

Chapter One

Joe Reynolds scanned the letters in his hands, making sure they all had stamps. More than once Mrs. Granlund had forgotten to pay that little "toll," and then complained to Joe when her letters were returned from the post office marked INSUFFICIENT POSTAGE. "I wish you had told me I forgot a stamp!" she would scold, then huff back into her house. She was a complaining, quarrelsome woman that Joe was happy to miss seeing on his route.

The three outgoing letters today all had stamps, so he slipped them into his mail satchel, adjusted the strap a little to make it more comfortable, and stepped off the porch, a porch he had stepped off at least a thousand times in the last ten years. He did so without really thinking about it. That was a mistake that he later hoped never to repeat.

Just as his feet hit the sidewalk leading from the porch, without a warning of any kind, a missile struck Joe's left side, catapulting him several feet to the right of the sidewalk with an ominous cracking sound. Joe landed mostly on his stomach, then rolled over and over before coming to an abrupt stop, thanks to a couple of garbage cans and some recycling bins.

Joe was confused. It had all happened so quickly and without warning. He had seen nothing, heard nothing. The peacefulness of the beautiful day was shattered, replaced with pain.

Who shot at me? he asked himself dully, not even trying to get up. *And why? Why didn't I see him?* He

knew he should open his eyes and try to find some way to escape or get help, but he didn't have the energy.

Joe felt increasing pain in his chest. *I can't breathe! Please Jesus, I need to breathe! Help me!* His eyes opened and with blurred vision, he began scanning back and forth trying to find some way out of this madness.

As he did so, he looked at his left arm. The sleeve of the U.S. Postal Service shirt that his wife, Amy, had so painstakingly ironed last night, was a bloody, ripped-up mess. Tilting his head down a little Joe saw that his pants legs were torn and blood was starting to ooze through where his knees were.

A scream filled the air, from the direction of the porch. Joe braced himself for another missile he felt sure was going to hit. But nothing happened. Joe was able to breathe a little and his lungs tried desperately to suck in larger and larger volumes of air.

There was more noise from the porch direction and then Joe heard an excited voice shouting. "Cameron, are you hurt?"

Boy, I must be confused, Joe thought, weakly. *My name's not Cameron. At least I'm pretty sure it's not Cameron. No,* he decided with increasing confidence in his own mental ability, *I'm Joe.* That shouting voice, coming from a woman running toward him, was getting closer. Then it let out another scream. *Does she have to scream?* Joe's head was beginning to ache.

"Oh no! Oh! Oh no! It's Mr. Reynolds! Somebody! Hey, sommmeeeeebbbbody, help!" Joe turned his head to the right and immediately recognized the panic-stricken face of Mrs. Granlund. She kept calling for help, louder and louder, but instead of stopping to help, she moved quickly away from Joe. He couldn't see what she was running toward because he didn't feel like tilting his head back far enough to see.

In a continuing answer to his prayer, Joe's mind cleared quickly. He was able to hear the muffled voice of a young boy, who was crying and groaning at the same time. "Are you all right, Cameron? Talk to me!" Mrs. Granlund shouted.

Joe could hear people running toward him. *I suspect the whole neighborhood heard Mrs. Granlund's scream!* He finally summoned the strength to tilt his head backward. Doing so, although it was indeed a painful thing to do, he saw Cameron lying next to a bent and twisted bicycle. Cameron's mother was leaning over him.

"Are you all right?" a man drawled, bending down to look at Joe. "Are you breathin' mister?"

Joe was breathing better now, and the pain in his chest was rapidly subsiding. *Thank You Lord*, he prayed. However, Joe felt it would be too much effort to try to speak to the man. So, he just nodded his head a little bit, instead.

"Hey, I think this guy is probably goin' to be okay," the man said, addressing a small crowd that was gathering to watch. "How's that youngun' over there?" he asked Mrs. Granlund.

Sobbing, Mrs. Granlund was able to get out a weak, "I think he's okay." Hugging her son closely, she repeated with a slow drawl, "Yeah, I think he's okay."

"Someone better call an ambulance," the man said to no one in particular.

"Are you sure that's necessary?" a lady's voice asked. "Hadn't we better ask the man if he needs one or not?" Then turning to someone else who had just rushed up to the scene, the lady continued, "Look, Marge, it's the postman. Looks like Cameron ran over him with his bicycle."

"You think you ought to go to the hospital?" the man asked Joe. "Want us to call an ambulance?"

Joe had never been in an ambulance before. He had always thought of them as only being for two classes of people: those very sick and dying, or for those severely injured. Joe really didn't feel that he was either. He realized now that he had simply had the breath knocked out of him when he landed on his stomach.

"No," he answered the man, surprising himself that the words actually made it out of his mouth. Joe slowly lifted himself to a sitting position. There was a group of maybe five or six people standing near him, with a few children running across the road in his direction. "My head and arm hurt," Joe explained to the older man who had a very worried look on his face. "I think my head feels the worst." He looked at the man carefully, but decided that he didn't recognize him from his route.

"Well, I reckon it should be hurtin'!" the man exclaimed. "You've already got a knot pert' near the size of a walnut on your forehead!"

Joe gingerly touched his forehead and found the man to be right.

"Must have landed at least partly on your head. That there's a pretty lousy way to break your fall."

Joe didn't respond. He began to feel a little weak and dizzy. Maybe sitting up had been a bad idea after all. He slumped back to the ground.

"I think you're supposed to lift his head," said one lady, offering the older man her advice.

"No, Amanda, I've always heard you're supposed to lift their feet when they get that look like . . ." another lady started, but then paused. Finally she continued, ". . . I mean, when they . . . when they get real white in the face." Joe felt his legs being raised and something

placed under his feet. Soon he felt less dizzy and less like he was going to pass out, but it did cause his right leg to start hurting.

"Is the boy okay?" Joe asked. His mind had cleared almost totally, and he knew now that it was indeed Cameron Granlund, a boy of about fourteen years. Cameron was one of the more rambunctious boys on his route. Joe recalled some of the mail packages he had delivered with Cameron's name on them. One a few months ago had been from the "Estes Rocket Company," with a label that read, "Caution: Keep away from heat or flame!" Another, about three years ago, had been a C.O.D. from a company located in Los Angeles with the unusual name of "George's Great Big Surprises." A label on the package had read, "Watch out! When George comes to town, people notice!!"

"Hmm, I'd say that 'when Cameron comes to town, people notice!'" Joe said out loud.

"What'd you say?" the man asked. He had been looking at Cameron's cuts and only half-heard Joe.

"Nothing," Joe replied. He hadn't realized that his thoughts were getting relayed by his mouth. Perhaps he didn't have full use of his senses after all.

Someone brought water and cotton gauze, and an older lady, whom Joe recognized as Mrs. McCurry, was busy trying to clean up Joe's wounds and stop the bleeding. When she touched the left arm, Joe winced and involuntarily drew his arm back.

"Sorry," Mrs. McCurry apologized, wincing a little herself.

"Thanks, Mrs. McCurry," Joe said encouragingly. "I appreciate what you're doing. I really do."

Joe listened as someone related to a new onlooker what had happened. A child from across the street saw

the whole thing. There was a row of tall bushes in the Granlund's yard. Apparently, when Joe was just stepping off the porch, Cameron was coming around the corner of the shrubs on his bike. Cameron had a reputation in the neighborhood as a daredevil and fast rider on his bike, and today was no exception. Unable to stop, he ran right into Joe's left side. "I saw Mr. Reynold's glasses go flying off and his body sort of doubled up like he was a rag doll or something. Yep, the bike hit him, and smack! . . ." the boy clapped his hands together loudly, ". . . there went the mailman flying through the air!" the boy offered graphically. "Then he bounced like a rubber ball and rolled into the garbage cans! Man, was he really moving!"

Joe winced as he again thought of the impact. *No wonder I thought I had been hit by a missile!*

After a few minutes, Joe felt like trying to sit up again. This time he didn't feel woozy, just sore. He started to get to his feet.

"Hold on there!" the man intervened. "Where do you think you're a goin'?"

Joe noticed the concerned look on the man's face. "I think I'm okay," he assured. "I have to finish my mail route. It's getting late."

"No sir. I believe you're through with your route for today. You've not seen yourself in the mirror, you know." The man couldn't help laughing. "You mail guys really must be serious about your job!" he noted. "Let's see. How does that saying go? 'Neither rain, nor snow, nor dead of night . . . nor Cameron running over you with his great big bike . . .'" The man laughed at his unexpected rhyme.

"It is my job," Joe offered, simply. But when he looked at his bloody and ripped pants and shirt Joe decided that he wasn't going to be able to finish the route

after all. What would people think, seeing this bloody man walk up onto their porch? "Maybe I just better get back to the post office and let them finish my route," he decided.

"Are you sure you can you drive your truck? I'll be happy to give you a lift," the man volunteered.

"Yes, or I can call them from my house," Mrs. McCurry suggested. "I'm sure that someone could come and get your mail truck and mail. Then we could take you straight home."

"Thanks," Joe replied sincerely. "I may take one of you up on your offer. But first I think I'll see if I can drive back." Then looking at the man, he added, "Sir, I appreciate your help. I didn't get your name?"

"Aw, just call me Fop."

"Did you say, Fop?"

"Yeah, that stands for Friend of Postmen," the man laughed. "Name's actually Elmer Smith," he added cheerfully, automatically sticking out his hand to shake Joe's. However, he withdrew his hand quickly, not wanting to do anything that might hurt Joe's bruised hand.

"Well, I do thank you, Elmer. You too, Mrs. McCurry."

One of the children handed Joe his glasses, which miraculously hadn't been damaged even though they had gone sailing through the air. "They landed in the rose bushes," the boy grinned. "I think they're okay."

"Thanks," Joe smiled back, but then groaned, "Ohhh. Smiling isn't something I want to do too much of. It hurts to smile."

Joe walked over to Cameron, who had some cuts, but didn't look as bad as Joe felt. Mrs. Granlund was still trying to mother him, but Cameron looked like he just

wanted her to leave him alone. "Is he all right? Is there anything I can do?"

Mrs. Granlund smiled through the tears in her eyes. "He's all right. Just shook him up, didn't it, Cameron?" Cameron didn't speak.

"I'm sorry, Cameron. I should have looked before I stepped off your porch."

Cameron still didn't respond. "Cameron, honey, I think you need to tell Mr. Reynolds that you're sorry for running into him," Mrs. Granlund pleaded. Still, Cameron didn't speak. Joe wasn't sure if the boy thought the accident was Joe's fault, or if he just had trouble admitting that he was wrong. Mrs. Granlund continued to try to talk Cameron into apologizing, but to no avail. Cameron's refusal to speak made everyone standing around uncomfortable. It was especially awkward for Mrs. Granlund and Joe.

"Oh, that's okay, Mrs. Granlund," Joe said, trying to break the ice. "I'm sure Cameron is sorry that the whole thing happened, too. I do hope you'll feel better soon, Cameron."

The scattered mail from the satchel had been gathered by some boys in the neighborhood and they had already delivered the mail to addresses on their street for Joe. Joe wasn't sure how the Post Office would react to that, but what could he do now? It was already done! They had crammed the rest of the mail back into his mail pouch. Naturally, it would need resorting before being delivered, but that was something that could be done back at the post office.

Joe walked to his truck parked at the end of the street, waving weakly to a few curious children who had followed him. He unlocked the door, slid it open, and then climbed in. Joe drove slowly toward the post office, wondering what his supervisor would think of his "new"

uniform style. Then, a bigger dread hit him: what would Casey say?