

LOVE LEADS THE WAY

By

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DEDICATION

To my courageous friend,
U.S. Army Command Sergeant Major Christopher A. Raines
“Forever a Hero”
1959-2011

Chapter 1

“Do the Right Thing”

*“A truly wise man makes decisions with his heart,
not his head.” ~ Granny Mae*

Alabama, July 2015:

“Come on, Jesse.” Emma waved her handheld radio in the air to indicate that they had just received a call. Her urgent stare prompted flight medic Jesse Daulton to rise to his feet.

With his cellphone pressed to his ear, Jesse nodded affirmatively in the direction of his insistent partner.

“I gotta go, honey. I’m sorry, but we just received a call. We gotta” He listened for another second while unconsciously raking his fingers through his thick, wavy hair. “Don’t worry about the test results, Mikayla, and please stop crying. Please don’t.” Jesse paced the length of the cramped flight staff lounge while attempting to comfort his wife. “We’ll talk more about it when I get home tonight, okay? It’ll be all right, Mikayla. I promise.” Jesse lowered his voice. “I love you, baby.” Handling the phone as gently as he would his wife’s delicate face, he whispered, “Bye, darlin’,” into the receiver just before he ended the call.

It pained him to end their conversation so abruptly. He hated to leave Mikayla so distraught, but he had no choice. Duty called, and duty couldn’t wait. He consoled himself with the promise of making it up to her the moment he got home.

With that, Jesse grabbed his two-way radio off the top bunk, and hustled out the door. His attention and demeanor transformed quickly from that of concern for his wife, to total concentration on his soon-to-be patient.

“What are the specs on the call, Emma?” Jesse asked, as he and his partner doubled-timed the stairs leading up to the hospital’s helicopter pad.

“We’ve got a father and son injured and stranded on the side of Grant Mountain ... apparent victims of a rock fall.” Emma had to quicken her pace to keep up with the expanded stride of her six-foot cohort.

“Who’s on the scene?” Jesse asked.

“County EMTs are on site. They put in a request for the high-angle rescue team from Birmingham, but they’re on another call.”

“Sounds like there’s gonna be a bunch of cooks in the kitchen on this one.”

Jesse didn't particularly care for situations where jurisdiction was up for grabs. In the Army, there was a structured chain of command, and everybody knew where his or her link in that chain was. He missed those days.

"Hopefully, we can be of some help," he said.

The partners squinted while reaching for their sunglasses as they stepped through the automatic double glass doors that ushered them onto the sun-scorched rooftop of Huntsville Baptist Hospital.

Jesse and Emma had become quite a team in only eighteen months—both as trauma rescue partners and as friends.

When they walked onto the landing pad, their hefty, salt-and-pepper-haired pilot for the day, Cliff Duggen, was already there, ready and waiting for them. "My grandad was slow, Jesse, but he was old as dirt ... let's move it, Ranger!" Cliff shouted jovially as his usual pre-flight, in-flight, and post-flight joking and good-natured harassment began. "I've never known an Army Ranger yet who was quick on his feet. You guys are too concerned with looking pretty to move fast."

Cliff's fun-loving attitude buoyed Jesse's somber mood. "I've never known a Marine who could pilot a decent helo ride, either ... especially an *old* Marine like you!" Jesse shouted back with a laugh. "Why don't you just make sure the cowlings are fastened down like a capable pilot for a change?" Jesse added. "By the time you get that done, my handsome Ranger ass will be strapped in the seat, praying that you've got one more crappy liftoff and landing left in ya."

Cliff smiled and shook his head. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, at least us Marines got the good sense not to jump out of a perfectly good aircraft while it's eight hundred feet in the air."

Cliff was Jesse's favorite pilot, although nobody knew that but Jesse. The other guys were fine pilots too, but Cliff was a natural. If anyone had found his true calling in life, it was Cliff. He and his helo were as much partners as Jesse and Emma.

Watching and listening as her two likable co-workers bantered insults back and forth, Emma squeezed her tiny frame into the cramped seat behind the pilot's position in the helicopter. After successfully seating herself, she balanced her helmet on her lap while she pulled her long, blond hair back into a ponytail. "When you two guys get finished with your little macho pissin' match, we'll be good to go."

Laughing aloud at Emma's uncharacteristic comment, Jesse and Cliff followed her into the bird and strapped themselves in.

"I do believe you're beginning to loosen up a bit there, Nurse Emma," Jesse teased. "I think our soldier mentality is beginning to rub off on you." He watched as a huge smile lit up Emma's pleasant face.

She shook her head in playful disapproval. "Do I have a choice, hanging around with the likes of you two?"

“I guess not.” Jesse laughed again as he tightened the strap on his helmet.

After plugging their destination coordinates into the GPS, followed by flipping a few switches on the helicopter’s instrument panel, Cliff’s mechanical partner came to life.

The initial slow whirl of the revolving main rotor blades was as familiar to Jesse as his favorite old song on the radio. It was a large part of the sounds of his past. He had never once regretted the twenty years he had spent in the military as an Army Ranger medic. Jesse was destined to be a soldier. It wasn’t just what he did; it’s who he was, and who he would always be. He had his share of bad memories, but more good than bad. Any successful mission made in defense of his country was well worth the personal sacrifice it demanded.

“FT3, this is Comm Base. What’s your estimated time of arrival?” The voice inside Jesse’s helmet startled him. He had been so deep in thought that the takeoff had escaped his attention.

“We’re cruising at a hundred and twenty-seven MPH with an ETA of fifteen minutes,” Cliff answered.

“Good. Listen up, you three, especially you, Jesse.” It was a different voice on the air this time. It was the voice of Earl Rosenfeld, the CEO of AirMed Trauma Transport Corporation—the boss. “This is a very important transport, you guys. I want this one done strictly by the book. By the book, Jesse Daulton, you got that?”

“Yes, sir, I got that,” Jesse stated, matter-of-factly. “Although the way I see it, *all* of our transports are very important.”

In an apparent attempt to keep Jesse out of trouble, Cliff interjected, “I can put us down in a clearing within a hundred yards of the scene.”

“Carry on then,” was the only response from the CEO.

As soon as the chopper skids hit the ground atop Grant Mountain, so did the soles of Jesse and Emma’s boots. Jesse yanked off his helmet, and slapped on his favorite cap, a green-and-white Marshall University baseball cap, a birthday gift from Emma.

Jesse’s adrenalin kicked in full force. He loved that sensation. It felt like combustible energy coursing through his veins.

Off in the distance, the red and blue flashing lights of the first responders looked out of place in the dense-wooded area. Jesse bolted through the trees toward the lights. Emma followed closely behind. Scouring the scene, Jesse headed toward the first man he spied in an EMT uniform.

“Where are the victims?” Jesse asked without introduction.

“This way,” the EMT motioned as he began leading them toward the cliff. “The name’s Tim, by the way.”

“Sorry, Tim, I’m Jesse. This is my partner, Emma Edwards.” Jesse nodded in Emma’s direction.

As they walked toward the edge of the mountain, the EMT briefed them on the specs of the victims. “Brendan Lavender, a forty-two-year-old male, and his ten-year-old son, Dustin, were pummeled pretty good by a rock fall around eleven-thirty this morning, about forty-five minutes ago. Climbers above them triggered some loose rocks that gave way.”

Stopping at the precipice, Tim’s lowered head pointed the way to the stranded father and son below. “That’s Senator Camilla Lavender’s husband and little boy down there. Apparently, they came up from Birmingham this morning to do a little climbing.”

Jesse removed his sunglasses and scanned the vertical wall of solid jagged rock, flecked here and there with determined green weeds and bushes that appeared glued to the solid, inhospitable surface. He spotted the father, limp, suspended about seventy feet below, tethered by a single rope fastened around his middle. His head, arms and legs dangled lifelessly as though accepting the inevitable fall to the base below. Twenty feet or so above the father, a young, dark-haired boy sat crouched on a narrow, flat surface in the rock. In textbook form, the belaying rope encircled the child’s tiny waist, held firmly in the brake position by his small hand. The boy was sobbing as he held onto his father’s lifeline.

The desperate scene ignited Jesse’s anger. “What the hell’s going on here, Tim?” Jesse hoped that his tone and intense stare conveyed his agitation. “Where the hell is the high angle team?” Jesse fired questions faster than Tim could answer.

Tim lowered his eyes. “They’re about fifty minutes out.”

“Fifty minutes?” Emma repeated, in noticeable disbelief.

Once again, Jesse leaned over the edge to assess the situation. He didn’t like what he saw.

Jesse shouted in the direction of the whimpering child. “Dustin, you’re gonna be okay, buddy. Your daddy’s gonna be okay, too. Just hold on for a few more minutes, just a little longer, Dustin.”

The sound of an adult’s voice seemed to inflame the boy’s desperation. He began to cry harder. “No!” he screamed back up the mountainside. “No, I don’t want to wait any longer. Help us now,” the frantic boy pleaded. “My dad’s hurt real bad, and my hands are sweaty. I can’t haul him up. Please help me ... I” He continued speaking, but his words became indecipherable.

As if the ground may contain an answer, Jesse kept staring down at it.

“Jesse, what are you thinking?” The tone of Emma’s voice indicated that she already knew the answer to her question before she asked it.

Cliff chimed in behind her. “Yeah, Ranger, what’s up?”

“Well, *up* isn’t the operative word. *Down* is more like it,” Jesse answered as he turned and headed back toward the helicopter. “But first I’m gonna need some rope and gear.”

Emma trailed after her partner like a scolding mother. “Jesse, you know perfectly well that you can’t rappel down there. Our job is to assess and transport. You know that as well as I do, and Rosenfeld said ‘strictly by the book’ on this one. You do remember that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I remember.” Jesse slowed his stride long enough to glance back at Emma. “But Rosenfeld didn’t say *whose* book, did he?” Jesse’s raised eyebrows punctuated his sarcasm.

Emma looked at Cliff. “Cliff,” she pleaded.

Cliff shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t look at me. I’m going down, too.”

Jesse interjected. “Oh, no, you’re not. There’s no use in both of us getting our asses fired. Besides, I need you up top.”

“Well, shit,” Emma said as she grabbed the scene bag, and pediatric case. “I swear. You guys are crazy.” She looked from one to the other of her cohorts and then surrendered. “Well, I guess I’m nuts, too. Count me in.”

Within a matter of minutes, the three allies arrived back at the mountain rim. After handing the end of one of his ropes to Cliff, Jesse began strapping the harness to his waist.

“You’re thinking hauling line, right?” Cliff asked, to which Jesse nodded. Cliff turned in search of a suitable tree to serve as an anchor for the rope. Jesse watched his stout counterpart ready himself to haul a hefty two-hundred-pound load straight up a vertical surface. Cliff would do that by sitting down in the direction of the cliff, spreading his legs, digging his heels into the dirt, and pulling with all his might.

Jesse tied the end of his static climbing rope off to his chest, and handed the opposite end to Emma for Cliff to secure to the tree as well. He then directed his voice down to the child.

“I’m tossing a rappelling rope down behind you, Dustin. Just hang on, buddy. I’m coming.”

A pitiful, “Okay,” reverberated up from the landing below.

Jesse turned back to meet Emma’s concerned countenance.

“You don’t have to do this, Jesse.”

“Yes, I do, Emma. I have to do this. I can’t live with doing nothing while that little boy sits down there and watches his daddy die. I won’t do that.” Jesse breathed in deeply and released a slow, calm breath. “Sometimes we just gotta B.L. it, Emma. The bottom line here is that I’m the one who has to look at myself in the mirror.” He stared at his own reflection in his partner’s dark brown eyes. “I don’t wanna have to look away, Emma. I can’t be the kind of man who does that.”

With those words, he stepped backwards onto nothing but air.

Jesse rappelled the summit with the ease that years of experience bring. His technique—fluid and flawless—straight and swift—landed him just a few feet behind the

boy. In a rush to assess the father's condition, Jesse verbally evaluated the child as he coiled his rappelling ropes using his right forearm as a spool. Taking control and getting the job done was as instinctive to Jesse as swimming upstream is to a salmon; a daunting task, but completely natural if you're destined for it.

"Are you hurting anywhere, Dustin, any cuts or injuries?"

"No, sir," the boy answered, clearly relieved by the presence of an adult. "Just my hands ... just some rope burns." With one swift movement, the child swiped his nose with the back of his small left hand, and then promptly returned it to the rope.

"Your dad's lucky that you're such a good belayer," Jesse said as he bent down and stretched his palm over the boy's trembling shoulder. His t-shirt felt damp against Jesse's hand. "My name's Jesse, and I'm gonna help you save your daddy." Jesse knew that the youngster's body had to be aching from the prolonged and consistent muscle strain, and though time was of the essence, for Dustin's sake, Jesse pretended that it wasn't. "Can you hold onto your father for just a few more minutes until I can get down there and tie him off?"

"Yes, sir," he answered. Heartbreak was evident in his young, innocent face. "I didn't do nothing wrong, mister," he said, his blue eyes wide with the need to explain. "When the rocks hit us, they hit Daddy so hard that he started falling. Then his stoppers failed, and he just ... he just kept falling. I braked, but the rope slid through my hands at first, but, but then the brake finally caught, and then Daddy finally stopped falling" The boy's voice trailed off.

The child's eyes never left Jesse's—clearly begging for absolution.

"He didn't just stop falling, Dustin. *You* stopped him. You did it." Jesse stared back at him with approval. "You did exactly what you were supposed to do, Dustin. You know that, don't you?"

The answer to Jesse's question came in the form of an uncertain nod.

"Did I really do good?" Dustin asked.

Striding over to the edge, Jesse flung his coiled ropes off the side.

"Of course you did, Dustin. Now, you just hold strong until I get down there. I'll tie your daddy off, and then he'll be ready for me to hoist him up. When I do that, I'll need you to go back and stand up against the side of the mountain. I'll tell you when to let go of the rope and step back." Jesse's voice took on a stern tone. "Don't come over here and look over the edge, okay?"

"Yes, sir, I won't," the child agreed.

Jesse smiled at the boy's courage. "You ever thought about becoming a soldier? You'd make a good one."

Dustin beamed. "You think so?"

"Absolutely ... I think you're a natural," Jesse answered honestly.

Jesse let the smiling boy enjoy the fantasy for the briefest moment before bringing him back to reality. “Your daddy’s gonna be fine, Dustin. Don’t worry. I’ll do my best to take care of him.” Jesse gripped the rappelling rope, and, with the confident tone of his own voice still ringing in his ears, he pushed off the side of the mountain, all the while praying that his best was good enough.

Reaching the injured man within seconds, Jesse brought his rope’s brake end across his back and up to his seat’s carabineer using his left guide hand, and then half-hitched it off on itself in front of him. This secured him next to the father’s body so that both of his hands were free to make the assessment.

The man was still alive, but gravely injured. His pulse was barely detectible, and the bluish-gray tint of his skin indicated a lack of oxygen and blood flow. Before Jesse could effectively treat him, he needed to get him up onto the flat surface twenty feet above. Jesse untied the hauling line rope from around his own chest and transferred it to the injured man’s body. Once he had it snugly secured under the patient’s armpits, he shouted up to Cliff. “Can you hear me, Cliff?”

“Roger that, Ranger.”

“I need to get the victim up to the flat where the boy is. I’ve got him tied off, strapped and ready. Haul him up slowly about twenty feet. You got that?”

“Copy that.”

“I’ve got your dad now, Dustin. You can let go of the rope,” Jesse shouted. “Move back against the mountain, okay, Dustin?”

A timid, “Yes, sir,” echoed down the rock face.

The rope tightened and strained against the heavy load as Cliff began inching the victim’s lifeless body up the rock wall. Jesse climbed off to the side and up ahead, muscling his way up, using the natural hand and footholds until he reached the flat. He rolled himself up onto the sun-drenched landing and proceeded to help Cliff haul the critically injured man up onto the shelf.

“I got him!” Jesse shouted up to Cliff as he carefully turned Dustin’s father onto his back.

Kneeling by his patient’s side, Jesse reached out and extended the man’s lifeless arms and legs, feeling for broken limbs.

Opening the victim’s shirt, Jesse found his chest littered with abrasions and deep purple bruises. Palpating the upper body, he didn’t like what he felt.

Dustin, now released from the belaying rope, inched his way toward his father. “We’re ... we’re going to Mexico next month. We were practicing for that today.” The boy’s tone was hushed and reverent. “Me and Mom’s gonna watch Dad climb Protero Chico. Dad said that me and him are gonna climb up part of it together.”

Jesse glanced up to find Dustin nervously wringing his hands. His tear-streaked face touched Jesse’s heart. Jesse saw no point in prolonging the child’s agony, and he

certainly didn't want him to witness the medical procedure that his dad was clearly going to need if the high-angle team didn't get their asses in gear.

"Tell ya what, Dustin ... my partners up top have to lower down some of the medical gear I need to help your dad, but I have to send this rope up to them first." He held up the rope he had just removed from the father. "How about I tie this around your chest and let them haul you up top. Then you can help them lower down the stuff I need to bandage up your dad. Can you do that for me?"

The child struggled not to cry.

Jesse was impressed with such maturity and discipline in one so young.

"Yes, sir," the boy answered. "Then you're going to bring my daddy up, right?"

"Yes, Dustin. Then we'll bring your dad up and get him to the hospital, right behind you."

Jesse yelled up to Emma and Cliff, "I'm getting the boy ready to be hauled up. Once you have him, lower down my scene bag, would you, Cliff? And Emma, I think Dustin is fine, but go ahead and let the EMTs take him to the ER and have him checked out. Did you hear me, Emma?"

"We copy you, Jesse. I'm sending down a two-way with your scene bag so we can keep in better comms."

Working quickly, Jesse took the rope that he had just untied from the father and tied it around Dustin's chest. "Everything's gonna be okay," Jesse told the frightened child. "Just hold onto the rope and my friend will pull you up to the top."

"Okay, Cliff!" Jesse shouted, as he tugged on the rope. "We're ready."

As Cliff began to haul the boy up, Dustin asked Jesse again, "My daddy's coming up next, right?"

Jesse smiled at the little boy. "He'll be right behind you," Jesse said. "Don't be scared. You're a soldier, remember?"

Dustin nodded.

Jesse watched as the child safely reached the top.

Moments after Emma lowered down the scene bags, Jesse heard the sounds of the ambulance transporting Dustin to the hospital. Taking advantage of the radio Emma sent down, Jesse voiced his assessment of the victim's injuries.

"It looks bad, Emma. The patient's shocky and pale. His skin is cool. He's diaphoretic. His heart sounds are uneven and muffled ... pulse is one hundred and ten and erratic ... BP is low and unstable. He's out cold."

Jesse stopped for a moment, removed his cap, and combed his fingers through his damp hair. Perspiration trickled down his forehead and down the back of his neck. "I think it's a cardiac tamponade," he said. "His breath sounds are shallow, but the same on both sides so it's not a tension pneumothorax. There's evidence of some hard blows to

the chest from the falling rocks. His pulse is weak, but it's as strong on the left as it is the right, so it doesn't appear to be an aortic tear, thank God."

"How about the carotid arteries? Are they distended?" Emma asked.

"Yeah, he's affirmative on Beck's triad, and there's some noticeable swelling of the chest and abdomen. I'm sure it's a cardiac tamponade."

Jesse checked his patient's vital signs again. "His systolic has never gotten above fifty. What's the ETA on the high-angle team?"

"The latest update puts them twenty-eight minutes out."

"Twenty-eight minutes," Jesse repeated. "Dammit, this man can't wait that long." Contemplating his options, Jesse was silent for another minute. "He's gonna arrest on me, Emma. I gotta do a pericardio right now or he's gonna go down."

"Jesse, are you sure? Are you sure you can't wait for the team?"

Jesse knew that this certainly wasn't the ideal environment to perform a risky heart procedure, but he also knew that the patient was likely going to die without it. "I'm sure I don't have a choice," Jesse stated.

Emma was also silent before she responded. "Okay then, have you started an IV?"

"I'm doing that right now." Jesse clenched the edge of the IV bag in his teeth while applying the tourniquet just below his patient's bicep. He swabbed the inside of the man's arm with antiseptic, and then inserted the catheter needle into the bulging blue vein. Once Jesse had the needle securely in place, he clipped the IV bag to the collar of his shirt. "Getting some fluids in him might buy me a little more time," he told Emma.

"It should. What's his BP now?" Emma asked as Jesse was squeezing the pump of the BP cuff on the patient's opposite arm.

"Sixty over forty-five ... his systolic is dropping ... even more on inspiration. I've got to get the pressure off his heart now, Emma. I gotta do it right now. If I wait any longer, he's gonna crash." Jesse ripped open a packet of iodine and began disinfecting the patient's mid-chest area in preparation for the risky procedure.

Emma's remorse resonated through the radio. "I'm sorry that I'm not down there with you. I'm your partner; I should be helping you."

"You are helping me," Jesse answered without hesitation.

Reaching into the instrument bag, Jesse retrieved an ominous-looking needle and syringe. He ripped open the plastic wrapping and with care and precision, carefully inserted the large bore needle at a forty-five degree angle into the patient's bruised sternum. He guided it up and into the pericardial sac around the heart muscle. Confident that the needle catheter was in the proper position, Jesse secured it in place with adhesive tape. He watched the site of the puncture as a clear, scarlet-tinted liquid began draining through the catheter into the slender glass container Jesse now held in his hand. The fluid felt warm in his palm as he monitored the unit markings. Jesse exhaled for the first time in what seemed like hours. "I'm getting fluid, Emma ... thirty cc's worth, so far."

“That’s good. His BP should stabilize a little now.”

Jesse could hear the relief in his partner’s voice.

“You’re doing the right thing, Jesse. You and I both know that, but Rosenfeld’s going to have your head for this.”

“I know, Emma. But better for the boss to have my head, than for this guy’s family to have his funeral.”

Jesse watched as the eerie blue tint began to dissipate from his patient’s skin. Another quick check of vital signs told Jesse all he needed to know. He had made the right decision. With any luck, Dustin’s daddy was going to make it. Jesse allowed himself to relax. Leaning backwards from the squatted position he had been in for many tense moments, his body jostled as his buttocks made contact with the ground. The medic in him felt a familiar and exhilarating sense of satisfaction at having just saved a life. He allowed himself to revel in that sensation.

“Damn ...,” he muttered. “It doesn’t get any better than this.”

