the GIVER: *Chapter 3 (continued...see previous)*

Ephesians 3:8-9 'Saving is all God's idea, and all His work. All we do is trust Him enough to let Him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving.' (MSG)

A cold, damp and persuasive, permeated the entire pod where Sammy was housed. It was the kind of winter that ate at your toes and settled in your bones. 'Course getting old and eating prison slop made up of empty calories and things he couldn't name didn't help matters. Nor did the thin blankets and metal bunks which seemed to instigate an icebox existence. His cellie chided him. 'Bro, if you'd move some, you wouldn't freeze. I'm telling you, my granny was right! Moving water can't freeze, so if you'd get up off your lazy behind, neither would you!' But Sammy just couldn't.

Sammy couldn't do much more than sob into his pillow this time of year. For some reason, his hopelessness hit rawer, felt more profound, cut deeper this year than any previous year he could recall. Maybe it was the constant reminder he wasn't getting any younger, while his son, the greatest accomplishment in his life, was growing older and likely wouldn't even know his name. Perhaps it was what was produced between the breeding of shame and the conviction of guilt that had created a result constantly crying out about his lack of worth. Maybe it was just being here almost a decade later, staring at the same cinder block walls and peeling paint, hearing the same clang of metal bars and snorts from men living around him and swallowing food that didn't taste or resemble anything food-like. And this year, again for a reason unknown to him, he missed his little boy more than he ever had. Theodore, born on Christmas Day a decade before, into a world of flophouses and drugs and gang wars, had wrought in Sammy a desire to *do something, be someone*, someday his son would be proud of. But he had never gotten that chance.

Sammy dropped his head into his hands. He shoved a corner of the pillow into his mouth like taking a bite from a burger in order to stifle his sobs. He felt his soul erupting like a volcano deep down inside as if it would explode any minute, blowing grief and guilt and gloom into the atmosphere surrounding him. When every emotion effervesced from within him, he wondered, would anything be left inside? An image floated behind his eyelids. He recalled right where he stood when the DEA busted down the door of the dive they all had been hiding in. Sammy remembered knowing they were coming any day. He had known it like he knew his own name; felt it just like he felt he needed to change so he had something worthy to give his son one day. A hundred of them, it seemed like, had broken through the barricade, rushing the shack they were in, and the only gentle moment he'd ever witnessed was when one of the agents cautiously removed the baby from his wife's arms before taking them all away. Sammy gnawed on the bunched-up pillow in his mouth, trying not to gag. That cry he would never forget.

"Jesus. Jesus. Jesus," Sammy whispered. Like a million other times, the name of Jesus became a mantra, and it would again carry him across the hard times, over the agony, through the bitterness he felt toward himself. Sammy may have been arrested by the system, but he had been rescued by God when he came to prison. He felt gratitude for the forgiveness and the grace that flowed from a God who had been in wild pursuit of him for years. It was a 'red sea' moment in his own life. The churning turmoil before him and the angry and insistent enemy behind him, and the God within him that parted the turbulence so he could pass through to the peace that was surely waiting on the other side. He'd get there. Someday, he'd get there. And then, he would find his son; he'd find Teddy and ask his forgiveness, and they'd start over fresh. Maybe find the boy's mother, maybe not. But he knew for certain, for the rest of his life, he would make it up to his son what he had caused. And then there would be decades of Merry Christmases left to celebrate.

To be continued...