

# Chapter One

## Rebirth

Friday, September 30

"Good morning, Daddy!"

"I know that voice," Mark thought.

His mind struggled for clarity. He was in a fog. A deep, dense, colorless fog. Through the mist, a fragment of memory floated by. It was his youngest daughter's voice. But she was four-hundred miles away. He wasn't supposed to see her until Thanksgiving. As far as he could recall, it was only September.

*"What is she doing here?"* Mark thought, suddenly aware he didn't quite know where 'here' was.

Slowly, Mark regained consciousness. It felt like waking from a dream. But no dream before had ever held him captive like this. He could sense movement around him, and felt the presence of at least two or three people, maybe more. He tried opening his eyes. Nothing happened. He focused as hard as he could, but all he saw was vague colors, splashes of light, and shadow. Everything was a blur. And then, a moment of clarity. There was something stuck down his throat. Mark tried pulling on it. It wouldn't move.

The fog closed in again, consciousness fading once more. He returned to the darkness. This time, he heard voices, felt someone holding his hand. He still couldn't see. Once more he sensed movement around him. The fog lifted again, consciousness returned. He blinked.

So, his eyes were open! But, why couldn't he see?

"Good morning, Mark! How about we remove that tube today?" a voice spoke from the space around him.

Mark didn't recognize this voice. It was gentle, with a slight, muddled accent. Questions flooded his mind.

*"What tube?"*

*"Who is that speaking?"*

His thoughts scrambled like puzzle pieces in a box. Mark nodded. At least, he thought he did. It was hard to tell if his body was responding. More questions poured in.

*"Who are these people?"*

*"Why can't I see?"*

*"What happened to me?"*

He searched his memories in vain. Another sensation of movement. He felt his hand being moved again. That part wasn't a dream. It felt warm and familiar.

"Hey, hon. So, it's Friday. You've missed a few days," a voice informed him.

*"That's my wife's voice,"* Mark realized, wrestling to understand, his mind still locked in fog.

*"What did she mean, I missed a few days? Where am I?"*

Clarity came, and left, and came again. He couldn't hold it for long. He was on the edge of panic. There had to be an answer to all the questions in his mind.

*"What was the last thing I remember?"* he wondered silently, focusing every ounce of energy he had, searching for a memory that made sense. *"Oh yeah, I remember now. Pain. Tremendous pain. And fear."*

## Tuesday, September 27

Mark had been feeling under the weather for a week. It didn't feel like anything serious. He should know. As a child he was always struggling with some virus or another. A sinus infection one year, strep throat the next. Bronchitis, mono, you name it, Mark had it. Even pneumonia once, back in fourth or fifth grade. What he felt now wasn't like any of those. This was just a minor cough and a low grade fever. He felt run down, like he had no energy. He didn't have chills or body aches like the flu. He wasn't coughing anything up like with bronchitis. It was probably just a cold. He most likely got it from his wife, Jennifer. She was an elementary school teacher and was always bringing something home from one of her students. Whatever it was, Mark was sure it would pass.

But it didn't pass. It got worse. Earlier in the day he coughed up blood. Not much, just enough to consider he might need to make an appointment with his doctor. Unfortunately, it was too late for that. By the time he and Jennifer finished dinner, he was already in distress. The next coughing spasm he had brought a sudden, sharp pain to the left side of his chest. It felt like he had broken a rib. The pain went away after a few minutes, but it returned an hour later. This time, it didn't subside.

Now, every breath he took hurt, and it hurt *bad*. The more he struggled, the worse it got. Mark had never experienced pain like this. He could usually tolerate pain. He had endured various cuts, scrapes, broken bones and torn muscles, all without losing a single day of work. But not this pain. It was all he could do to keep from collapsing. Jennifer had tried to get him into the car, but Mark couldn't stand, let alone walk. Instead, she dialed 911. The firefighters arrived within minutes, bursting into the house throwing questions his way.

"Where's the pain?"

"When did it start?"

"How bad is it?"

"Did you fall recently?"

"Did you hear anything snap or pop?"

Mark answered as best he could, but it was difficult. Speaking meant breathing, and breathing hurt. The firefighters tried to guess what it might be. Gallstones. Pulled muscle. It wasn't heart related. The pain was in the wrong spot for that. He didn't care if they guessed right or not. He only wanted one thing: make it stop.

The paramedics arrived. Another round of questions, then a quick assessment of his vitals. They loaded him on a gurney and took him outside to the ambulance.

"So, which hospital do you want?" one of the paramedics had asked.

"The closest one," Mark replied. He didn't care about the cost, only the pain.

It took a minute to get him set up. They shaved his arm, inserted an IV, and started pain meds. By the time they arrived at the hospital, the meds had kicked in. He was loopy.

"This isn't the pizza place!" Mark blurted out as they got him out of the van, his mind beginning to blur.

He couldn't recall being pushed inside, or if his wife was with him or not. The memories he did have were sporadic. And they all involved pain. It hurt when they striped off his clothes. It hurt even more when they took an x-ray. But the CT scan, that was the worst. He couldn't stop screaming.

Mark floated in and out of consciousness, oblivious to the flurry of activity around him. Fleeting images flashed through his mind. He recalled being wheeled into an elevator. He remembered meeting the nurse assigned to his room. He recalled a mask being placed over his nose and mouth; his nurse told him it was called a bipap machine. He remembered they had to insert a catheter. He recalled requesting more meds. The pain was increasing again.

"It's not time for that yet. You have to wait," his nurse had informed him.

He knew the next memory he recalled was the last. Pain so severe, he almost blacked out. Breathing became impossible. A flood of nurses and doctors poured into his room, pulled his bed into the hall, and rushed him back to the elevator. He could feel their presence, could sense their emotions. They were nervous, anxious, concerned. Although he wasn't aware, Mark had been brought down to the Intensive Care ward. Someone asked permission to put in a breathing tube. Mark shouted a reply.

"Save me!" he begged.

That was it. That was the last memory he could recall. After that, nothing.