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Remember

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CHAPTER ONE

DR. JOHN BAXTER RECEIVED NEWS of the fire the moment he arrived at St. Anne's Hospital that afternoon. An emergency-room nurse flagged him down on his way back from rounds, her face stricken.

"Stay nearby; we might need you. An apartment complex is burning to the ground. A couple of families trapped inside. At least two fatalities. And we're already shorthanded."

John felt the familiar rush of adrenaline that came with working around disaster. He filled in only occasionally at the hospital emergency room—in the summers when he didn't have classes to teach, or when a disaster of some sort demanded extra personnel. But for him the excitement of ER medicine never lessened. It was as quick and consuming now as it had ever been.

He glanced at the others making preparations and then back to the nurse. "What happened?" Already sirens were blaring across Bloomington.

The nurse shook her head. "No one's sure. They're still working the blaze. They lost track of two men, firefighters." She paused. "Everyone's fearing the worst."

Firefighters? John's heart sank to his waist.

He followed her into the back, where a flurry of medical personnel were preparing for the first victims. "Did you get their names? The missing men?"

The nurse stopped and turned around. "It's Engine 211. That's all we've got so far."

John felt the blood drain from his face as he launched into silent, fervent prayer. He prayed for the people fighting the fire and the families trapped inside—and for the missing men of Engine 211.

He pictured them lost in an inferno, risking their lives to save mothers and fathers and children. He imagined them buried beneath burning rubble or cut off from all communications with their chief.

Then he prayed for one of Engine 211's men in particular. A strapping young man who had loved John Baxter's middle daughter, Ashley, since the two of them were teenagers.



The money was running out.

That was the main reason Ashley Baxter was out looking for a job on that beautiful summer morning—the type of blue-skied, flower-bursting day perfect for creating art.

The settlement from her car accident four years ago was almost gone, and though she'd paid cash for her house, she and little Cole still needed money to live on—at least until her paintings began to sell.

Ashley sighed and ran her hand through her short-cropped, dark hair. She studied the ad in the paper once more:

Care worker for adult group home. Some medical training preferred. Salary and benefits.

As mundane as it sounded, it might be just the job she wanted. She'd checked with her father and found out that caregiver pay

tended to be barely above minimum wage. She'd be working mostly with Alzheimer's patients—people with dementia or other age-related illnesses, folks unable to survive on their own. She would have wrinkled bodies to tend, hairy chins to wipe, and most likely diapers to change. The job wasn't glamorous.

But Ashley didn't mind. She had reasons for wanting the job. Since returning from her sojourn in Paris, everything about her life had changed. She was only twenty-five, but she felt years older, jaded and cynical. She rarely laughed, and she wasn't the kind of mother Cole needed. Despite the heads she turned, she felt old and used up—even ugly.

Paris was partly to blame for who she had become. But much of it was due to all the running she had done since then. Running from her parents' viewpoints, their tiresome religion, their attempts to mold her into a woman she could never be. And running from Landon Blake—from his subtle but persistent advances and the predictable lifestyle she'd be forced into if she ever fell in love with him.

Whatever the reason, she was aware that something tragic had happened to her heart in the four years since she had come home from Europe. It had grown cold—colder than the wind that whipped across Bloomington, Indiana, in mid-January. And that, in turn, was affecting her only true passion—her ability to paint. She still worked at it, still filled up canvases, but it had been years since she did anything truly remarkable.

Ashley turned off South Walnut and began searching for the address of the group home. In addition to bringing in a paycheck, working with old people might ward off the cold deep within her, might even melt the ice that had gathered around her soul over the years. She had always felt a kind of empathy for old folks, an understanding. Somehow they stirred a place in her heart that nothing else could touch.

She remembered driving through town a week ago and seeing two ancient women—hunched-over, gnarled old girls, probably in their nineties—walking arm in arm down the sidewalk. They

had taken careful, measured steps, and when one started to slip, the other held her up.

Ashley had pulled over that afternoon and studied them from a distance, thinking they'd make a good subject for her next painting. Who were they, and what had they seen in their long lifetimes? Did they remember the tragedy of the *Titanic*? Had they lost sons in World War II—or had they themselves served somehow? Were the people they loved still alive or close enough to visit?

Had they been beautiful, flitting from one social event to another with a number of handsome boys calling after them? And did they grieve the way they'd become invisible—now that society no longer noticed them?

Ashley watched the women step carefully into an intersection and then freeze with fear when the light turned, catching them halfway across. An impatient driver laid on his horn, honking in sharp, staccato patterns. The expression on the women's faces became nervous and then frantic. They hurried their feet, shuffling in such a way that they nearly fell. When they reached the other side, they stopped to catch their breath, and again Ashley wondered.

Was this all that was left for these ladies—angry drivers impatient with their slow steps and physical challenges? Was that all the attention they'd receive on a given day?

The most striking thing about the memory was that as the questions came, Ashley's cheeks had grown wet. She popped down the visor and stared at her reflection. Something was happening to her that hadn't happened in months. Years, even.

She was crying.

And that was when she had realized the depth of her problem. The fact was, her experiences had made her cynical. And if she was ever going to create unforgettable artwork, she needed something more than a canvas and a brush. She needed a heart, tender and broken, able to feel in ways she'd long since forgotten.

That afternoon as she watched the two old women, a thought

occurred to Ashley. Perhaps she had unwittingly stumbled upon a way to regain the softness that had long ago died. If she wanted a changed heart, perhaps she need only spend time with the aged.

That's why the ad in this morning's paper was so appealing.

She drove slowly, scanning the addresses on the houses until she found the one she was looking for. Her interview was in five minutes. She pulled into the driveway, taking time to study the outside of the building. "Sunset Hills Adult Care Home" a sign read. The building was mostly brick, with a few small sections of beige siding and a roof both worn and sagging. The patch of grass in front was neatly manicured, shaded at the side by a couple of adolescent maple trees. A gathering of rosebushes struggled to produce a few red and yellow blossoms in front of a full-sized picture window to the right of the door. A wiry, gray-haired woman with loose skin stared out at her through the dusty glass, her eyes nervous and empty.

Ashley drew a deep breath and surveyed the place once more. It seemed nice enough, the type of facility that drew little or no attention and served its purpose well. What was it her father called homes like this one? She thought for a moment, and it came to her.

Heaven's waiting rooms.

Sirens sounded in the distance, lots of them. Sirens usually meant one thing: it'd be a busy day for her father. And maybe Landon Blake. Ashley blocked out the sound and checked the mirror. Even she could see the twinlike resemblance between herself and Kari, her older sister. Other than Kari's eyes, which were as brown as Ashley's were blue, they were nearly identical.

But the resemblance stopped there.

Kari was good and pure and stoic, and even now—five months after the death of her husband, with a two-month-old baby to care for by herself—Kari could easily find a reason to smile, to believe the best about life and love.

And God, of course. Always God.

Ashley bit her lip and opened the car door. Determination

mingled with the humid summer air as she grabbed her purse and headed up the walkway. With each step, she thought again of those two old ladies, how she had cried at their condition—lonely, isolated, and forgotten.

As Ashley reached the front door, a thought dawned on her. The reason the women had been able to warm the cold places in her heart was suddenly clear.

In all ways that mattered, she was just like them.



There was no way out.

Landon Blake was trapped on the second floor somewhere in the middle of the burning apartment complex. Searing walls of flames raged on either side of him and, for the first time since becoming a firefighter, Landon had lost track of the exits. Every door and window was framed in fire.

His partner had to be somewhere nearby, but they'd separated to make the room checks more quickly. Now the fire had grown so intense, he wasn't sure they'd ever find each other in time. Landon grabbed his radio from its pocket on his upper jacket and positioned it near his air mask. Then he turned a valve so his words would be understood.

"Mayday . . . Mayday . . ."

He stuck the radio close to his ear and waited, but only a crackling static answered him. A few seconds passed, and the voice of his captain sounded on the radio.

"Lieutenant Blake, report your whereabouts."

Hope flashed in Landon's heart. He placed the radio near the valve in his mask once more. "Lieutenant Blake reporting Mayday, sir. I can't find my way out."

There was a pause. "Lieutenant Blake, report your whereabouts."

Landon's stomach tightened. "I'm on the second floor, sir. Can you hear me?"

“Lieutenant Blake, this is your captain. Report your whereabouts immediately.” A brief hesitation followed; then the captain’s tone grew urgent. “RIT enter the building now! Report to the second floor. I repeat, RIT report to the second floor.”

RIT? Landon forced himself to breathe normally. RIT was the Rapid Intervention Team, the two firefighters who waited on alert at any job in case someone from the engine company became lost in the fire. The command could mean only one thing: Landon’s radio wasn’t working. His captain had no idea that he’d become separated from his partner or where to begin looking for him.

Landon made his way into the smoky hallway and heard his radio come to life again. He held it close to his ear.

“This is an alert. We have two men trapped on the second floor, and the radios aren’t working for either of them. Backup units are on the way, but until then I need everyone in the building. Let’s move it!”

So he was right. The radios weren’t working. *Dear God, help us. . . .*

Landon fought off a wave of fear. In situations like this he’d been trained to scan the room for victims and then fight his way out of the building. Choose the most likely place for an exit and barge through burning beams and broken glass. Do whatever it took to be free of the building.

But Landon had gone back into the building for one reason: to find a five-year-old boy in one of the apartments. He would find the child—dead or alive—and bring him out. He had promised the boy’s frantic mother, and he didn’t intend to break the promise.

The smoke grew dense, dropping visibility to almost nothing. Landon fell to his knees and crawled along the floor. The flames roared on either side of him, filling his senses with intense heat and smoke. *Don’t think about the broken radios. They’ll find me any minute. Help is on the way. Please, God.*

He still had his personal accountability safety system, a box

on his air pack that would send out a high-pitched sound the moment he stopped moving. If that signal worked, there was still a pretty good chance his engine company might locate him. But they'd have to get here fast. If they waited much longer, ceiling beams would begin to fall. And then . . .

Landon squinted through the smoke, his body heaving from the excruciating heat and the weight of his equipment. *God, help me.* He crept through a burning hallway door. *I need a miracle. Show me the boy.*

Just ahead of him he saw something fall to the ground—something small, the size of a ceiling tile or maybe a wall hanging. Or a small child. Landon lurched ahead and there, at the bottom of a linen closet, he found the boy and rolled him onto his back. He held a glove against the boy's chest and felt a faint rise and fall.

The child was alive!

Landon jerked the air mask from his own face and shoved it onto the boy's. He switched the mask from demand to positive pressure, forcing a burst of air onto the child's face. The boy must have hidden in the closet when the fire started, and now here they were—both trapped. Landon coughed hard and tried to breathe into his coat as the acrid smoke invaded his lungs.

Then he heard crashing sounds around him, and he glanced up. *No, God, not now.*

Flaming pieces of the ceiling were beginning to fall! He hovered over the child and used his body as a covering. Inches from the boy's face, he was struck by the resemblance. The boy looked like a slightly older version of Cole, Ashley's son.

"Hang in there, buddy!" Landon yelled above the roar of the fire. He removed the mask from the boy for just an instant and held the child's nose while he grabbed another precious lungful of air. Then he quickly replaced the mask over the boy's face. "They're coming for us."

He heard a cracking sound so loud and violent it shook the room. Before Landon could move, a ceiling beam fell from the roof and hit him across the back of his legs. He felt something

snap deep inside his right thigh, and pain exploded through his body. *Move*, he ordered himself. He strained and pushed and tried to leverage the beam off his leg. But no matter how hard he tried he couldn't get free. His legs were pinned by the burning wood.

"God!" The pain intensified, and he reeled his head back, his jaw clenched. "Help us!"

He fought to stay conscious as he lowered himself over the boy once more. His training had taught him to limit his inhalations, but his lungs screamed for air, and he sucked in another deep breath. The smoke was choking him, filling his body with poisonous fumes and gasses that would kill him in a matter of minutes—if the falling debris didn't bury them first.

His air tank was still half full, so the boy should be breathing okay—as long as Landon stayed conscious enough to buddy-breathe with him.

The heat was oppressive. The visor on his helmet was designed to melt at 350 degrees—a warning that a firefighter was in a dangerous situation. Landon glanced up and saw a slow, steady drip of plastic coming from just above his forehead.

This is it. There's no way out.

He could feel himself slipping away, sense himself falling asleep. He borrowed the mask once more, gulped in one more breath of air, then firmly placed the mask back on the child's face. *Keep me awake, God . . . please.* He meant to say the words out loud, but his mouth wouldn't cooperate. Gradually, the pain and noise and heat around him began to dim.

I'm dying, he thought. *We're both going to die.*

And in the shadows of his mind he thought about the things he'd miss. Being a husband someday, and a father. Growing old beside a woman who loved him, standing beside her through the years, watching their children grow up.

A memory came to him, sweet and clear. His mother, frowning when she first learned of his intention to fight fires. "I worry about you, Landon. Be careful."

He had smiled and kissed her forehead. “God wants me to be a firefighter, Mom. He’ll keep me safe. Besides, he knows the number of my days. Isn’t that what you always say?”

The memory faded as smoke burned its way down his throat again. A dark numbness settled over Landon’s mind, and he was struck by an overwhelming sadness. He held his breath, the smoke strangling what little life remained in him. He no longer had the strength to choke out even a single cough, to try for even one more breath of clean air. *So this is it, God. This is it.*

His impending death filled him not with fear, but with bitter-sweet peace. He had always known the risks of being a firefighter. He accepted them gladly every day when he climbed into his uniform. If this fire meant that his days were up, then Landon had no regrets.

Except one.

He hadn’t gotten to tell Ashley Baxter good-bye.

Discussion Questions

Use these questions for individual reflection or for discussion with a book club or other small group. They will help you not only understand some of the issues in *Remember* but also integrate some of the book's messages into your own relationships.

1. Before September 11, in what way did Landon Blake's memories play a part in his decision to take a job in New York City? Explain.
2. As helpful as remembering can be, painful memories can actually stand in the way of healthy relationships. How was this the case in Ashley Baxter's relationship with Landon? with her family?
3. Explain Ashley's goal in taking a job at Sunset Hills Adult Care Home.
4. How did Kari's memory play a part in her healing after the death of her husband? In what way do you think remembering may have helped Ryan Taylor during this time?
5. After working at Sunset Hills for several weeks, Ashley began to discover something about the memories of the Alzheimer's patients she worked with. What did she discover?
6. Describe the Past-Present ideas Ashley found on the Internet. How did this help her make the residents at Sunset Hills calmer and happier?
7. How did Ashley's work at Sunset Hills affect her personal life? What did it make her feel about her own memories?
8. When Ashley shares the painful memories of her time in Paris, what does Landon remind her? How does this, in turn, change Ashley's life?
9. After September 11, when Landon goes to New York to work at Ground Zero, what do you think drove him to work nearly eighty straight days?

10. How does Kari use the importance of remembering to help Erin in her marriage?
11. What can you learn from the happy memories in your life when it comes to your relationships? What can you learn from the darker memories?
12. Throughout the Scriptures God asks his people to remember certain things. Why do you think remembering is so important to God? How would your faith grow if you were to remember in the ways suggested in the passages below?

“And remember these instructions when the Lord brings you into the land he swore to give your ancestors long ago, the land where the Canaanites are now living.” (Exodus 13:11, NLT)

“Remember your Creator now while you are young.” (Ecclesiastes 12:6, NLT)

“Remember what I told you: I am going away, but I will come back to you again.” (John 14:28, NLT)

“You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:35, NLT).

13. Describe a relationship you would like to see improved. What are the problems, the conflicts? How would your ability to remember possibly improve that relationship? Detail a plan based on the suggestions in the previous section.
14. Purchase a “memory journal”—any lined notebook will do. Jot down important memories from your past and the lessons you learned—or can still learn—from them.
15. What role did forgiveness play in Ashley’s relationships to Landon? God? herself? Luke? Kari?
16. In what ways would you find freedom and peace if you were to seek forgiveness from God and others? In what ways would you experience freedom and peace if you were to extend forgiveness to others—including yourself?
17. How did the redemption theme—the overall theme of

the series—reveal itself in this book? In whose lives did you see redemption at work?

18. In what ways does your life need redemption? How will you find it?
19. Whose relationships were marked by honor? In what specific ways did the characters show honor?
20. How are you currently showing honor in your relationships? How would you like to grow in that area? How will you accomplish that?