

A CRIMSON WHISPER

Alan Talmage gripped the steering wheel tightly as he drove to the funeral of his friend, oblivious to the power of regret. He believed each life was touched with sorrow and struggle and avoiding both was the best path.

by CHRIS FABRY

HE HAD PULLED into the turn lane that would take him on a bridge spanning I-25 and into the heart of the town of Crimson, Colorado. He and his family had moved here 10 years earlier. He glanced into his rearview to check his tie, frowning at the off-kilter double Windsor knot.

So many thoughts spun through his mind, but one rose above all the rest as he switched on his turn signal.

Why didn't you talk with him?

It was more of an internal accusation than a question.

He came to a stop and noticed the brisk traffic on the interstate below. A quick glance to his right allowed him to spot the Crimson Range, a series of mountains that rose stately in the distance. Such beauty every day, if he paused long enough to notice it.

Amidst the aspens and evergreens that flourished on the mountain was a scar that ran from bottom to near the top of the range. A killing fire

a decade ago made its way through the trees, leaving a telltale "V" on the mountainside. A firefighter friend had told Alan that if the flames had reached the top, the wind would have run the fire both directions, destroying thousands of acres. The destruction would have ravaged that beauty. But the fire, started by a lightning strike, had been stopped by a gentle rain, both acts of God.

Though the fire had been contained, the scar remained.

He felt the same searing on his own heart as he looked back at the red light. The sudden loss of his

friend Paul had taken his breath away. What Alan had learned since then had stirred something deeper than he could imagine. The funeral would begin in an hour, and all he could think was, *Why didn't I talk with him?*

Paul was a barrel-chested, red-faced man who immediately looked familiar. Piercing blue eyes and a smile and an infectious laugh. Their sons had played on the same sports teams. In the bleachers, Alan and Paul would talk about the weather and sports — the Broncos and Rockies mostly — and sometimes politics.

Paul had rough hands and drove a rusted Ford pickup, and Alan discovered the man's penchant for carpentry and lawn work and even the occasional electrical repair. Paul could do just about any odd job, and he often said, "If I can't do it, I know someone who can."

He had poured the concrete for their backyard basketball court. He moved a fence in the hard ground that was too close to a property line.

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Alan couldn't count the times Paul had pulled them out of a ditch when one of his teenagers had taken an icy curve too fast. Anytime Alan couldn't handle some repair around the house, he called Paul.

But in all those years and in all those odd jobs, they had never spoken about the most important thing, the eternal. And as Alan found out after Paul's death, there were secrets to the man's life.

"You didn't know, did you?" Paul's wife, Stephanie, said on the phone when Alan called

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after hearing the news. "How he struggled." "I'm sorry. I didn't. I still don't." "Paul and I separated about four months ago. I couldn't take it any longer. He was drinking heavily, and the abuse had become intolerable. I asked him to get help. I begged him." Her voice caught. "But if Paul couldn't do something himself, he felt weak. He always wanted to do things on his own."

"I had no idea," Alan said. He wanted to ask the particulars, how his friend had died, but instead he stayed quiet and let the pain wash over them.

Finally, he said, "I should have seen what was going on. I should have talked with him about more than the jobs I had him do."

"Don't do that to yourself," Stephanie said. "I've thought the same thing a thousand times. What if? He really liked you, Alan. He respected you. But that kind of thinking doesn't do any good. You can't live in the past."

Her words echoed in his soul as the light changed from red to green. For some reason the green arrow stayed red through the entire sequence. Alan sat frozen with his blinker clicking.

He honked his horn, as if the light might hear.

Why hadn't he been a better friend? Why hadn't he talked about spiritual things when he had the

chance? There had been so many times at games or when Paul fixed a broken doorknob to ask a question or make some kind of spiritual turn in the conversation. Now he was headed to the funeral with nothing but a thousand pounds of regret.

A truck pulled up in the next lane, and Alan glanced over at the aged, rusty vehicle. A man in his 30s was behind the wheel, a dirty baseball cap pulled low. He had several days of stubble growing and hair that stuck out underneath the cap. Smoke billowed from his open window, and an old country song played through crackling speakers.

Movement in the passenger seat. Alan craned his neck and saw a hound with sad eyes looking straight at the cracked windshield. The man and dog looked like an old married couple, a match made in heaven. No words needed between them. Alan smiled.

He turned back to the red arrow, and it was in that moment, that twinkling of an eye, that the struggle inside coalesced with what he saw in the truck. In the rumble of the interstate and the music through the window and the breeze wafting down the mountain, he heard a whisper to his heart.

You can live with this regret the rest of your life and let the accusation paralyze you. Or you can let this pain do its work and move you toward others. There are many Pauls ahead. Just like the one in that truck beside you.

The accusation made him feel like a failure. There were so many things he should have done that he never did. But the whisper brought life. The whisper showed him that living fully didn't mean avoiding fires and scars. The goal was not to remain untouched by the hardness of life.

Struggle is not a sign of failure, Alan. Struggle is a sign of life.

There would always be regret for things he had done and things

left undone. But as the arrow turned green, he knew he had a choice of staying shackled to the regret or being freed to truly live.

He never saw the man in the truck again. But he would never forget him. 🌀

CHRIS FABRY is an award-winning author of more than 80 books, including his new novel, *Lifemark*, available at lifeway.com. Chris is also the host of *Chris Fabry Live on Moody Radio*. Find out more at his website, ChrisFabry.com.

