouldn’t you want one of them to make those decisions?”

She sat up a little, and he stood to help arrange the pillows behind her. “I came to study here, and I never went back. They’ve never really forgiven me for that. I’m their only daughter. I have an older brother, but my mom was very unhappy when I didn’t come back home.”

“I can imagine.”

“She won’t talk to me anymore.” She picked at her nails.

“I’m really sorry about that.”

The nurse strode back in with a stack of papers on a clipboard and

stood at Sarah's side. "To be clear, Sarah, you are giving Marc permission, in your absence or if you are unable, to make decisions about your care and to receive information about your health?"

While Sarah and the nurse discussed the consent forms, Marc slipped into the hall and texted the manager of the sporting goods store he co-owned—had co-owned—with Mike: *Get everyone you can together around one this afternoon. I need to talk to them.*

The nurse was arranging all the papers back under the metal clip as he closed the door behind him. "The doctor will be by later. Right now, you should concentrate on getting lots of rest. Do you want breakfast?"

"Ugh. No." Sarah flopped back on the pillow, her ebony hair splaying all around her.

"All righty. If you change your mind, press this button." She held up a cord with a blue button on the end, and left the room.

His sister-in-law curled up in a ball on the bed. Or as much as she could be, as pregnant as she was.

"Sarah, what can I do? I want to help, but I don't know how."

"You can't. No one can."

"Sarah..."

"Leave me alone, Marc. I might as well get used to it."

"Used to it?"

"Being alone."

TWO



AFTER SHOWERING, CHANGING HIS CLOTHES and grabbing some breakfast, Marc climbed into his Avalanche and headed for Mustang Mike's.

He pulled the truck into the spot at the end of the first row at 12:55. His heart clenched. That was one thing—of many—he and Mike had always argued about. Mike had wanted reserved spots right near the front door. Marc thought the best spots should be for the customers, not the owners. On that topic, Marc had won. Their parking spaces were at the far end of the lot. As for being open on Sundays, Mike had won. At least Marc had convinced him they should open late.

He pressed the button on his key fob to lock the truck and slipped his keys into his pocket. At the glass door with the company name inscribed on it, he paused for several seconds, his chin on his chest. An audible sigh escaped. He stepped inside.

Paul waited near the cash registers.

Marc caught his gaze and pointed toward the break room. *Here goes nothing.*

Ten minutes later, facing his employees, the pain in his chest was

unbearable. Saying it out loud made it so...achingly real. "It was over before I got there." In the small room in the back of the store, five employees stared back at him. Other than Suzi's and Maggie's sobs, stony silence filled the air.

"Sarah is still at the hospital. They want to keep her under observation for a while until they know the baby is safe."

Will spoke first. "So are we closing the shop then, or what?" Besides Paul, Will was the only full-time employee. He was likely worried about taking care of his family.

"We are not closing for good. I'm the sole owner now, and I intend to keep it open if I can. You'll all still have jobs. As for today, and the next few days, that's up to you. Whoever wants to work is welcome to, and if you need some time off, that's fine, too. We all need to grieve in our own way."

He scrubbed his hand down his face, tried to grab a few of the scattered thoughts in his brain and make coherent sentences. "I'll be busy with Sarah for at least the next week or so, what with the ...umm...making all the arrangements and everything. Paul, you're in charge. Redo the schedule. If you can't,"—he raised his hands, palms up—"close up. Just...put a sign on the door. I have to go." He stood to go, stepping toward the door.

"Marc?" Suzi's small voice reached him from the corner of the room. His newest employee, and the youngest, she had been so grateful for the job, she'd sent both Marc and Mike handwritten notes in the mail. She was a cheerleader at the high school where Mike's name still, even eleven years later, meant something. Where his trophies even now sat front and center in the case that caught your eye as soon as you walked in the front door. "You'll let us know about the arrangements? I mean, when, and where, and everything?"

"Of course. I'll tell Paul and he'll let you all know."

"I'll be praying for you. And for Sarah and the baby." Suzi flashed her pep squad smile at him, though it faltered.

Like Marc's faith. Because he had no idea how long he could keep the store operating without Mike.