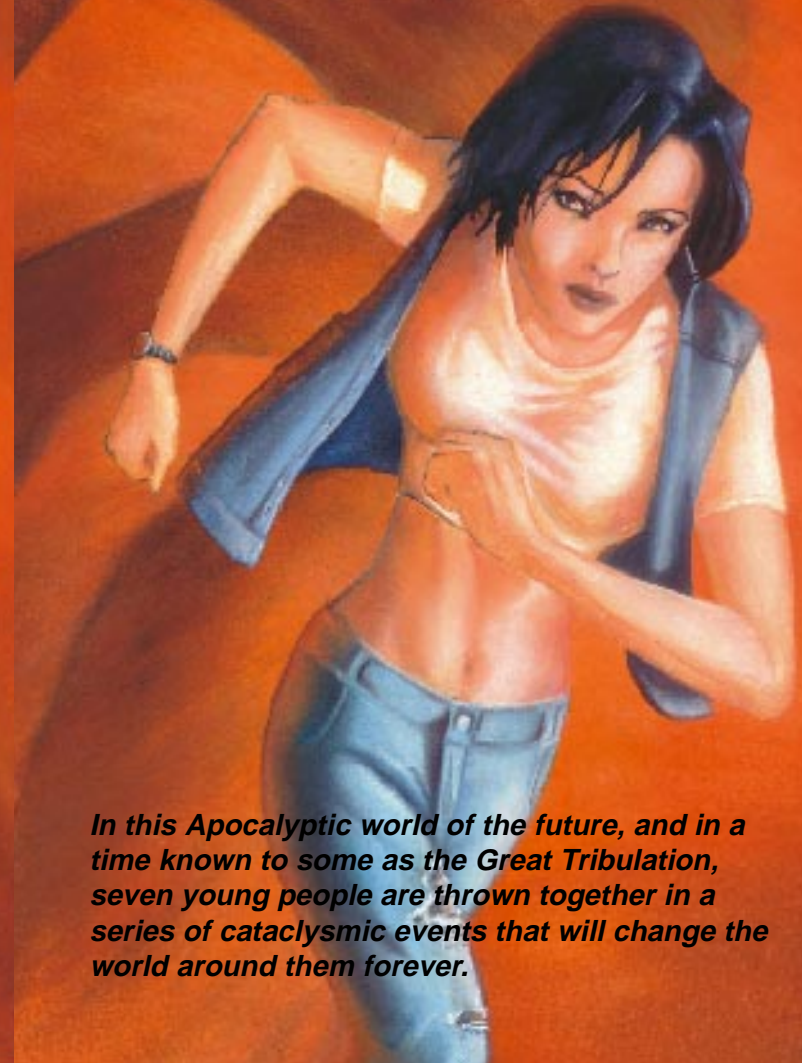


BLOOD AND FREEDOM

*Beneath the organized exterior ... chaos.
Behind the controlled front ... rebellion.
Beyond the surface of everyday life ... a spiritual
weapon that threatens the destruction of the
entire New World Order.*



*In this Apocalyptic world of the future, and in a
time known to some as the Great Tribulation,
seven young people are thrown together in a
series of cataclysmic events that will change the
world around them forever.*

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Recommended age: 14 years and up.
(May be read by younger children at parents' discretion.)

ORIENTATION

What you are about to read is a story set in the future. It is a spirit story, but not necessarily a direct prophecy about future events. The Lord told us that He has given this story as an education of how things might be during the dark days ahead, but cautions that we should not take it word-for-word as the Gospel truth or as the exact way things will happen.

So as you dive into the prophecy, the sex, the fiery wonders and supernatural events, the death and destruction ... remember, not every situation that is portrayed here will necessarily happen exactly that way. It is important to remember that the policies and practices portrayed in this story are, like the story itself, largely fictional, and are not meant to be adhered to literally, either now, or in the future. Although in spirit we are preparing to face situations similar to those you will find within this story, let us continue to live within the current boundaries that the Lord has put in place for now, following and heeding the New Wine for today, and waiting on the Lord for any changes that may come in the future.

Chapter 1

CHANCE ENCOUNTER

It was getting late, but one glance at her wristwatch told Kate that it was not as late as it felt. The sun was already starting to set, and it was hardly past four o'clock. *How unusual!* she thought to herself—just another of the stuffing type of thoughts that often filled her mind when she could not find anything of consequence to put in it.

She stood up from her desk, pushing her chair back against the wall of her cramped little office. She drew her arms up over her head and stretched vigorously, then shook her head hard, as if to dislodge some of the cobwebs that seemed to have been dwelling in there of late. Then she plopped back down in her chair and drew her eyes absently over the landscape that faced her window. The street lights didn't come on till five, and were apparently caught off guard by nature's quick schedule change. Some of the shops had caught on and were starting to put on their big neon flashers, but for the most part, the city was fast sinking into a pool of darkness.

Following the busy streets randomly with her eyes, Kate continued on for several miles until she reached a set of hills. Beyond the hills was the sky,

and what a sky there was tonight! Thinking back much later, Kate realized that she had never seen a sky quite like this one, and that in itself should have been enough to set alarm bells ringing in the head of any self-respecting journalist—even one whose head was as foggy as hers. But somehow it didn't, and the sky was just another part of the great, empty world out there—just as empty as Kate herself.

Still early into her twenty-somethings, Kate was of medium build, with a thin, inquisitive face and soft grey-green eyes that lit up like big question marks when something sparked her curiosity. Nothing remotely like that was happening now, however, and Kate abruptly stood up again. Grabbing a pile of papers from the desk, she shoved them into the great big burlap sack that was lying on the floor by her desk.—It was Kate's own personal version of a briefcase, and she was seldom seen without it. It was rumored to contain everything she would need to survive for days on end. This may have been due to the fact that once something went inside, it seldom ever made its way out again. Kate had often considered giving it a spring cleaning, but the more time passed and the more things went in, the more daunting a task it seemed, until now the very thought was enough to give her mind a complete shutdown. So she continued to carry it around wherever she went, contentedly reminding herself how much less weight she would have to use in her workout session for all the "training" she was getting in her personal time.

With the burlap bag thrown over her shoulder, Kate strode across her office, stepped outside and locked it. She walked rather quietly through the dimly-lit hallway, trying to avoid being noticed by the other workers. She could leave whenever she wanted, but too many early departures tended to

send questioning glances in one's direction, and it was easier to just keep up an average appearance whenever possible.

She sighed as she emerged from the door and stepped into the elevator. She was the only one in there today—something that didn't happen very often. She figured it was probably not the time when most people were leaving work. She watched the numbers on the electronic display flash as the floors sped past ... 30, 20, 10 ... it was just a matter of minutes till the doors slid open again, and she stepped into the main lobby of the building.

The caretaker's daughter, Alana, was sitting behind the desk smoking. Her short, straight black hair blended in with the rest of her black outfit, and was complemented by heavy dark makeup. Her strikingly white face was puckered up into a sour scowl, and Kate smiled inwardly—though careful not to let it show on the exterior. Alana was not one to cross if there was any way to avoid doing so. Kate did not know Alana well, but they were nearly the same age and had gone to the same high school.

"How is your mother?" Kate dared to ask.

Alana only looked darkly in her direction, and her scowling eyes followed Kate's brief walk to the outer doorway.

"I'll see you later on, then!" Kate called over her shoulder, not expecting an answer, and not receiving any.

Once outside the building she allowed herself to burst into a quiet fit of laughter, and she felt rather brave. It's not that Alana was anyone to be worried about, but Kate usually did not take many risks, and to tease Alana about having to sit in the caretaker's seat for her mother—something that she strongly detested—was pretty high up on her risk level.

Kate's small red convertible was parked just a couple of minutes' walk away. She had opted for a closed-in garage, even though it meant a little walk and forking out a few more bucks. She had saved for years to pay off this car, and she didn't want to risk anything happening to it in some two-bit parking area. She affectionately referred to the machine as Emsie, and often carried on conversations with her as she drove her one-hour trip to work and back every day. Emsie was her closest confidante, and if Kate was sure of nothing else in her life, she knew that Emsie would not betray her trust.



Kate had been driving for forty minutes or so when she got to the outskirts of the city. She turned left up the road that led to the hills, and smiled to herself as she changed gears.

"What a beauty you are, Emsie!" she laughed aloud. The road narrowed quickly as it climbed upward, and once again, Kate's attention was drawn to the magnificent sky above her.

"Will you get a look at that?" she said softly. Unable to restrain herself, she pulled over on the nearest shoulder, and stepped out of her car. Quietly, almost reverently, she walked to the edge of the embankment and placed both hands on the guardrail. Her head was tilted all the way back, taking in every drop of the magnificence that surrounded her.

From where she stood she had a clear view of the city below. The entire valley seemed to be ringed with huge, billowing black clouds, so deep and so dense that they looked like a seething mass of coals. The entire rest of the sky below the clouds was a deep, vivid red, that seemed to be blushing more and more with each passing second. The sun had long since sunk into its bed, yet the sky retained this ominous—yet somehow majestic—pattern.

Out of nowhere, a single flash of lightning lit up the landscape, slicing through the sky like a sharp knife. Kate turned to look in its direction, and when she did, she saw something she hadn't noticed before. A little below her, to her left, was another embankment that overhung the valley and the city below. She could make out a lone figure standing on that crag.

Kate shifted positions to get a better look, and the more she saw, the more her interest grew. The little spark that had been so quietly dying not an hour before seemed to suddenly spring to life again, as her curiosity was kindled with just one quick glance.

It was a man's figure that she saw—a tall, young man, very muscular. He was wearing strange clothes—some sort of a thick robe that covered his entire body from the shoulders down. It was sleeveless and open down the front, and the sleeve-holes were wide enough for Kate to see that he was bare-chested. He seemed to be wearing some sort of jeans underneath. His long hair was waving wildly in the wind.

There he stood, like a lone force outlined against the glowing sky behind him. It made a strange picture, one that would be forever etched in Kate's mind—the lonely figure on the crag; the black above, the red behind; and far below, the distant, darkening city, with people swarming around like ants, going about their never-ending business. Another burst of lightning flashed, and as his head moved slightly, Kate almost thought she could see his eyes—large, lonely eyes, they seemed to be taking in the entire landscape before him. He almost looked as though he was going to cry.

Something caught Kate's attention far to her right, and she turned to see the streetlights in the city below her begin to light, one block at a time. It

was five o'clock. She turned quickly back to the crag, but ... the mysterious stranger was gone.

Kate quickly leaned as far over the guardrail as she dared, but she was at an awkward angle and couldn't tell if he'd disappeared, or had just quickly moved back into the trees. She cursed herself inwardly.

"I can't believe I let him slip through my fingers!" she shouted to the city below. Then she stopped, rather surprised at her own loudness. Indeed, she could hardly remember the last time she'd even raised her voice. She laughed at the strange sensations that she felt. Even Emsie seemed somehow less real, less red, and less trustworthy.

Still buzzing with all those tingly sensations in the pit of her stomach, Kate jumped back in her car and recklessly made a U-turn right from where she was, then began speeding back down the hillside.



Alana was sitting behind the desk with the same depressed look that had been on her face for the last several hours. The only thing that had changed was that she had leaned her chair back another couple of inches, and had thrown her large spiked boots up onto the main desk. Her attention was drawn to a noise outside the front entranceway, and she inwardly hoped it would be her mother, for the picture she made at that moment would have been perfectly shocking to her.

No such luck this time, though. In through the door like a whirlwind swept Kate, her hair all blown out of place and her eyes bright with excitement.

Alana dropped her chair back into its place and her boots hit the floor with a thud, but she did not deem it necessary to say anything.

"Alana!" Kate obviously had words enough to spare for the both of them. "Oh, Alana! This is so very

forward of me, but I just had the most amazing thing happen. I just had to tell someone, and ... well, I have no idea why I came to tell you. I guess you're about the only person I know."

Alana pursed her lips and tilted her head a bit to the side, as if to imply that if their acquaintance was the best that Kate could do, then she was pretty bad off.

Fortunately for Kate, she was too far-gone in her dizzied state to take notice of any subliminal messages. "Can I tell you all about it?" she asked excitedly.

"Be my guest," Alana shoved a nearby chair with her foot, and Kate stopped a moment in surprise at hearing the girl's husky voice.

"You've got a real pretty voice, it's sort of sexy-sounding," Kate said in surprise. "I guess I never heard you say anything before."

"Yeah, I'm a regular Demi Moore," Alana drawled sarcastically. "So, what's the big news? It couldn't be any worse than the day I've had so far."

Kate ungracefully landed in the nearby chair, her burlap bag hitting the ground next to her with a thud.

"So I was driving home, right," she began enthusiastically, hardly noticing the expressionless face near her, so intent she was on recounting what had happened. "And right as I got halfway up the Bowler's Hill, you know the one right on the east side of town? I stopped to look at that incredible sky—I'm sure you noticed it, all afternoon it's been this unbelievable spectacle of red and black ... what?" She stopped and took in Alana's rather scornful expression.

"Well, I don't mean to be a wet blanket or anything, but the sky looked awfully ordinary to me," Alana drawled. "I made a specific point of looking out the window a couple times this afternoon—just

in case some crazy-sounding brunette would dart in here and accuse the sky of pulling tricks on her—and I certainly never noticed anything unusual.”

Kate’s eyes flashed, but she was still too involved in her story to be deterred by Alana’s sharp retorts. “Well anyway, as I’m standing there taking in the sights, all of a sudden there’s this flash of lightning, and for the first time I notice this incredible guy standing on the ledge right below me. It was just like, oh my God! You’d never believe this guy! I’ve never seen anyone like him!”

“What did he look like?” Alana asked dryly.

Kate paused for a moment to consider the question. “I don’t know,” she finally said. “I couldn’t see him very clearly. But it was sort of the air, the atmosphere, the ambience that permeated the entire ...”

“Okay, newspaper lady, don’t give me any of that big jargon talk,” Alana cut her off. “Sounds like you’ve got a bad case of the hots. Did you ask him out?”

“Of course not,” Kate was annoyed at the down-to-earth question. “Besides, he disappeared. I looked away for a second, and then he was gone.”

“Ah,” Alana shook her head in mock wisdom. “Big mistake, lady. *Never, ever* look away! Didn’t they teach you anything in school?”

Kate stood up, offended at the other girl’s coarse manner. “Well, I guess I’d better be going home now.”

Alana threw back her head and laughed aloud. “You drove forty minutes back from Bowler’s Hill to tell me *that*, and now you’re going home again?”

Kate bristled, and surprised herself with another first. “Look here, Alana Williams,” she said fiercely, raising her finger and shaking it in the other girl’s direction, “just because you feel you got a tough deal in life does not give you reason to miserate

the lives of everyone around you. You could be a very nice person if you’d just let yourself.” Kate paused, and looked down at the floor, somewhat embarrassed at her uncharacteristic display of temper. “There, now I’ve said it, and I’ve been wanting to for a very long time.”

“Well, just for the record, ‘miserate’ is not a word,” was all Alana said.

Kate rolled her eyes at the girl’s denseness. “Well, it is now!” she fairly shouted, as she grabbed her bag and ran out the door, letting it slam shut behind her.

Left alone in the empty lobby, Alana shrugged her shoulders gruffly, trying to brush off the chewy feeling in the bottom of her stomach that told her she’d made a big mistake. “That girl’s a pipsqueak. She had it coming,” she said aloud to herself. But deep inside, she could not suppress the knowledge that what Kate had said was true.

Where is my life heading? Alana wondered suddenly. *Do I like what I have become?*



By the time Kate made the turn again to go up Bowler’s Hill, she was sorely regretting her rashness. She couldn’t believe that she had been so foolhardy! And what was it that Alana had said about the sky? Was it possible that Alana could have looked out the window at all, and not noticed it? Surely that sky would have impressed even the likes of Alana Williams. Kate looked doubtfully up as she drove, disturbed at how normal the sky and everything around her now appeared. There was no sign that anything was or ever had been remotely out of the ordinary.

The whole rest of the way home Kate berated herself for her incontinence, and rehearsed apologies that she’d make to Alana the next time she saw her.

So intent was she on these rehearsals that she scarcely kept her eyes on the winding road in front of her. By the time she looked up and focused on something in the middle of the road, it was well upon her. She threw all of her weight on the brakes and the car screeched loudly. The back side of the car spun around into the center of the road, and Kate's heart nearly died within her as she heard a loud thump.

Almost before the car had fully stopped, Kate had leaped onto the street and ran around the car to see what she had hit. There she stopped dead in her tracks. Lying in the middle of the road, halfway under her car, was her mystery man.

"Oh my God! I've killed him!" Kate started wailing. Her mind was racing, and she had no idea what to do. She noticed that his head was bleeding. "The hospital! I've got to get him to a hospital. They'll know what to do."

She moved cautiously towards him, but at that moment he stirred. Kate almost started sobbing with relief, and threw herself down next to him. "Are you all right?" she asked.

The man's eyes fluttered open. He was obviously trying very hard to say something, and Kate moved in closer, till her ear was only inches away from his lips. She could barely make out the words.

"No ... hospital ... no people ... no ..." his voice trailed off, and his eyes shut again.

Kate frenziedly reached her hands onto his neck, only to utter a huge sigh of relief at feeling the pulse still there.

"No hospital?" Kate said incredulously to Emsie. "What is this guy, a nut? He's gonna die if I don't take him to a hospital." Then she rolled her eyes. "Look at me, arguing with a car. All right, all right. He said no hospital, that's fine. He'll just have to come home with me."

The next task was getting him from the street into her car. It was only a matter of time before another car would come around the bend, and people in these parts didn't drive slow. Kate knew she had to get out of the way, and fast, or there would be a second string of casualties starting.

The man was lying right next to Emsie's right door. Kate opened it and began struggling with the huge, muscle-bound body. Despite the gravity of the situation, she couldn't help appreciate the quality of what she was handling.

It took the better part of fifteen minutes for Kate to push, pull, drag and roll the unconscious body into the back seat. By the time she had successfully accomplished the task, she was sweating hard. But there was no time to lose. Shutting the back door behind her and climbing over into the front seat, she stepped on the gas and made it to her house in record time.

Only once she arrived did she realize her next dilemma: If it had taken her that long to move the guy a couple of inches from the street to her car, what hope was there of her getting him all the way down the walkway and into the house? Not much. It was too late by now to turn around and go somewhere else, so for the second time that day, she chose what seemed the only obvious option.

Picking up the phone, she dialed a number, and soon heard the expected husky drawl in the receiver. "Yeah?"

"Alana!" Kate said frantically. "Look, I'm sorry about earlier on. I shouldn't have said all that, but I really need your help."

"Hey, you're entitled to your opinion," Alana said charitably.

Kate brushed that aside and said again. "I *really* need your help, Alana. You know where I live?"

"Yeah, what of it?"

"Remember that mystery guy I was telling you about? Well, I ran him over with my car on the way home."

"You *what*?" Alana's well-controlled front was shattered at this unexpected news.

"Please, don't!" Kate wailed. "I guess I wasn't looking where I was going, and I hit him. He's unconscious. But he doesn't want to be taken to a hospital, so I've got him here at my place."

"So where do I come into the big picture?" Alana was back in control of herself again.

Kate cringed at how ridiculous she knew this would sound. "He's really big, and I can't get him out of my car. There's no one else near here, and plus I just figured ... well, you were real good at first aid and stuff in school too, and I know beans about that. I really need your help. Could you please come?"

Somewhere deep beneath her tough exterior, Alana's heart was touched, but all she could get out was, "What do you think I am, a drop-by nurse and carry service? Yeah, yeah, I'll be there."

"Thanks, Alana, you're tops. Come as quick as you can. Oh!" Kate suddenly realized. "What about the reception desk?—You're on duty!"

"Aw, forget the desk," Alana said. "Mom's late anyway, and I'm not paid for overtime."



Just over forty minutes had passed before a loud roaring sound was heard on the driveway, and a bright headlight illumined the front lawn.

"Over here!" Kate called.

Alana kicked the stand on her motorbike and strode across the lawn.

Kate cringed at the tracks her spiked boots were leaving, but only said, "You got here fast! It usually takes me almost an hour to make the trip."

"Yeah, well, that's the difference between me and you I guess," Alana said, looking at the motionless form in the back seat. "Come on, let's get this hunk out of there. Why don't you get inside and help prop him up, then throw him over on me and I'll carry him inside."

"You'll carry him by yourself?" Kate's eyes widened. "Look at him. He's huge!"

"Hey, I'm not so small myself," Alana said.

"Yeah, but nowhere near his size."

"I'm tougher than I look," Alana retorted proudly.

Kate couldn't suppress a laugh. "Not much," she said.

She could have sworn she saw a smile threatening to appear on Alana's face, but all she said was, "Come on, give him a shove."

Shaking her head, Kate heaved until she had the guy in a semi-upright position, and then shoved his limp body over on Alana. He was a fair bit taller and much bigger than she was, but if her load was too heavy, Alana would have rather died than admit it. She struggled bravely down the path towards the door, moving scarcely more than a foot at a time.

Not knowing what else to do, Kate shut the car doors and ran ahead to fling wide her front door and show the way to the living room.

By the time Alana had gotten to the front steps, she croaked, "Grab his feet, will you?"

Kate said nothing, but took ahold of the guy's legs, and the two together staggered into the house, shutting the door behind them.

Chapter 2 IN THE TENT

A loud crash startled Kate out of her light doze. It took a second for her foggy mind to regain its sense of direction, but as soon as she focused on the now upright figure on the couch, it all came flooding back to her. She stumbled out of her chair and over to the couch, rubbing her eyes as she did.

“How are you feeling?” she asked hesitantly, bending over to pick up the object that had fallen to the ground when he had suddenly sat up.

“My name’s Stuart,” he said in a raspy voice. “Where am I and who are you?”

In her usual fashion, Alana’s voice behind Kate took full charge of the situation. “I’m Alana. This is Kate. She’s the one that ran over you last night. You’re at her place. You’ve been out cold for hours.”

“Oh,” Stuart said, and raised a hand to his head. Then he leaned back on the couch again. “I’m not feeling so strong right now, but I guess I’d better be getting along. Thanks for taking me in.”

“No problem,” Alana said. “She owed it to you anyway, after a stunt like that.”

Kate jabbed Alana’s leg fiercely with her elbow, but was only further embarrassed by her response

of, "What? Did I say something? Gee, don't get so soft on me. I'm just telling him what's going on."

Thoroughly embarrassed, Kate got up and mumbled something about breakfast, and hastily retreated from the room.

"She's a good kid," Alana said patronizingly. "I don't know her well, but she's all right." Throwing herself down on the carpet near the couch, she went on, "So, you're the big mystery man. Tell us about yourself."

Stuart looked uncomfortable, and scanned the room uneasily.

"Oh no," Alana turned one side of her mouth down. "Don't tell me you're one of those resistance guys. Are you? One of those 'durned evil renegades'?" Alana's tone was now obviously mocking the famous speech given by the mayor just weeks earlier on this very subject.

Seeing no other way out, Stuart quietly said, "Yes, I suppose you could say I am."

"Well, join the club," Alana said. "Self-made rebel against any and all authority, at your service.—But I like this latest authoritarian government least of all." She looked up at Kate, who had just appeared in the doorway. "Katie here, on the other hand ... what about you, newspaper woman? You're not one of them durnedies, are you?"

Kate reddened slightly, and simply said, "I don't think we should be talking about this right now."

"And why not? Now is as good a time as any!" Alana said hotly, sensing that she had struck a defensive chord in Kate.

"Later would be fine with me as well," Stuart stood up for the obvious underdog in the situation.

Alana shrugged. "Fine, I'm outvoted. Tell me something else then, champion of the weak. What kind of resistance-person are you? Are you religious or just rebellious? Active? Passive?"

"I don't think we should be quizzing him so intently when he's been unconscious for so long," Kate interrupted. Then to Stuart, "Perhaps you should try and get some rest."

Stuart struggled to sit up. "No, I really should be on my way. I've troubled you long enough."

"It hasn't been any trouble," Kate said, a little too quickly, and Alana smirked noisily. Ignoring her, Kate went on. "But if you've really gotta go, maybe I can give you a lift on your way."

Stuart opened his mouth in the shape of a "no thank you," but then seemed to freeze in his tracks. His wits were obviously still all there, but his eyes squinted up a little and took on a somewhat faraway look, as though he were hearing or thinking something very intently. After a couple of seconds he turned to look at Kate.

"Thank you, Kate," he said with a charming smile, "I would love a ride."

"Well, that's just grand then, we're all set," Alana said. "And what a nice couple you make, too."

Kate only just suppressed herself from running across the room to strangle the black-haired girl, but Stuart laughed good-humoredly. "Why don't you come along too, big mouth?" he asked.

Alana's eyebrows shot up in surprise at this unexpected return from the good-looking stranger, and thus, silenced as she was, could not think of an acceptable retort. So she just said, "All right then, I guess I will."



Mosquitoes splattered on the windshield as Emsie curved along the windy mountain roads that led past Kate's house. Stuart, still feeling weak from his ordeal, lay in a semi-reclined position in the back seat. Kate and Alana sat in the front.

Over their quick breakfast, the girls had not found out much more about Stuart, nor about where

they were headed. It seemed that they would find out more as they went, and as they were starting to become curious about this strong, silent character they had come across, both had been anxious to get moving. Now that they were on the road, they found they knew little more than they had before.

Even Alana found herself silenced by Stuart's strange calm boldness, and as the minutes flew by, little was there to greet them other than an occasional, "Turn here," or, "Go right at the next corner."

Finally they were speeding down a very long, straight road, lined on both sides by fields of wild greenery, with mountainous forests stretching off on the right hand side.

"Here we are, it's the next turn right," Stuart said.

The girls looked up at the big festive-looking signs that adorned the area, each proclaiming in their own brash way: "Westmorland Amusement Park."

Alana was the first to turn to Stuart, saying incredulously, "This is where you live?"

"No, this is where you're taking me," Stuart said with a smile. "But don't stop here. Drive around the back to the parking lot. There's some people I'd like you to meet."

"Whatever you say," Kate said. She wasn't quite sure what she had expected Stuart's big secret to be, but this certainly wasn't even close.

As the car edged into the makeshift parking lot, Kate eyed her surroundings uneasily. "Do you think the car'll be safe here?" she asked. "I would hate for it to get stolen."

"It should be fine," Stuart said. "Just lock it up well. I don't know everyone around here, but most are honest folks."

"Boy, it sure is hot," Alana said, as the reality of the weather settled in on her like a thick, moist cloud, which seemed all the more uncomfortable in comparison with their windy drive. "This global warming stuff really chaps me. I mean, five years ago summer was getting unbearable, but now it's almost a mockery to be alive!"

"That last statement is certainly true," Stuart said, "though I would say it for a different reason than you."

Leaving the two girls wondering at his cryptic comment, Stuart led the way through the few cars that dotted the empty lot, and into the amusement park. There were not many people around at this time of the morning, and it was only minutes before Stuart paused at the front of a tent. The girls looked up in unison to find out their destination: "Esmeralda's Magic Ball."

Alana grimaced at Kate and whispered under her breath, "We're going to a fortune teller?"

But they moved inside quickly enough, and were pleasantly surprised to find the tent air-conditioned inside. They both sighed at the cool, pleasant atmosphere they found. It was bigger than it looked on the outside, and the pie-slice-shaped compartment they were in was obviously just a portion of it. It was pleasantly decorated in surprising colors of white, gold and bright blue, and held a certain pastoral atmosphere. Thick curtains lined both sides of the small room, and they seemed to have been painted in a sky-and-cloud pattern of some sort.

Painted pretty badly, in my opinion, Alana added to herself.

At the pointed extremity of the room there was a gold-colored, semi-circular desk with a plush chair behind it which was empty at the moment. The rest of the room was richly carpeted and furnished with a variety of low armchairs and cushions.

"What is this place?" Alana asked. But Stuart had by now expertly located an opening in the curtain folds, and held it ajar for the girls.

"Come along, this is the back area."

It was an informal-looking room that they entered into, contrasting heavily with the plush, luxurious setting they had just left. Cardboard boxes piled with miscellaneous items were strewn around, and a couple of couches lined the walls, along with a table, some chairs, and a portable kitchenette in the far corner. The room was obviously in need of a good spring cleaning.

"This is your home?" Kate asked politely.

"Oh no," Stuart said. "It's more like my hangout. It's a project that some friends and I do on the side. It helps to support our subversive activities," he laughed.

At that comment, the only other person in the room looked up in surprise at seeing Stuart talking so freely with two strange girls. Stuart walked over to the couch and the dark-skinned, curly-haired young man stood up.

"This is my good friend Jay," Stuart said. "Jay, these are two girls who ..." he paused, not sure how exactly to phrase their encounter.

"Who ran him over and then rescued him," Alana finished off his sentence. "I'm Alana. But she's the one who ran him over."

Kate was learning how to ignore Alana's mannerisms. "Hi, I'm Kate," she said warmly, with a winning smile. "Pleased to meet you." She held out her hand and Jay shook it with a grin.

"Well, now that the introductions are over, what are we doing here?" Alana asked.

"I don't know what *you're* doing," Stuart replied. "I was just driven to my destination by two beautiful women, and, trying to avoid having them walk out of my life so quickly, I decided to invite

them in for a look around. How are we doing so far?"

Alana laughed out loud. "I like you, Stuart. You're a pretty strange, past-less' kind of a person, but you're right up my alley."

"What do you girls do?" Jay asked.

Alana comfortably kept the lead in the conversation. "I don't really do anything. I went to college for a while, but I dropped out after a year or so. Too much head stuffing; made me sick. I finally figured, 'What the hell? I'm not going to learn a single useful thing in here, so why should I be cooped up with a bunch of morons who haven't realized that yet?' That was a couple of years ago. Just a few months after I quit was when this new big peace accord hoopla came about. I don't know, I just don't buy it. This superman guy just looks like a suit with an attitude to me. I don't like his face. So I'm not wanting any part of it. And I figure if I get a job I'm gonna be buying right into his end of the stick, so ... yeah, I guess you could say I'm unemployed."

Kate looked at her in awe. "How do you survive without a job?"

Alana shrugged. "I make do. You know, mooch off of my friends, baby-sit the house for my mom when I'm really desperate. I know some guys that have me truck stuff around for them sometimes; that brings in a bundle that keeps me going awhile. It's not the easy life, but I've done fine so far."

"What will you do if things get tighter?" Stuart asked quietly.

"What do you mean, tighter?"

"I don't know. ... Say this world leader makes his registration mandatory? Right now you have a perfect right to do what you're doing, but what if it was illegal?"

"Hey, man, no sweat!" Alana laughed confidently. "Illegal is my middle name. Oh, I don't know. Don't

ask me about the future. If it happens, I guess I'll just have to see how the mood strikes me then, you know? Kate, for God's sake, say something!"

"What shall I say?" Kate asked, caught off guard at the sudden conversation shift.

"Tell your life story, of course! Isn't that what we're doing?"

"Here, let's all take a seat," Jay suddenly realized they were all still standing. "These couches don't look like much, but they're pretty comfortable."

Kate gathered her wits together as they sank into the soft furnishings. Being so near Alana somehow made her feel more timid than usual, but she knew she had to say something.

"Well, uh, I'm a newspaper editor," she said. "I graduated from college and went right into this job. It's not a real big paper, but it pays well."

"What do you do?" Jay asked.

"I usually just do the deskwork type of stuff—you know, regular newspaper editorial work. I've done field work a few times, written a few pieces, but I guess they didn't go over too well because I'm back to the other again."

"Naw, they were good. I read 'em," Alana was as generous with her praise as she was with her criticism. "If the bigwigs didn't like 'em I don't know what their problem was. I thought you had a real good writing style."

"Thanks, Alana," Kate said in surprise.

"Are you registered, Kate?" Jay asked.

"Yes, I am."

Kate wasn't sure if the room had just gone silent upon hearing her say those words, or if it was just her nervous imagination overheating again. "Did I say something wrong?" she finally asked.

"Not at all," Stuart said. "Well, I guess I'm next in the circle. What can I safely say?"

They all laughed.

"I'm an official rebel from society," he finally said, "and I like to keep a real low profile when it comes to anything government-related. I guess you figured as much by now."

"Yeah, I guess we did," Alana said with a laugh. "I suppose you're not registered."

Both boys shook their heads immediately.

"Not on your life," Jay broke in. "We're kind of in the same boat, Stuart and I—and a few of our friends besides. We're also pretty leery about this guy. He's been in power for over three years now, and ... well, we're just a bit concerned about what his next move will be."

"You're thinking things are going to get tighter, aren't you?" Kate asked.

"We're pretty sure of that," Stuart said affirmatively.

"How so?" Alana challenged.

The boys hesitated and looked at each other quickly.

"You're religious, aren't you?" Kate deduced.

"Yes, we're Christians," Jay said. "Actually, we're a little more than that—we're pretty dedicated believers, sort of the all-out type."

"Ah, like the fanatic in that movie that came out last year, 'The Raging Lamb'?" Alana teased.

"Yes, actually, very similar to that," Stuart laughed.

"You're kidding! You're like a cult member?"

"Well, if you sucked that movie right in, then you're not as much of a rebel as I'd have thought," Stuart said. "Think about it—the way they portrayed that guy ... I mean, it was nuts! Don't you think he should have had the right to believe and live as he wanted?"

"Yeah, but he was weird!" Alana said in disgust. "I mean, he did all those rituals and sacrifices and stuff. Do you do any of that?"

"Of course not!" Jay said. "That's just your typical Hollywood BS. I mean, there's no group or faith they haven't smeared like that. They're just trying to pull the wool over on the masses any way they can."

"I'll buy that," Alana finally agreed.

Kate suddenly spoke up. "So what are a couple of Christian guys doing living out of Esmeralda's magic tent?"

"Good question," Jay laughed. "Well, you know things are starting to get pretty tight on anything outside of the mainstream party line. So we try to find ways to get out our message that are a little less obvious than normal. I hope you realize that we're taking a pretty big risk talking to you about all this."

"I wonder why you are," Alana said disdainfully.

"No, I understand," Kate said. "I mean, this is your whole life. But you don't have to worry about us—me anyway. I think everyone has a right to believe as they wish. I mean, the only reason I registered was because it just seemed like the thing to do. Everyone else in college was doing it, and it was really the only way I could have stayed and carried on with my studies. It's not like I'm into this whole new party line, I just didn't know there was an option." She looked a bit wistfully at Alana.

Stuart cleared his throat, figuring this conversation had just about outlasted its usefulness. "Hey, girls, it's almost noon on a scorching Saturday. How about you join us for a bite to eat and maybe stay for the afternoon? You can meet some of the others and see how our booth works too. I think you'd enjoy it."

"Ah, you really don't want to let your 'beautiful girls' get away, do you?" Alana laughed.

"That, I most certainly do not," Stuart replied, meeting her gaze without flinching.

"Fine by me," she said.

"I'd love to stay on too," Kate said softly.

"Come on then, why don't you come out back and let's see if we can find the others."

Chapter 3

ABOUT SEX AND PROPHECY

Throughout the early afternoon, Kate and Alana were introduced to the rest of what they affectionately dubbed the “Esmeralda team.” Marty was the oldest of the bunch, being in his early thirties. He was tall and thin, with blond hair and piercing blue eyes. Then there was Susannah, a pretty, red-haired girl of barely sixteen, as thin and wiry as a boy, and with the stamina and temperament to match. And lastly, Angelica was the motherly figure on the team. She had a pleasantly plump figure—not large, but well-rounded—and a heart of gold. She always seemed to be doing something towards the betterment of her surroundings, whether in the culinary, sanitary or organizational department.

“Angelica was gone this morning,” Jay whispered confidingly to Kate. “That’s why our room looks the way it does. We all try to do our part, but ... I don’t know, it just doesn’t look the same as when she does it. She’s our angel!” He smiled tenderly, and Kate made careful note of the gesture, wondering if it might be a clue to some intimate connection between the two.

The five Esmeraldas and the two newcomers were all sitting around in the main area of the tent in

various stages of digestion after their noontime meal. Alana, always anxious to be moving and doing, broke the silence. "So when does the shindig start?"

"The fairground officially opens at four o'clock," Jay said, "but we don't usually get many customers till five. Gotta be ready by four, though."

"Which one of you is Esmeralda?" Kate asked.

Each of the five laughed a little, each in their own unique way. Finally Susannah said, "We rotate."

"You all take turns being the soothsayer lady? Even the guys? Isn't that kinda kinky?" Alana turned up her nose a little.

"No," Stuart said. "We don't pretend to be girls. Esmeralda is just the name of the tent, it's not any one person. We each have our time slot. We take a two-hour slot each, and the one on the first shift gets any customers that come after two A.M., though that doesn't happen very often. And we take turns at the different time slots. It's kind of fun, actually."

"I don't understand exactly what it is that you do," Kate asked.

"Yeah," Alana added. "I guess it's some big fraud thing to get money, huh? I mean, you gotta live somehow."

"Oh, no!" Angelica's sweet voice rang out in a clear, soft way. "It's nothing like that at all. You see, each of us do have a certain psychic ability. It's not exactly the same as most fortune tellers have, but we've been given a certain gift of seeing and knowing things. So we thought we'd put it to good use in this way. But it's all very genuine."

"Oh," Alana said, obviously not convinced.

"Look," Stuart said. "The afternoon session's gonna start in just a couple of hours. Stick around and see how we do it. Until then, anybody want to go have a walk around?"

"Sure, I could suffer that," Alana said.

The others either were genuinely disinterested at the prospect of a human bakery session, or had enough sense to realize that walks of this type were more of a two-person sport. So they all proffered various excuses, and Stuart and Alana soon set forth on their own.

There wasn't much to see in the still-deserted fairground, so they soon made their way into the relative cool of the nearby woods. And so they walked—sometimes in silence, sometimes making idle conversation.

All of a sudden, Alana turned and threw her arms around Stuart's neck, tilting her head back to look at him full in the face. "Do you want to have sex with me?" she asked in a husky whisper.

Stuart manfully suppressed his shock at her brazen boldness. "Why do you ask?" he replied.

"Well, I was just thinking, I'm here and you're there, you know, we're walking along, no one's around, so why don't we make the most of it? I mean, why not? Oh my God, wait a minute." She reached over and grabbed his left hand, holding up his ring finger. "You're married? Oh man, just my luck! You being a religious guy and all, that probably scratches out any chance for me, doesn't it?" She pouted up her red lips.

A bird in the tree overhead took off in sudden flight, and the movement shifted some of the leaves, sending a beam of sunlight radiating across Alana's white skin.

Stuart reached over to stroke her forehead. "Yes, I am married," he said. "And I have two children. I've been apart from them for over a year now. When things started heating up for us in this area surrounding the city, we decided that the children should be in a safer place. I had to stay, and though on occasion I've been able to get in touch with them, I haven't seen them in all this time."

"I guess that's that then," Alana said glumly.

"Well," he said. "You're a pretty tough lady, so I suppose I should just be straight with you. My religion doesn't have any problem with sex in general. I suppose you could say we're a bit more liberal than most."

"Don't stop there," Alana said hopefully.

"Well," he began again, trying to decide what exactly he was going to say.

"You say that a lot, you know?" Alana commented.

"Okay, no more 'wells' then. Gosh, you're sharp, aren't you?"

"Nah, not really. I'm just ornery," she said. "But don't let me distract you from our main topic of discussion." She slowly moved her hand further down his back.

"Okay, so I'm in this group, and we've always had these pretty strict rules as far as sex with people who aren't in our group. That was the way it's been for a long time. Then just recently things changed a little, and ... well, you know, now with the Trib and all, it's just such a different situation.—We're all so scattered, and I guess the threat of AIDS is not so big anymore now that they've developed the vaccine and all."

"I don't know if it's because my mind is elsewhere, or if you really are speaking an entirely different language, but for one of those reasons I don't think I caught much of your drift," Alana said. "Perhaps you could give me the bottom line."

"The bottom line," Stuart said, "is that it's been left up to our discretion to pray about what we want to do. It's not the norm for us to go around having sex with people who aren't 'with us,' so to speak. But it's happened."

"That's great," Alana said. "So shall we do it?"

"Look, Alana," Stuart said. "It's not that I'm not interested. I just don't know if now is the right time,

you know? I know I can just tell you what I think and that you'll take it at face value. I just think we'd better not rush into anything. Let's give it a wait, what do you say?"

Alana disengaged her grasp on the tall man, and shrugged her shoulders carelessly. "Sure, whatever. I'm in no hurry. I just thought I'd ask."

"I do appreciate the offer," Stuart looked sidelong at her.

"I know," Alana retorted. "I've seen you looking at me."

"Why, you ..." he burst out. Alana immediately started to run, and he set off after her. She was a fast runner, and obviously in very good shape. It was all Stuart could do to keep up with her.

"Alana!" he finally called. "Do you have any idea where you're going? We're just getting further and further into this forest. I hope you're dropping peanuts or something for our trip back!"

She disappeared behind a large tree and by the time he arrived at that spot, a few seconds later, she was nowhere to be seen. Narrow paths forked on in several directions, and neither looked notable.

"Alana!" he called out. "Where are you?"

All of a sudden he was thrown to the ground as the girl dropped from a branch directly above him. Throwing all her weight on him, she pinned his arms back to the ground. Caught off guard as he was, he did not put up much of a fight.

"I think that now is the time," she said hoarsely, breathing heavily at her recent exertion. With that she threw her full lips directly on his and reached for his pants button.

"Not so fast," Stuart managed to disengage her embrace. Then grasping her arms tightly, he rolled over, sitting firmly on her legs. She struggled valiantly, but he held her fast. "Now let's not get ahead of ourselves," he said. "First things first, after all."

“What are you going on about?” Alana was still squirming to get free.

“Remember, I’m a married man, am I not?”

“Yeah, but you said ...”

“Hold it, that statement was a stopping point, not the final destination,” Stuart grinned. “As I was saying, I’m a married man, not to mention a member of an unspeakable religious group. Therefore you’re going to have to play by my rules. Agreed?”

“Maybe,” Alana said. “What are the rules? Guys make all the first moves?”

“No, but remember I said I had to get any stuff like this ‘okayed’ first?”

“You are going to sit here while I am losing circulation in my legs and ask God whether you can have sex with me?” Alana asked in disbelief.

“Something like that,” Stuart grinned. “Maybe without the losing circulation part of it.” He moved over and Alana rolled out from under him.

“Well, how about I leave you to it? I’ll go look for berries or something.” Before Stuart could object, she ducked behind the tree and out of sight.

Stuart groaned. This was definitely not the kind of situation that he found himself in every day and, as enticing as the circumstances were, he wanted to be sure that it was all okay Upstairs before he went any further.

I mean, he debated, half to himself and half as a warm-up before his big guidance-seeking plea to the Heavenlies, it’s not like I’ve even known her for a full 24 hours or anything. Not that that in itself is a great deterrent, of course, but it’s just the sort of thing we should like counsel about first or something. ...

It all seemed very complicated. But as Stuart finished his debating session and let the quiet Heavenly answers replace his parrying thoughts, he was intrigued to hear words of specific encouragement: This whole situation had indeed been

engineered by the Lord, for the end result that He might bring Alana closer to Himself.

“Well,” Stuart grinned under his breath, with a slight chuckle, “it’s a ... job, but somebody’s gotta do it! I am, after all, the servant of the Lord.”

Pleased as ever with this new twist on “God’s ways are not our ways,” Stuart set out through the undergrowth in search of Alana.

Engrossed as Alana was in her own thoughts, she didn’t hear the ever so slight rustling of bushes behind her until a strong pair of arms grabbed her from behind. Startled, she lost her footing and slipped onto the soft grass. Realizing what was happening and determined to be true to her nature no matter how her hormones may have been begging her otherwise, she struggled valiantly against his lead.

But Stuart seized his advantage and held her down firmly, pinning her arms above her head.

“So I guess you got the go-ahead, huh?” she said breathlessly.

Stuart didn’t bother answering. With his right hand holding her arms to the ground above her head, he used his left hand to pull up her black T-shirt, pull it over her head and toss it to the side. By the time he let go of her arms, she was no longer struggling to get loose.



Back at the tent, Kate was finding answers to many of the questions she had never even known she had. Marty and Angelica had busied themselves with various unspecified work elsewhere, leaving Jay and Su to face the volley alone.

“I really appreciate your hearing me out like this,” Kate finally said. “I suppose I seem pretty antagonistic about all the stuff you believe.”

“Not at all,” said Jay. “It’s only natural you should have questions. A lot of us have been doing this all

of our lives, so I can imagine it would be a lot to fathom all at once.”

Kate shook her head. “Everything you say and the way you are is just so very opposite to everything I’ve ever known.”

“That’s the classy thing about this time,” Su spoke up. “It’s that we’re just so anti, you know? I mean, before things really shifted we blended a lot more. I mean, I was just a kid, but even to me, there wasn’t always a whole lot of diff between our type and your type. But now we’re like wow, and we really make a statement. That really gives it to me.”

“I notice your vocabulary isn’t so different from most teenagers I’ve met,” Kate laughed.

“Oh, yeah!” Su joined in the laughter. “Some things you’ve just gotta keep up with! It’s not like we’re from another planet. It’s just when it really comes down to it, we’re in a whole different class.”

“And I guess that really ‘gives it to you!’” Kate said again.

“Oh, yeah!” Su said.

“You crazy girl!” Jay cuffed her head affectionately.

“Whoa, look at the time!” Su said suddenly. “I’m on the first shift, and I need some serious praying up time first. I hope you don’t mind, but I’m outta here.”

“Not at all,” Kate said. “I understand.”

“Hey, maybe you’d like to listen in on some of her sessions?” Jay asked.

“I’d love to, if you don’t mind,” Kate replied.

“Sure,” Su was almost out the door. “Don’t expect much. I’m still just a baby prophet around here. But I never mind an audience. Ciao, see ya late’.”

“She’s really something,” Kate laughed as Su vanished from sight.

“She’s a barrel of laughs, that’s for sure. Keeps

us in stitches a lot of the time.” Jay shook his head in amusement. “Say, we’ve got about half an hour till four. I’ve got some interesting stuff here, do you feel like reading something?”

“Sure, I always love a good read,” Kate said, “especially if you’ll stick around for it too?”

“At your service,” he replied with a smile.



A few minutes before four, Jay offered to get Kate situated for her “listening in” session. He led her to a little cubicle off of the main area of the tent where most of the group had spent their afternoon. It turned out to be behind and a little to the side of the “seer’s chair.”

“The tent was already equipped like this,” Jay said, almost apologetically. “We wouldn’t have come up with this idea ourselves. But since it’s here, sometimes if there’s not much going on elsewhere, we’ll take turns listening in. It can be educational, and it’s almost always interesting.”

“So what kind of things do people ask about?” Kate inquired.

“Oh, it can be anything,” Jay shrugged. “Some people just want a regular horoscope, like a ‘what’s my week gonna be like.’ Others want sort of a lifetime synopsis along with future predictions. Others have specific questions that they want answered. It’s always something different—keeps us on our toes.”

“So what if someday you’re sitting in the chair and you go blank? What would happen then?”

Jay looked serious. “I don’t know,” he finally said. “It hasn’t happened yet. We’re not just doing this for kicks or for our pleasure, and if there’s anything I hope you’ll see from listening in, it’s that we’re dead serious about this. It’s really our way to give out our message, though at the moment, in somewhat of a limited fashion. So, I guess we figure

that since we're doing God's work, He's gonna have to keep the juices flowing."

Satisfied with that answer, Kate settled herself in the comfortable armchair that filled almost the entire space in the little compartment.

"There's an opening here," Jay demonstrated. "And you can pull it back if you want to peek in. I wouldn't advise doing it too much, though. It's at an angle where you'd really have to be searching for it to see it from the other room, but it is possible. I usually like to know who I'm listening to, so I like to get a little look in, but it's gotta be fast. It can also be interesting just to listen without a visual sometimes, and try to imagine what you think the person looks like. Then sometimes at the end when you look, you're in for a shocker." Jay laughed, obviously at a particular remembrance that tickled his fancy. But he didn't elaborate, and Kate wasn't curious enough to inquire further.

"Well, that's that then," he finally said. "I'll see you later. I'm up next after Su, so I think I'll go off and stoke up my fires a little." With an affectionate pat on her shoulder, Jay was off, leaving Kate alone to munch on her thoughts till activities in the next room would pick up.

"What a day this has been!" she whispered aloud to herself. "What a day indeed!" She thought for a moment of her life in the past weeks—or months, or years, for that matter! How very "predictable" it had all been—an adjective she would have uttered with pride only days ago, but which now she viewed with a much more dreary eye. A certain exhilaration for life had started to spark within her. She couldn't exactly identify what it was, but there was something about this adventurous, living-by-the-day lifestyle that suited her unspoken fancies exactly.

She remembered with a quiet chuckle an old

fantasy that she used to entertain on boring Mondays at the office—one of those "quiet heroine gets a sudden unrealistic burst of courage and saves the world" type of daydreams which can be so pleasing on dull rainy days. Well, this wasn't *exactly* living out her fantasy, but all the markings were there for a mighty good opening thus far.

A quiet rustle in the adjoining room jolted Kate from her reveries. Peeking discreetly through the netted opening, she saw Su settling down into Esmeralda's seat. Su fidgeted and fluttered around for a bit, and Kate thought she looked quite nervous. Then, abruptly, Su settled down. She was taking deep breaths, and Kate could see her lips moving. She could hear snatches of phrases that the girl was saying: "Please give me strength. ... You know that I don't have any words ... I don't know what to say so You'll have to come through. ..."

Kate could almost see a tangible peace coming over the restless teenager. It was almost as if another, wiser spirit had possessed her, to where she seemed to possess an almost unearthly wisdom and maturity. It seemed that Esmeralda had indeed arrived!

And none too soon, for before Su's lips had altogether stopped moving, there was a noise at the front of the tent, and a figure entered. Kate left her peephole open just long enough to get a clear view of the small-built teenaged boy who entered in, and then she sank quietly back into her seat. The conversation sounded clearly through the thin tent walls.

"You Esmeralda?" the boy inquired suspiciously, obviously surprised to find a girl so near his age sitting in the medium's chair.

"Please sit down," Su said quietly but with authority. "It's all right, they won't find out."

"Who? What are you talking about?" the boy sat

nervously in the chair.

"Your name is Robert, isn't it? Give me your hand," Kate could tell by Su's vocabulary that for this time she was indeed Esmeralda. Su herself would not be caught alive speaking in full sentences on a normal day.

Su took the boy's hand and began stroking it softly. She wasn't too interested in looking it over, but concentrated on projecting soothing vibes as she held it gently.

"Your friends will not find out about your coming here, unless you want them to," she continued. "Now tell me what you came here for."

The soothing effect had worked well, and Robert's voice sounded much more relaxed. "You're good, you know that," he said. "I mean, it's like you can read my mind or something! That's like, you know, like it's really classy."

"Ask me whatever questions you have, Robert," Su said.

"Okay, well, it's just that there's this girl I like at school. She's real popular and all, and I was wanting to ask her out. But I don't know if she would go out with someone like me. So that's what I wanted to ask."

"These affairs of the heart are very tricky, are they not?" Kate could not understand where Su was getting this sudden depth. She made several mental notes to herself to inquire later about this phenomenon. For now, she focused her full attention on the drama next door. "You have strong feelings and you wonder if there is hope of reciprocation." The words flowed smoothly from Su's uneducated lips. "There is always hope. It is never wrong to love, but on this Earth nothing is perfect, and the course of human emotions often does not run smoothly. If you want to declare your feelings to this girl, or even make steps in that direction,

you must be prepared to encounter rejection. Emotional hurts cannot be avoided, but though they are painful, they are part of the great growing process of the spirit, and so they actually help you more than they hurt."

"That's all a bit deep for me," Robert passed his hand over his forehead. "You're saying that she's probably going to reject me, but it would be good, and I should do it anyway?"

"Every person is given a choice, and for me to predict what choice a person would make is impossible. So the real choice is yours—whether your feelings are strong enough to risk a rejection, and if you are willing to pay the price."

"Well, look, you told me my name. Can't you just tell me whether she likes me or not?" he persisted.

"I can only say those things that are revealed to me, and that has not been," Su said firmly. "But one thing more I can say to you. You feel empty sometimes. When you are alone, you question the way things are, and the trivial pursuits you find yourself involved in. I want to encourage you that there is something more, and that emptiness you feel inside of yourself is what will egg you on and keep you searching for it. If you wish to be truly happy, you must keep searching for the real meaning of life until you find it."

There was a shuffling of the tent walls as Su stood up. She reached out her hand to Robert and said, "If you ever have any other questions or need advice, please come again."

"Thanks," he said, his head still swimming from all that he had heard. He made his way out the front of the tent, and Kate could hear a low murmur of voices as Angelica received his payment and gave him the taped recording of the session as a keepsake.

Before the next person could enter, Kate slipped out of her little hideaway and back into the main room. There she found Jay, sitting on the couch reading.

“Hey, stranger!” his face lit up in a friendly smile. “Come sit by me.”

Kate obliged, and sat in silence for a moment or two.

“What’s up? You look pensive. Was all that too much for you?”

“I don’t know if it was too much or not,” Kate shook her head. “I just can’t get over Su—it’s like she *became* Esmeralda or something. She really was not herself.”

Jay laughed. “I guess you got the real initiation by starting off watching the person whose true character is the most obviously un-Esmeraldaish. But that change happens to all of us. I told you that it wasn’t our words that we were speaking. It’s Jesus that speaks through us, and so it doesn’t matter who it is speaking. He replaces our personality with His, and He’s the One Who’s talking and giving advice to these people.”

“But she didn’t talk about Jesus at all,” Kate retorted.

“I don’t know exactly what she said, but we can’t usually come straight out and get too religious right off the bat,” Jay replied. “Things may look peaceful on the surface, but any day now things are due to blow up in a big way. This world leader means business, and I’m sure that he’s having folks keep an eye on any fringe groups like us. So we’re trying to keep a balance of getting out our message, while not saying anything directly that could get us in trouble. We try to plant little hints so that if people are interested and searching, they will come back. Sometimes we’ll talk to them informally later, and then we can be more up front if we see that they

are really interested and ready for it.”

Kate nodded, and leaned further back into the couch. “Sounds like you folks really have your act together,” she said with a satisfied smile.

“You could say that,” Jay replied with a little laugh. “Or you could say that we’re so un-together that we just have to stick real close to God, and that way we end up more together than we ever could have been on our own.”

“Not bad,” Kate laughed. “I’ll have to remember that quote in case I ever do an article on you people.”

“Well, I hope it never has to come to that,” Jay laughed a little nervously.

Kate stood up and walked to the edge of the tent. “I wonder where Alana is,” she mused thoughtfully, as sort of a time-filler kind of question.

“I’m sure Stuart is keeping her busy,” Jay replied. “They’ll probably be back any time now, it’s been quite a while.”

“I guess I’ll go back into the listening room, if that’s all right with you?” Kate was curious to partake of a little more of Esmeralda’s charm. Turning just in time to catch the winning smile Jay threw in her direction, she returned one his way and then headed towards the flap leading to the secret compartment.

As noiselessly as she could, she brushed through the flaps and lowered herself into the soft chair. The thick silence seemed to magnify her every breath, so for the longest time she sat frozen in a half-crouched position before she finally trusted herself to sit down the rest of the way. She held her breath and waited, sensing by the irregular breathing on the other side that there was a séance in progress.

At length a raspy man’s voice broke through the silence. “Well, what do you see?”

“I see ...”

Kate suddenly sat up, alarmed. This was not the usual voice of Esmeralda that she was hearing. This was Su, and Su was sounding rather worried and fearful. Kate had not seen many of these sessions, but her earlier experience and her talks with Jay had given her a general impression of how things should be going, and something was definitely not going right.

Without realizing what she was doing, Kate found herself thinking out a few words of prayer. "I don't know You, God, but please come through for Su. I don't know what's eating her but she's definitely got a problem." She cast her eyes uneasily towards the roof of the tent, hoping that their God would look kindly upon her since it was for one of them that she was asking. Almost before the words were completely out of her mouth, a great sigh proceeded from Su's lips, and she began to speak. Kate sensed that the trying moment was over.

"You are a very rich man, very influential, and held in high esteem of the government," Su's voice was monotone, emotionless. The worried teenager had gone, but so also had the rich, comforting sage that had spoken earlier. This was a very different Esmeralda speaking—but Esmeralda nonetheless. "Great power and influence is exerted by your authority. You are now gearing up for a—"

"All right, that's enough of that," the man's voice curtly interrupted her. "Let's stick to the topic at hand. You are a medium, are you not? Can you answer my questions?"

"Yours to ask, mine to answer," Su said quietly.

"Very well then. Tell me this, little girl. What are you doing here? Why are you putting on this masquerade?"

"Sir, I answer questions about the unseen world, not about myself," Su's voice was shaking a little.

"The unseen world? Don't you know that it's

illegal to talk about things like that? Why waste your time searching for dancing fairies when there's so much hard core reality to mess with? Huh?"

"I only know what I see, sir," Su said coldly. "If you don't believe in those things, perhaps you have come to the wrong place."

"Perhaps I have," the man stood up abruptly, shoving his chair out behind him. "and perhaps I haven't."

With those words ringing in the air like a thunderclap, he burst out of the tent doorway.

Trembling all over with a nameless fear, Su walked quickly to the front of the tent and put her head out. "Shut it down for now, Ange," she said. "We've got to get our heads together."

Chapter 4 DISASTER

"I don't know," Su said for the sixth or seventh time in the past few minutes. "All I know is that there was something seriously wrong with that guy."

"What do you mean by wrong?" Jay prodded gently.

"There was just something weird, menacing..."

"Evil," Kate interrupted quietly.

"Yeah, that's what I mean," Su agreed. "He's up to serious badness if you ask me. I think we oughtta pull up stakes and scam this minute."

"Whoa, that's a pretty stiff suggestion," Jay passed his hand over his forehead. "What does everybody think?"

"Su, I understand you've had a shock," Marty said. "but we've been here for months. It took us a long time to establish this work. We've had incidents like this before, but nothing serious ever came of it."

"This one was so different, you guys," Su wailed. "You have no idea how different it was. It was like really bad. God, I wish I could just express myself in a way like you guys can. You'd listen to me if I could say what I meant."

“Okay, look,” Angelica cut in. “What we really need to do is stop right here and ask the Lord about it. Right? Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do?”

Everybody nodded, and the circle came a little closer together. Unsure of what was taking place, Kate drew herself back a little. Jay, who was sitting next to her, leaned over to whisper in her ear. “It’s okay. It’s just more of the Esmeralda thing, but for our own direction. It’s sort of like our communication with our Boss—that’s Jesus. You know, in Heaven. When we don’t know what to do, we just ask Him to tell us.”

Kate whispered back incredulously in his ear, “You mean you just go into a trance and get directions whenever you’re stuck with a problem?”

“Something like that,” Jay wasn’t worried about similes at the moment. “Listen in, you’ll get the idea.”

The room grew very still, and as one began to speak and then later another, and then another, Kate was astounded to see Esmeralda in each one of them in turn. *It’s like one big Esmeralda fest*, she thought to herself. What they were saying really made sense, too. They were obviously expressing a higher vocabulary and a deeper logic than she had noticed most of them possessing during the regular course of their day.

By the time the brief session had died out and the Esmeraldas opened their eyes, the matter had been decided.

“So I guess we’ll wait for Stuart and Alana to get back and then head out tonight,” Jay said, looking around from one to the other.

Su was fairly jumping up and down with excitement. “Whoa!” she squeaked as she jumped up and started pounding on Marty’s back. “This is so classy. It’s just utterly out there. *It is happening!* Isn’t it about time now? Isn’t it supposed to be the

three-and-a-half years like any day now?”

No one offered a reply, and Kate noticed several people in the room who seemed less than enthusiastic about that possibility.

Finally, Jay stood up. “I guess we’d better get a move on,” he said. “We’ve got a lot of packing up to do.”



“Do you have the slightest clue where we are, mystery man?” Alana called loudly.

“You were the one that led us out into the middle of nowhere,” Stuart replied with a laugh. “So I guess it’s fair to say that no, I have no idea whatsoever where we are. I told you you should have been dropping peanuts.”

“Well then, maybe we’ll just have to stay out here in the woods for the rest of our lives. We can mate like savages and maybe grow up to be Tarzan and Jane the Second or something. What would you think of that?”

Stuart laughed. “I think we’d better focus our attentions on finding our way back, lest we be forced to settle to such depths.”

“Gadz, it’s past six already!” Alana said. “It’s going to be getting dark soon. Kate’ll be long gone even if we do find our way back. She has no reason to wait around for me.”

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll wait. Stop, stand still!” Stuart suddenly clapped his hands on Alana’s shoulders, bringing her to an effective standstill. She opened her mouth to question, and immediately had a strong hand placed over her mouth.

He remained motionless for a few moments, then abruptly released her.

“What was all that about? Some sort of a pass or something?” she fussed.

“This direction,” Stuart said. “I heard some noise, and I didn’t want you babbling on and

drowning it out, that's all. Some sort of shouting and stuff. It's gotta be the amusement park. It was coming from the west."

After they had walked a little further, they came upon a familiar-looking trail, and in less than twenty minutes they found themselves emerging from the forest into the dusky evening. They were on the far side of the fairground, but even from where they were they could see that something was terribly wrong. People were running around frantically, and as chaos reigned triumphant, it was hard to make any sense at all of what was happening.

"We've got to get back to Esmeralda!" Stuart said, breaking out into a run. Alana followed close behind him, but dodging people and vehicles as they were, it took them almost ten minutes to cover the relatively short distance.

By the time they arrived at the tent, it seemed that much of the panic had settled down. A soothing woman's voice on the loudspeaker was urging all the festivities to carry on as normal, assuring everyone that nothing had taken place and that the fun could carry on as before.

"In honor of our new government," the woman's voice cooed, "all visitors to our amusement fair this evening will be given one free pass for the ride of their choice. Just come up to the front booth and show your identification and get your free pass. ..."

"I wonder what that's about," Alana said suspiciously.

Stuart, however, had already gone inside the tent, and there he found his worst fears confirmed. The place was deserted.

Alana came in behind him, and had to step over broken boxes and piles of papers and trashed-out books. The entire place had obviously been

ransacked, and the former dwellers were nowhere to be seen.

"They've taken them!" Stuart said, and Alana was startled to see tears in his eyes.

"Hey, man, it's okay. I bet they escaped. We'll find 'em!"

"Oh, Lord! What I am doing here? Where did we go wrong?" Stuart collapsed on the couch and covered his face in his hands.

Alana, true to her nature, was a bit oblivious to what was going on. "Am I missing something?" she asked. "I know they were your friends and all, but why are you taking it so hard? I mean, what do they have to worry about anyway? If it comes down to it they can just get their little registration and that's it."

"You don't get it, do you?" Stuart gave in to a moment of unbridled rage. "You don't get it! This is not a joke, tough girl! This is not a game we're playing. You walk around and you stick your chin in people's faces because you like the way it makes you feel. Well, that's not us. We're serious about our lives and we know what the costs are."

"Whoa," Alana put her hands up. "Ease up, man. I'm not attacking you. Look, I know you're upset. Let's go walk around. I'll buy you a drink."

"Sure," Stuart said apologetically. "Look, I'm sorry about that. I don't know what came over me."

"Hey, don't." Alana said. "That is too like me to get bugged on. Let's go."

Despite herself, Alana reached out to grasp his hand, unbelieving of her own uncharacteristic display of compassion.

They eyed the crowds rather uncomfortably at first, unsure of what sudden turn the climate may have taken, but they soon realized the greedy, self-centered throng was no different than any other. Most were pushing and shoving their way towards

the front booth, and so by adopting the opposite course of travel, the two were able to walk in relative ease.

A small snack bar set up with semi-enclosed eating tables beckoned to them loudly, and Alana motioned for Stuart to hold a table while she went for some drinks. In a minute or two she was back, and shoved the can in his direction.

"These new disposable cans are disgusting," she said, pulling out the tab and aiming the liquid down her throat. "Oh, for the days of tin cans! They may have been bad for the environment, but they sure made drinking a heck of a lot nicer. Life was so simple in the nineties, wasn't it? Uh, Stuart? Are you with me?"

"Yeah, I'm here," Stuart was still staring at the colorless can on the table in front of him. The beads of condensation had gathered into a puddle at the base of the can and now conspired together to roll across the table and empty themselves in his lap. Stuart never batted an eye as the ice-cold liquid spread across his tanned leg. Alana smiled to herself as she thought lewd thoughts, but quickly came back to reality with his next comment.

"I'm sorry, Alana," he said, looking up at her. She was relieved to see that his eyes were focused once again with the usual determined resoluteness that she had begun to admire, despite all efforts not to admire anybody if she could possibly help it. "This whole situation was totally unexpected, and I've been a bit put out by it. I think what I need is to check in with my Boss a little and find out what's going on and what we're supposed to do."

"Your Boss?" Alana squinted her eyes and pursed her lips. "Oh, yes! This is your big Jesus thing, right? Like you told me about how He like answers your questions and stuff? It's the whole Esmeralda deal."

"That's right," Stuart smiled. "But it goes way beyond Esmeralda. Esmeralda is just our way of reaching out to people who don't know the Lord. But our link-up is our constant source of guidance. It's kind of like the Web."

"Uh huh," Alana laughed, lifting an eyebrow with a "what are you trying to pull over on me now" look.

"Yeah, it's a bit of the same deal. You can just link up to the connection anytime you want and get all kinds of info and answers to just about any questions you have..." Stuart hesitated, and then he abruptly brought his hands together. "I'll tell you what: enough of my droning on like a lunatic. We'll do it together and then you'll have experienced it for yourself. Then I won't need to do any more explaining. What do you say?"

"You're gonna tap me into your own special Internet thing? Oh, I don't know about that! I may prefer that you just continue on with the whole lunatic scene!" Alana countered with a laugh.

"Come on, it's not bad. It's very easy, and I promise I'll do all the hard work. You just get to relax and enjoy the ride."

"Well, if that's the case," Alana's eyes twinkled with innuendo, "then I'm certainly game. I've tried that once today and it wasn't a bad experience. So where does this encounter happen? Right here?"

Stuart looked around. The amusement park was buzzing with wild life, but their alcove formed a protective barrier that inferred, if not actually afforded, a certain sense of peace and tranquility, even separateness from the thronging masses. They were also secluded enough from view that no one could call into question any strange turns their activity may take.

"Here looks good enough to me," he finally said. "So what do I do?" Alana asked.

Stuart didn't answer, and Alana could tell that

he was very serious about what he was about to do. Oblivious to her continued stare, he shut his eyes and grabbed both of her hands in his. In short words and halting sentences, awkwardly at first but gaining confidence as he went along, Stuart's thoughts began to tumble forth from his heart. He said it all—his condemnation at having gone off and been gone so long, especially when he came back and found them all gone; his worries at what may have happened to them; his insecurities and uncertainties about what the future held and what they were to do next.

"Things were going pretty smoothly up till now," Stuart looked no less strong or manly on account of the tears that were now fighting their way onto his cheeks. "But now I can honestly say that I don't know what to do. I feel like everything's been catapulted into confusion, and I feel so alone. I feel cut off from the rest of the body and I just don't know what to do. Please speak to us now, Jesus. Send down Your Words and fill us with them, so that we'll know exactly where to go, what to do, and how to do it."

Alana cast her eyes downward, almost ashamed at his earnestness. She had never witnessed anything quite like this, and did not know what to make of it. Yet at the same time she was fascinated, and felt herself curiously drawn to this man whose pride at his lifestyle made her own rebellion seem paltry.

She looked up with a start as he began to speak again, only this time it was different. Kate would have recognized it as Esmeralda, but for Alana it was all new. Only this was very clear to her: Where only seconds before was a hesitant, unsure man who stumbled over every other word, all of a sudden the same man spoke in solid tones of confidence and assurance. He said a lot, and each word burned

into Alana's mind as surely as the finger of God writing on the tablets at Mount Sinai.

"I have chosen you," the message rang out, "to be My prophets of warning and of judgment unto this city and unto this land. You have been called to love not your lives unto the death, for whether you live or whether you die is not important. All that is important is your high calling, to burn brightly as a sign unto the wicked and a beacon unto the ignorant. Worry not for those who are dear to you, for they are as much in My hands as you are. I had to take you apart from one another in order that each of you might fulfill the plan that I have for you. When My time has come, you shall find each other again—and that time will come. But until then, follow Me step by step, and it will be shown you what you should do."

The anointing passed as quickly as it had come, and Stuart opened his eyes straight into Alana's. After a short pause, he asked, "Do you have something you want to say?"

"Uh, look, I've never done this type of stuff before," Alana said, pulling her hands away and throwing them up around her face in a nondescript gesture meant to indicate hesitation.

"Hey, it's all right. I'm not measuring you against anything. But I can tell you have something that you want to say, so say it."

"Okay then, but it wasn't a big set of fancy words like you got. I was just thinking about what you were saying—"

"That was a prophecy. It was Jesus talking, not me."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. But anyway, I was thinking about that, and all of a sudden I saw in my mind Kate's car, the one we drove here in."

"Okay then!" Stuart's eyes lit up. "That's wonderful! That's our next step then. I didn't have

a clue where the Lord wanted us to go next. Shall we go there now?"

"I haven't got anything better lined up," Alana agreed in her own way.

Tossing their used cans into the proper receptacles, the two pushed their way back through the throngs.

"So this prayer and stuff is completely foreign to you, is it?" Stuart asked Alana when they were alone again.

"Well, sort of. Actually ..." she laughed, a little embarrassed, "there is a part of my distant past that this all sort of brings back some memories of. I usually don't talk about it much. My parents were in some cult when they were young, and they left when I was like five. Well, this group was into this type of stuff like praying and quoting the Bible and stuff like that, you know. I mean, five years old is not much, but I have these sort of subconscious things that come back to me sometimes. Funny the things that you remember."

"What type of group was it?" Stuart's curiosity was instantly aroused.

"Oh, I can't think of the name right now. Some real ordinary, generic sort of a name. We lived in this huge house with millions of other people—like forty or fifty or something, maybe more, and scads of little kids my age. It was pretty fun, actually," she laughed. "My parents had different names in the group and we used to go out on the streets and give out these posters and stuff. I thought it was the greatest at the time."

Stuart smirked.

"What?" Alana threw her hands out. "What have I said now? Am I paid to make you laugh or something? Share the joke, man, or get out of my life!"

"It's just that I think you've come full circle, little rebel-girl," Stuart laughed.

"You mean you're in the same group as the one my parents were in?"

"Sure sounds like it to me," Stuart said.

"Oh my God, now that is very weird," Alana said, then she started laughing too. "Oh, wouldn't that just rub my parents up a tall tree! They were always griping about this or that thing that happened to them in 'that group.' Well, actually it was mostly my mom. My dad never said much. Actually, I think he kind of liked it there—sometimes when Mom wasn't around he would tell me stories about those days, and he'd get these little sparkles in his eyes. He was never the same after we left. He died a few years ago."

Alana stopped suddenly, as if something had just come back to her. "You know, now I remember he was real worried about this whole one-world government that was getting itself together before he died. He was always making me promise things like, 'Don't ever register with the government, okay?' God, that's weird! I haven't thought of that in years! He'd say, 'Whatever happens—they'll try to force you to, but don't take it!' I don't know, I guess I thought he was just raving on—he was on so much medication, he never really made much sense."

They had arrived at the car by now, and Alana quickly changed the subject, exclaiming her unexpected relief at finding the back door unlocked.

"Now what are we going to do without keys?" Stuart asked.

Alana answered by crawling down under the steering wheel and busying herself with wires and connections until the sound of a revving motor fulfilled their expectations.

"Here we go!" she said, grabbing the wheel and taking control of the vehicle. "Hop in, big man!"



“So where are we headed then?” Alana asked, as the road sped past them with the cool evening breeze.

“I’m thinking we should go back to Kate’s,” Stuart said. “She obviously didn’t leave with her car, but she’s registered so I don’t think they’ll give her much trouble, wherever they’ve taken her. So she’ll be wanting her car back. You left your motorcycle there, didn’t you? I thought I saw one strewn out front when we left.”

“That adds up for me,” Alana replied.

As they drove along, Stuart fiddled with the various switches in the car. He absent-mindedly flicked on the small compact television screen that was in the center, facing away from the driver’s seat—obviously in an effort to counter traffic accidents on its account.

“She’s got everything in this rig, doesn’t she?” he said, flipping through the channels.

“Yeah, you name it—cell phone, satellite hookup, built-in PC—about the only thing she’s missing is a microwave oven! This is like this year’s model, so it’s got all the trimmings.”

Alana’s voice faded out as something caught Stuart’s attention on the screen and he turned up the volume. The crisp newscaster’s voice reached around to her: “... unconfirmed reports that ever since yesterday morning, unknown quantities of people have been rounded up from various locations around the country. Nothing official has been revealed concerning their destination nor the purpose for their being apprehended. We do have it from reliable sources, however, that those taken in seem to be mostly youth and people on the fringe of society—those who are in some way or other resisting the new government’s authority.

“There is some speculation as to whether there is any connection between this dramatic round-up

and our great world leader’s speech at the inauguration of the new state building this week, but nothing has been confirmed as of yet.”

Stuart hit the button to silence the machine and leaned far back in his seat.

“Whoa, sounds like our missing buddies, doesn’t it?” Alana bit her lip as soon as the words left her mouth, but couldn’t think of anything better to say.

“The Lord told us not to worry about them; He said that they’re all right.” Stuart’s words were directly opposite to his tone and facial expression, but he was obviously trying hard, and Alana, in a manner uncharacteristic to herself, tactfully avoided the obvious.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I’m sure they’re just peachy. They’ve got the big God on their side, right? Actually, if your little prophecy thing is really right-on, I’d say we should be more worried about our own future than theirs.”

Stuart laughed aloud. “I could agree with you on that one,” he said. “What was that that He said, ‘love not your lives unto the death?’”

“I don’t know, the one that stood out to me especially was, ‘whether you live or whether you die is not important.’ Now in my book, *that* is something to worry about.”

“I’m sure it was figurative,” Stuart offered helpfully.

“Don’t try to pull anything over my eyes,” Alana retorted good-naturedly. “I know a scary future prospect when I see one, and I don’t think I’ve ever been quite so well-prepared for what’s up ahead as now. But hey, this is my kind of life, after all! To live, to die—it’s all the same, really? I think it would be rather classy to die in a flashy way, you know, like He said, ‘as a sign.’ That would dig it in for me.”

“I suppose so,” Stuart said, inferring the opposite. “I tend to prefer the living part myself. But I guess

His will's what'll rule, no matter what we speculate. Hey, wait! Isn't that the turn?"

"Right you are, big man," Alana said. "Just testing your wits."

The little car tilted precariously as Alana swerved to the left, just in time to skid into the narrow road alongside the lawn of Kate's house. Night had fully descended now, and the house was as empty and quiet as could be.

"There's obviously nobody home," Stuart said.

"Yep, but my bike is here, and that's what we came for." Alana shut off the car's motor and shoved open her door. "Just a sec, let me fix up the wires here. She'll have my neck if she notices I've been tampering with her precious baby."

After a minute or two, Alana stepped out of the car with a look of satisfaction on her face. "Hey, Stu," she said, "have you thought about what we're going to do for the night?"

"I was just thinking about that," he said.

"Well, since your place has been trashed out, why don't you come over to my house. I've got a dingy little two-roomer. Not much to look at, but better than the street I guess."

"That sounds fine to me," Stuart said, as he joined her on the motorbike. She kicked the gas pedal and the roar of the motor resonated off of the surrounding mountains.

"We're off then!" she said. "Hang on tight, it's gonna be a bumpy ride!"

Chapter 5

A LOOK AT THEIR FATES

The rhythmic jolting motion that should have been so soothing now jarred Kate into a full and conscious wakefulness. She sat up with a start, straining her eyes in the semi-darkness. She could see other figures nearby, but when she reached out her hand to touch them, she instead collided with a seemingly invisible surface. As her groggy mind struggled to get a grasp on her surroundings, she dragged her body into a sitting position.

Raising her slender hands to her forehead, Kate tenderly stroked a small hard lump on the top of her forehead. She winced—partly at the resultant twinge of pain, and partly at the remembrance of her own futile pleas and attempted explanations, and the blow from the dull end of a weapon that had silenced them.

"I must have been knocked unconscious," she mouthed the words in an audible whisper. Somehow, she derived some strength from the sound of them—what little she could hear above the rumbling of the vehicle. Vehicle! She now turned her attention to the jolting that had first woken her up. Her eyes were more accustomed to the dimness now, and she could see a small, narrow strip of light

some meters down. Judging from the height of the roof and the length of the room, as well as the noise the vehicle made, she discerned that they must be in some type of truck.

Now she reached out her hands till she felt a smooth wall. "Fiberplast," she pronounced aloud. This new and highly touted plastic was said to be unbreakable by any method—impervious to bullets or any sort of blade, and fully fire-resistant. This was just one of the marvels that the one-world government had introduced in their efforts to step up security in detaining criminals.

Kate could now imagine the government's detaining truck, the back of which was lined with anywhere from ten to twenty cubicles just big enough for an average-sized person to curl up in. They were each efficiently equipped with individual ventilation systems, so that there was no connection between the compartments. A sheer soundproofing layer inside the glass effectively cut off all communication between any inmates.

What is going on here? Kate was growing increasingly impatient. She realized that this must all have something to do with her new friends' strange beliefs and practices, and doubtless with their refusal to register. But, although strongly frowned on by the higher powers, such rebellion had never been outright forbidden. So what had changed? And why the sudden attack with no warning?

Kate could now tell that the cubicle next to her was occupied by Jay, as she could see his curly black hair matted against the glass. She pounded on it till her knuckles ached, but he did not move an inch. Added to that, the glass had a certain quality that she didn't understand which did not make much noise when struck. It had obviously been designed to offer would-be communicators the least amount of cooperation as possible.

"What is going on?" she wailed, aloud this time. Excitement she had wanted, but this was going a little further than she would have hoped for, secretly or otherwise. *Oh, God! Why aren't any of them moving?* she gazed helplessly at the other motionless forms that she could barely make out around her.

Leaning her head wearily back to the surface behind her, she was suddenly startled by the appearance of a picture in her mind. She opened her eyes wide, and there, clearly outlined and contrasting sharply with the dingy blackness of the jostling vehicle, she saw a shiny metal syringe being injected into a brown arm.

In a flash of understanding, it was all clear to her. The others had all been drugged! "But what about me?" she asked aloud. And then she knew that, too: She had been knocked unconscious in her original protests and efforts to explain her registration. Therefore there had apparently been no need to drug her, and that was why she was now conscious, unlike her unhappy friends.

I wonder if that was Esmeralda, Kate wondered about the strange apparition she had seen. Then another thought came to her—she remembered the churning sky which had caused her to leave the office early that fateful day, and Alana's strange denial of having seen anything out of the ordinary. Perhaps it had all been a sign—one orchestrated especially for her, with the ultimate intention of bringing her into contact with these strange people, and with the power that rested within them.

Slowly, the churning fear and anxiety she had felt in the pit of her stomach was replaced with a warmth and tranquility that she could not understand, but could only absorb and revel in. Gratefully, she drifted into a peaceful sleep.



A burst of bright light plunged Kate's mind into full wakefulness. Her body, on the other hand, still holding out against its earlier rough treatment, refused to budge an inch. Kate waited patiently for her faculties to catch up with each other, and turned her gaze to the bright light that was pouring into the rear end of the truck.

Several large, uniformed men were now going into the various compartments and carrying the people out. Kate noticed with interest that more than half of the cubicles were occupied—her new friends had obviously not been the only targets. Once again she wondered what in the world was going on.

Before she had a chance to pull herself together, her own door was flung open. To her dismay she found that her mouth had taken her body's side, and she felt no more useful than a limp doll. One of the uniformed figures threw her over his shoulder, and then stepped out into the night air. Kate breathed it in deeply, savoring every iota of it after the stale, refrigerated atmosphere she had just left.

The short journey took her up a flight of stairs and into a large communal dormitory of some sort. She was unceremoniously dumped on to a hard, exceptionally narrow bed, and the man left without so much as a glance behind him. Kate opened her mouth to speak, but once again found herself unable to do so. Realizing at last that there must be a purpose for her general malfunction, she contented herself to lie where she had landed and study the high ceiling above her.

It took less than ten minutes for the remainder of the beds in the room to be filled, and gradually the hustle and bustle settled down. As the last uniformed giant left the room, the door slammed crisply shut and the grating sound of an electronic lock shifting itself to the right combination resonated across the bare walls.

Just as she no longer needed them, Kate's faculties finally kicked in. She leaped out of her bed and ran to the door, pounding on it till her hands ached. But it was of no use. It was made of thick metal and was clearly soundproof and Kate-proof in every way. She sank to the floor, tears filling her grey-green eyes. She felt very trapped and very alone.

After some minutes of musing and stewing, Kate finally accepted that she was in for the long haul, and decided to explore her surroundings. She stood up uneasily on her feet, reaching one hand for the door handle to steady herself, and the other to tenderly ensure the safekeeping of the lump on her forehead, which was still tender to the touch.

Looking around herself fully for the first time, Kate quickly took in her surroundings. A dormitory it was, but a fairly small one, with no more than a dozen beds. Each bed was no more than a meter from the other, and the room held no other furnishings whatsoever.

Looks like some sort of a holding tank. Kate turned her nose up in disgust. She turned around quickly when she heard a scuffle or small noise of some sort, hoping against hope that perhaps whatever drug had been administered may have worn off of one of its victims. But whatever brief movement it had been had passed without her having been able to ascertain its origin.

Walking along the windowless wall, she came again to her own cold, hard bed, and dismally threw herself down upon it. Adventure and excitement was definitely not all that it was made out to be.

"Why am I the one that's been left awake?" she wondered aloud. "It certainly should have been one of the others.—They would have known what to do. At least they've got Esmeralda, and all I've got is ..." Kate's words died in midair as she remembered her

own experience in the truck. Words now flashed across her memory, words that she had said with Jay earlier that day. She had prayed a simple prayer with him, and had been very impressed at hearing him explain that she now had just as much access to their source of power as any of them did.

She remembered how she had laughed in disbelief, but the sincerity in his eyes had gelled in her mind, and it all flooded back to her now, in her hour of greatest need.

"Please," she whispered, folding her hands awkwardly together as she had seen people do in movies, "please, I don't really know much about You or Who You are. I don't know much more than I've learned today. But I'm really stuck right now and I need to know what to do. Would You help me out and give me some advice, like I know You would if one of the others were awake?"

It was a simple prayer, but Kate meant it with every pore of her being. As the words left her lips she was content to sit and wait patiently for a reply. She wasn't sure how it would come—would it be a picture like she had seen in the truck? Or perhaps words like the Esmeraldas spoke. She didn't think she'd be up to saying some big dialogue, but perhaps

The answer caught her quite off guard, busy as she was in analyzing its possible arrival methods. On the wall directly across from her, she suddenly saw a blur of motion. Some sort of a large insect or creature, perhaps? Her curiosity instantly empowering her, she darted across the room. There she found no creature at all, but herself standing at the head of the bed where Jay lay, unconscious and deeply sedated.

Kate couldn't help but laugh at the interesting and creative answer she had received. She plopped down onto as much of the narrow bed as was not

resting under Jay, and looked down at his pleasant brown face.

He's not a bad looker, she thought to herself with a smile. Then she put her hands on his shoulders and began to gently shake him, calling his name. "Jay!" she said again, louder this time and with a more vigorous shake. "Jay! Wake up!"

It was no use. Whatever medication had been administered was doing its job well. But then why had she been sent over to this side of the room? Kate groaned in frustration, but just as she prepared to stand up from the bed, a flash of color on the side of Jay's pants caught her eye.

Not knowing why she was doing it, she reached out her hand and pried a small object loose from inside his back pocket. It was a small electronic keypad, attached to a key chain upon which were several keys. Instinctively, Kate knew that this was something important, and she also knew that it would not last long in Jay's possession. Without a second thought, she lifted up her shirt and wedged the lumpy object in the bottom of her bra.

Standing up, she carefully felt the outline of her shirt to see if anything showed. Then she shook her head. Much too obvious. Prying the key chain out again, she carefully removed the keys, and placed them inside one bra cup, then the tiny keypad and the chain in the other.

Satisfied that she had been led by a higher power and had thus done some heroic feat, Kate returned to her cot and settled down for the night. The blessing of sleep, however, was much slower in coming, and the night proved to be a short and restless one for Kate. What little sleep she did get was interrupted at regular intervals by sharp jabs in her breasts whenever she would make a wrong move.

Almost before Kate was quite certain the night had started, it was abruptly over. The heavy metal

door was flung open and harsh white light poured into the windowless room. A tall, well-built man with graying hair and protruding temples now stood in the entrance, eyeing the room with a look of a man sizing up his work for the day. There was a certain steely resoluteness in his eyes that abruptly vanished when his eyes settled on Kate and realized that she was awake.

Snapping his fingers to someone around the corner, the man rushed forward. There was obviously a very different approach in progress than the one they had encountered last night, and that was obvious from the first instant.

"Why, good morning!" the man fairly gushed. "I do hope that you have rested well and that you have not been inconvenienced in any way!"

Kate brushed the indirect and obviously foolish question aside, concentrating on the main purpose at hand as she saw it. "I just need to clarify a misunderstanding," she said, pouring out breathlessly the words she had rehearsed for most of her long, sleepless night. "I was given to understand that the reason these people were arrested was because they were not registered, but there's been a big mistake. You see, I am registered." She held out her hand, showing as proof a tiny, barely-visible scar. "I'm hoping that things can be sorted out so that I can be on my way. You see, I have a job to attend to—I'm a newspaper reporter—and this is a great inconvenience for me, if word of it should get out to my boss."

Kate was mustering out all of her charm and wiles, but she soon realized that she needn't have. At the first sight of her hand, the man snapped his other finger and muttered a few words to a suited woman, who trotted off with the earnestness of a park ranger.

"So terribly sorry, ma'am," the man crooned, the

more earnestly after hearing her profession. "Truly, a most unfortunate occurrence. You won't be detained a moment longer. I've sent someone to call a taxi for you and you'll be out of here in minutes. We do apologize for the inconvenience."

"That's fine, just as long as I'm out of here," Kate said, then looked back somewhat guiltily at the still-unconscious forms behind her, some of whom had grown so dear to her heart. "What will happen to them?" she finally ventured to ask.

"Oh, they will be just fine," the man smiled a crooked smile, revealing a large gold tooth in the left corner of his mouth. "They've just got some paperwork to do, and I'm sure they'll be on their way in no time. Do you want to leave a contact number to pass on to any of them?" The man's observant eye rested on the bed where Jay lay.

"No, no," Kate said, shaking her head. "I only just met them yesterday, it's not like we're good friends or anything. I'm sure they'll be all right."

The two turned as the matronly woman had returned, and gently but firmly grasped Kate's arm to guide her out of the building. As she was guided away, the woman turned and whispered a question in the man's ear.

"No," the man answered, as Kate strained to make out the rest of his reply that was scarcely above a whisper. "Nothing drastic like that. Just try and keep her distracted in conversation as you leave. She'll be fine. We'll keep an eye on her."

The murmurs turned into a nervous cough as they caught Kate's eye and the mistrustful look in it. "All right," he said, with another crooked grin, "better be moving along now. Once again, so sorry for the inconvenience."

With one last look over her shoulder at the motionless brown figure in the bed, Kate turned away, leaving behind forever the perilous and

adventurous life that she had so unwillingly sampled—or so she thought.



Jay and the others never saw the small, round woman with a syringe that circled the room to coax them into wakefulness, for by the time the counter-chemical took effect, she and her trolley had long since vacated the room.

Jay instantly noticed the assorted pin-pricks on his arm, though, and leaped to his feet in about the same instant as some of the others.

“Where are we?” Su groaned, tossing her rumpled curls and stretching her aching limbs.

The question was not to be answered, for at that same moment the metal door was flung open once again, and a very similar picture greeted their eyes to the one that had met Kate’s earlier that morning. The look on the man’s face, however, was quite different. One could almost have thought that the man who stood before them was kind and congenial. He was obviously sporting his very best people-friendly image, and the smell of it reeked to high heaven.

“Good morning, everyone!” the man said loudly, clapping his hands together in an attempted gesture of enthusiasm. “My name is Brett Marshall, and I’ll be your host for the next little while. Firstly, we want to apologize for any inconvenience that this little detour may have been to any plans that any of you had in the works. I’m sure that you will understand once everything is explained.” A firm lift of his hands silenced the many questions that started with the slight pause in his monologue.

“First of all,” he said, with a slight turn of his head. “You will be escorted to the dining hall for breakfast. Then I will meet with you again in forty minutes, and we’ll talk more then.” He began to turn away, then faced them all again, as though

something had just come back to him. “One other thing,” he said smoothly. “I’m afraid we have very strict guidelines here concerning personal effects. We’ll have to ask each of you to submit to a routine search and to entrust any questionable items which you may have brought with you to the trusted members of our staff. All of these will of course be returned to you as soon as you have completed your business here. Thank you.”

Without a glance behind him, Brett turned on his heel and vanished from the doorway, only to be replaced by four strong men in army-green uniforms. They looked casual and relaxed, but the well-filled holsters on their hips and the protrusions around their ankles showed that they were all too capable of springing into violent action at a moment’s notice.

“All right, gang,” the soldier in front called out in military fashion. “Let’s go, and no funny business, please. We’re to escort you to your next location; comply with your guards and there will be no problems. Just get yourselves into a single file here, you’ll get your search over and done with, and then follow along behind me.”

Still groggy from the waning effects of the medication and pleased at the idea of a hot meal, the ten people submitted quietly to two sturdy women agents, who frisked them from head to toe as they filed out obediently. They then made their way behind the soldiers till they reached a large, brightly-lit room filled with tables and chairs.

A cafeteria-style serving area lined the wall nearest the door, and the soldiers motioned them to step into the line. The room was empty, and a look at the clock on the wall confirmed the reason. It was twenty-five minutes past eleven in the morning. Despite that fact, the food bins were well-filled with piping hot breakfast matter of all possible

types and imaginations, and the hungry troupe filled their trays well.

They were then moved along to a designated cluster of tables, where they sat down.

Pausing with his first untouched bite only inches from his mouth, Jay suddenly raised his eyebrows questioningly at Marty, who was sitting in front of him. "Do you think this is okay to eat? None of the soldiers are eating and there's no one else here but us!"

"It tastes fine to me!" Su said, with her mouth already full.

"I think it's probably all right," Marty said. "If they wanted to drug us again, they could have done it without putting it in the food—they made that obvious yesterday. I think we've got a great deal more ahead of us, that's for sure, but breakfast seems to be the safest part of it so far."

"I'd eat up if I were you," a tall, redheaded youth with stringy, matted hair said. "We may not be getting another of these for a while—you never know how long one's gonna have to last!"

Perhaps it was the hot food that helped their senses to return to their full capacity, but after a few bites, Jay suddenly widened his eyes in horror, looking over at the others as he groped frantically around in his pockets.

"The keypad, and the keys!" he whispered hoarsely, below his breath.

"What about them?" Angelica said warily.

"They're gone!" Jay said. He scratched his head in a puzzled sort of way. "But I don't remember them being taken from me at the search."

"If it's any comfort," Su offered, "my pockets are quite empty now, and I don't remember anything being taken from them either."

"Well, whether they got the stuff now or whether they took it while we were unconscious, we're in a

pretty bad state!" Jay said. "I knew we should have kept that thing in a more secure place! Our vital info won't last two minutes in the hands of some of those creeps."

"Let's commit it to the Lord," Angelica said in a low whisper. "I guess now it's about all we can do!"



Forty minutes passed all too quickly for the hungry young people, and sooner than they would have wished, they found themselves reluctantly being herded down another long bland hallway and deposited in front of an austere wooden door.

After some business on the safety keypad, the door swung open and the group was led through yet another short hallway and then through a glass door into a sort of waiting room. There weren't enough chairs for most of them to sit, and so several of the boys obligingly remained standing. There the guards left them, and further down the hallway the sound of the great door being firmly shut and locked echoed across the bare walls.

They hardly had time to open their mouths for speculation when a door on the far side of the room swung open, and a young, immaculately dressed woman with a sharp nose and a blank face announced that they were to follow her.

The room that they were led into, immediately adjoining their waiting room, looked like a large living room. A fireplace in the center of the far wall lit up the rather dim atmosphere, though it was obviously just for looks, since the building was air-conned. A large semi-circle of couches filled up most of the room, and a carpeted area offered large cushions for the remainder who could not find seats. Into these varying degrees of comfort the captives thankfully lowered themselves, then turned their attention to their host, Brett Marshall, who was taking everything in from his reclined armchair at the front of the room.

"Welcome!" his rich, sugar-coated voice oozed out through the room. "I'm so glad that you all could make it. Was your morning meal to your liking?"

The young people expressed their various assents.

"Excellent," he nodded, rubbing his hands together. "Then let's get right down to business. I'm sure that you're every bit as anxious to get on with it as I am."

Pulling himself with some difficulty out of his resting place, Brett stood and began to pace back and forth in front of the fireplace. The flickering glow of the flames cast an eerie light on his black suit, and the girls huddled closer together.

"I know that some of you here know each other; others, I suppose, are complete strangers. But there is one thing that you all have in common. At least so far as we have been able to ascertain, you are ..." he hesitated, searching for the correct word to use in this context. "Wanderers," he finally pronounced with a smile. "I would say that none of you are permanently attached to anything; you don't have roots put down, and you have not yet had the chance to experience our great and efficient process of registration."

A shiver passed through Jay's body, though he could not have said it was the air conditioning ... perhaps it was a shadow of things to come?

"I don't doubt that you all have reasons for this, and why not? It's absolutely your choice, is it not?"

The crowd murmured their assent rather nervously, wondering where this monologue was leading.

"Let me share with you some exciting news. I am finding it so difficult to keep to myself, and I thought that you may want to share in my joy." Brett smiled a sickly-looking grin, so fraught with phony joy that many of the onlookers could scarcely keep

a straight face. "This coming week, there will be a special gala celebration at the new State Building. The finishing touches on it have been completed, and our great leader will be there *in person* to inaugurate it. In honor of the occasion, he will also be delivering a notable speech, unveiling the next step in the evolution of our One World Order, the details of which, of course, have not been fully disclosed to us," here Brett paused, successfully giving off the hint that he knew much more than he was disclosing at the moment.

"He will be presenting some new additions to his great laws of peace which have so successfully been ruling our great nation—and the world! And amongst all the people of the world, *you*—and others like you—have been chosen to participate in this great extravaganza!"

Brett paused for effect, scanning his audience for a receptive face, and upon finding one, latched onto it like a dog upon a bone. He formed his words carefully and with emphasis, "More details will be revealed as we go along, as to exactly what your role will be. But first, I'd like to invite you next door, where we will conduct some tests and surveys."

The discussion was over, and Brett was already moving on to the next subject. There was no offer of questions or further debate. The perplexed group rose warily to their feet, and followed Brett through a door on the far side of the room.

The transformation through this corridor was like entering day from night. Every inch of the room was fully lit with bright white light. All the floors and walls were white and polished to a high finish, and a host of white-uniformed people awaited them at the entrance.

"You are each assigned your personal partner, who will guide you through the next hour or so of tests," Brett called over the din. "Feel free to ask

them about anything you don't understand." The latter seemed more of an offer of formality than something he really expected them to do.

Preparations had obviously been made ahead of time, for each of the newcomers was paired up with a white-clad attendant of the opposite sex and of a similar age. Jay found himself alongside a girl with frizzy, blonde hair, a voluptuous front and long thin legs that reached temptingly below her thigh-length skirt.

"Hello," she batted her curvy green eyes, crusted thick with mascara, "my name's Fawnie. What's yours?"

"I'm Jay," he said quietly.

"Hi, Jay," she repeated, then continued. "God, this place is so loud. Do you want to go somewhere quieter?" She spoke softly and sensually, emphasizing every syllable.

"I just want to get on with whatever it is we're supposed to do," Jay said.

"Then that's just what we'll do," Fawnie said, and with a coy smile she grabbed Jay's hand and squeezed it tightly. "Come over here, I know a way around all this red tape."

Fawnie maneuvered Jay around the cluster of newcomers and their attendants who were standing around getting to know each other, and over to a low table. There she collected a stack of various forms and papers, and a handful of writing materials.

"Come on," she grabbed Jay's hand again with her free one, and pulled him through one of the many doors branching off of this central room. There, they came upon a small living room-type setup. There was a table with a couple of chairs, a couch in the corner, a television and various other furnishings. A few other doors leading from this room were closed.

Fawnie went right over to the table and spread the papers across it. "You've got a lot of paperwork to do," she said, "and I can tell you're one of those 'down to business' types. So why don't we get right on with it."

Jay smiled, appreciating her easing up on the sex appeal, and sat down next to her at the table. "So what do I do first?" he asked.

"All right," Fawnie said, leafing through the sheets. "There must be a hundred thousand of these. Okay, here's a good one to start with. Wait, let me give you a basic overview. These are just your typical, average questionnaires. Here you've got a basic information sheet, you know, personal things like name, age, parents' names, nationality, stuff like that. This one's asking for more detail on your parents. This here is a history form, sort of a synopsis of your life, past job skills, education. You know the jig. This is a general perspectives form, your point of view on things like religion, politics, stuff like that. And this one they call a general orientation and overview—it's kind of the miscellaneous one, I think. It's just got all these assorted questions, everything from A to Z, sort of getting your viewpoints on stuff, what would you do in this kind of situation or that one, what are your dreams, your goal in life, stuff like that. That was the hardest one for me to fill out—took me ages!" She rolled her eyes at the remembrance.

For the first time, Jay took interest in something she had said. "You filled these forms out?"

"Oh yeah, sure!"

"How long have you been here?"

"Oh, I've worked here for almost a year now. I came from a messed up family, you know. My mom put me out on the street when I was fourteen and I had to ... you know..." she shrugged and looked up at Jay to see if he understood was she was trying to say. He nodded reassuringly and she continued.

"Yeah, so then one day I got picked up by the police and they sent me to a juvenile place. One day, some people came to our place and we all filled out all these forms, and then a couple of weeks later a whole bunch of us were given jobs here." She smiled. "It's been like a lifesaver for me, really. I mean, I was nothing before. Now I've got my own apartment, I've got a life. And it's a great job, you know. You get to meet people, talk to them. It's classy. I like it."

"You're registered?" Jay felt stupid asking the obvious.

"Yeah, of course," Fawnie said, "that was the first thing after we accepted the job. But hey, I don't know why people make such a big deal about it. I mean, you do it and it's done, you know? It's not this Big Brother thing like it's cooked up to be by some fanatics."

Jay shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever," he said. "Let's get on with the forms then."



"What great hair you've got!" Terrence was Su's companion, and had been eyeing her with obvious interest ever since they'd made their way into their set of rooms, which lay parallel to Jay and Fawnie's.

"Thanks," Su was flattered at the unaccustomed amount of attention she was getting from the tall, good-looking man. She had learned that he was twenty years old, and half-Arab, which gave him a swarthy complexion and strong build.

"Yeah, it's a really rich color," he stroked it tenderly as she sat with her back towards him, staring at the small pile of forms on the desk in front of her. "You could do a lot with it."

Su took advantage of having her back to Terrence to close her eyes for a moment, savoring the feel of his hand on her back. She knew she should be fighting these strange feelings that she felt swirling inside

her, but she had never experienced them in quite this way before. And though she knew they were bad, she found herself lacking the willpower to part with them just yet.

"So what do you do?" Terrence asked.

"Uh ... oh," Su snapped out of her reverie. Then she hesitated again. What exactly was she supposed to say? Here she was in the very heart of the Antichrist kingdom. As far as she knew, there was no actual knowledge of who they were, so was she supposed to volunteer this information? A voice inside her reminded her that the answer was to shoot up a quick prayer for help, but she felt pressured. *I'll have to pray about all this later*, she told herself. *I can't just stop everything and stall this guy on. I'll just have to say the first thing that comes to me.*

"Yeah well, I've been working at this fairground for a little while, with some friends of mine. Sort of a part-time thing."

"Hey, that's different!" Terrence looked interested. "What did you do?"

"Oh, sort of a ... Hey, aren't we supposed to be doing something to all these papers?" Su changed the subject quickly.

"Of course," Terrence said. "It's okay, you don't have to talk about your past at all, if you don't want to."

"I don't?" Su lifted her big blue eyes to look into his.

He shook his head, and leaned a little closer. "We don't have to *talk* at all, if you don't want to."

"We don't?" Su felt foolish saying the words, but the situation was overpowering her. She knew that she was doing something wrong, but she wasn't sure how to control it—and at this moment, controlling it was the last thing she wanted to do. More than anything, she wanted to let herself go, and be flung fully into the belly of fate. *I can pay the consequences*

later, she thought to herself as she brushed off the voice of conviction in her heart. *This feels too good to stop now.*

Terrence dropped off of his chair onto his knees, and with one thrust of his arm he pushed the table out of the way so that he was kneeling directly in front of her chair. "You are so beautiful!" he whispered hoarsely, and his voice cracked a little as he said it. He leaned forward, and his lips met her neck. Su's hands clenched the back of the chair so tightly she feared she might break it.

Terrence moved his hands slowly, softly along her shoulders and down to touch her breasts. With smooth motions he unbuttoned her shirt and pulled it open. He leaned back a little, feasting his eyes on the small, perfect round breasts. Then he leaned forward and kissed them—softly at first, then more passionately and intensely. Feverishly, he moved to her stomach. Reaching both hands around her, he grasped her by the back of her pants and pulled her closer to him. Scarcely knowing what was happening, Su felt him gently unzip her jeans, and loose them from around her hips. The kisses continued, warm and soft, sending incredible feelings shooting up into every part of her body. Lower he went, until Su shivered and moaned softly.

Then he picked her up, wrapping one arm around her waist and letting her jeans fall to the floor. "Come," he whispered, filling the deep pools of her eyes with his. He placed her on the table, and she leaned her arms behind her and threw her head back as he pulled his pants down and came closer, till he was inside her. Oblivious to everything else, and having thrown all caution to the wind, Su wanted nothing else but for this moment to last till the end of time.

Chapter 6 BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

"Do you usually walk around the house like that?" Stuart nearly burst out laughing when he rounded a corner and came face to face with Alana, obviously only partially awake and clad only in a pair of oversized boxer shorts.

Quite unashamed, Alana shrugged her shoulders and shoved her hands through her untidy mop of hair. "Only when I've got handsome muscle-men staying the night," she retorted with a smile. "You slept okay?"

"I did, thanks," Stuart said. "A little longer than I was expecting, too."

"Gadz!" Alana exclaimed. "It's past eleven! We really wiped out, didn't we?"

"I guess we had a big one yesterday."

"Well, let's grab a bite and set our evil plans for the day in motion then," Alana turned and headed back towards her room. "The kitchen's that way," she waved her arm aimlessly in the other direction. "Help yourself; I'll be right there."

She returned a few moments later with a black cloth hairband keeping her short locks out of her eyes and a low-cut black tank top almost covering her front. Stuart had found the breakfast cereals

and was halfway through a large bowl of it. Alana joined him and helped herself to a portion.

“So, any great nighttime revelations?” she asked conversationally.

“No revelations yet, sorry to disappoint you,” Stuart returned with a smile.

“Not at all,” Alana said amiably. “To tell the truth, I’d rather be there when they come. It’s all rather spooky, you know. Kind of fits into this whole new lifestyle that I seem to have been adopted into.”

“Well, I guess it’s time to go for it, then. What do we have to go on so far?”

“I guess what we’ve been clued in on is that we have some big mission ahead of us, and that we may or may not die, but hey, it’s not supposed to bother us,” Alana laughed.

“Yeah, that’s about the way I remember it too. We should have recorded that prophecy. I wish I had some sort of ...”

“Oh, you want recording? You should have asked!” Alana said suddenly, pulling her watch off of her wrist. “I’ve got a built-in thingie in here—sort of a spy wannabe thing, I guess. It’ll record up to ten minutes of stuff before starting over, and you can transfer it onto cassette or disk or whatever if you’ve got the right adapter.”

“That’s perfect!” Stuart’s eyes lit up. “Let’s just turn it on right when we’re about to get something, then we can listen back to it anytime we want.”

“Sounds good to me,” Alana said. “You’ll be doing most of the talking anyway, so here’s the button.”

Stuart took the watch and then laid it down on the table, looking up at Alana with a serious look in his eyes. “Look, Alana,” he said. “I’ve just been thinking about what you’ve gotten yourself into all of a big sudden. I do need you, and I’d be pretty nervous going at this thing alone, but if it’s too much for you, you don’t have to feel obliged to come with

me. I don’t know what all the consequences are going to be, and ...”

“Hey, don’t,” Alana said. “I think I have a pretty good idea of the risks. I heard the words as well as you did. But you don’t have to worry about me. I’m with it.”

“I’ve been doing this all my life, preparing for it and stuff. To me it’s not any big surprise, but everything’s new to you, and I just want to know you’re okay with anything that’s gonna happen.”

“I’m with it, man,” Alana said again. “I appreciate the thought, but this is the kind of life I’ve always dreamed of. If my old lady hadn’t screwed up I’d probably have been with you all this time anyway.”

Stuart smiled and the two of them allowed their minds to spend a couple of idle seconds pondering the differences that could have occurred in her life from just such a decision. Then Alana broke the silence. “Okay, now that that’s out of the way, I guess we’re all set to continue?”

“We sure are,” Stuart said, snapping out of his reverie with a smile. “Let’s get down to business then.” He grabbed her white hand with his strong one, and held it tightly. She looked surprised at first, but seeing him shut his eyes earnestly, she quickly followed suit.

“Jesus, help us!” the words came naturally to him, so much so that Alana felt she had to open her eyes every few moments just to partake of that special quality that she could feel flowing from his spirit. “We are so weak and so helpless! Our only desire in life is to serve You, to do Your will, to give our lives for You if that be Your highest will. And now we know that there’s something very important that You want us to do. We know that You’ll tell us what it is and exactly how to do it if we’ll just come before You and ask, so that’s why we’re here right now. We kneel before You in humility and submission and beg that You would

pour forth Your Words through us clearly and specifically. Tell us what You want of us, and then give us the faith to believe and the dedication to do it whole-heartedly, whatever it may be, and whatever the cost.”

A few moments of silence followed, but a silence that seemed so natural that neither of them thought to question it. It was more than a silence—it was filled with rich fullness and unspoken wisdom. Alana felt like they had plugged in to a direct channel with the Creator above and were now basking in the warmth and strength of His omnipotent power.

Then Stuart began to speak, slowly, but clearly and specifically. Word by word the Voice spoke through him, outlining step by step exactly what they were to do and how to do it. When the words at last stopped coming, Alana pushed off the record button on her watch, and looked up at Stuart in amazement.

“That was wonderful!” she said. “I am so impressed.”

“Oh, don’t be,” he reddened a little. “I’m sure you could have gotten exactly the same thing; you just have to reach out for it.”

“You know what,” Alana said. “I think I will next time I get a chance, because this whole prophecy thing—is that what you called it?—is all too classy for me to be missing out on for long.” She shoved her hands on the table and tipped her chair back precariously. “But whoa, Gadz! We’ve got our work cut out for us now, don’t we?”

“I should say we do!” Stuart said. “Don’t you feel a little awed at the magnitude of it?”

“Let me ask something, Big Stu,” Alana said suddenly. “Don’t misinterpret me or anything. I have the highest respect for your prophecy thing and I’m pretty sure I do believe it as well. But how

do you know that it’s not just your mind making these things up? I mean, where we’re going and what we’re doing, we’re more than likely gonna wind up a feast for the roaches, you know? I’m just wondering if you’re like positive that this is really a divine order thing.”

“Alana,” Stuart looked her straight in the eyes. “If I was making up some proclamation or prophecy mission, do you think I would have picked one this dangerous?”

Alana thought about that a second and then laughed. “I see your point,” she said at last. “You’re right. Of course, I knew that all along. Anyone could see that that wasn’t you talking. You’re not that eloquent!” She threw him a naughty look out of the corner of her eye.

Stuart faked an angry look and shoved her chair back with his foot. Her already precarious footing was lost altogether and she tumbled backwards onto the floor. Before she could pick herself up, Stuart was already there, offering an apologetic hand. “Sorry about that,” he said. “I couldn’t resist.”

“I’ll get you back, big man,” she laughed, as she pulled herself up and rearranged her sparse articles of clothing to cover any protruding areas of her body. “Just you wait.”

“Well, while you’re inwardly plotting your revenge scheme,” Stuart laughed, “shall we talk about what we’re gonna do from here?”

“I’m sure you’ve got a plan in mind,” Alana said.

“Well, today’s Sunday, and we’ve got till Wednesday to prep ourselves up. I’d say we’ll need all the spiritual beefing up we can get. There’s a mailbox across the city where we get stuff coming in from time to time. Oh ...” Stuart stopped suddenly.

“What? What?” Alana asked.

“Jay ... he had the keys. If the bad guys get ahold of them ...” Stuart didn’t finish his sentence, and

he didn't need to, for Alana could tell by his expression that it wasn't just the keys that he was worried about, or even just the safety of Jay and the others; something even greater seemed to be at stake. It didn't seem that she was going to be provided with more information at the moment, however, and so Alana wracked her brain for something remotely helpful to say. "So what are we gonna do?" she finally sputtered out, then paused, satisfied that she had said something very charitable and reassuring indeed.

"Thank God I do have a copy of the key to our letter box," Stuart replied. "It's a public locker box at a nearby train station where we keep things that come in. It saves us from having to cart it all around with us everywhere we go. We can go there and pick up some materials so we can at least read something." Stuart thought for a minute. "Actually, we'd better empty out that box altogether. Those keys are very easily traceable, and that'll be the first priority of anyone who gets ahold of those keys. Yeah, so let's do that, and then we can tackle anything else we may need to do to gear ourselves up for our big day."

"Do you know how far away this place is, where we get to do our big 'mission' thing?" Alana asked.

"Not specifically, but I expect it's a good six hours' drive from here, at least. We'll want to leave on Tuesday night so we can be well-situated in time for the morning ceremony."

"That all sounds decent by me," Alana agreed. "Let's go to it then." Standing up and casting a glance down at her outfit, she grinned a little. "Just give me a sec, I'll go change into something a little more public. Then I guess it's 'off to the locker box we go!'"



The hours passed slowly for Jay, who was

feeling very strongly the confinement of his circumstances, and the separation from those he was close to and could draw strength from. Fawnie had been his almost constant companion since her appearance that Sunday afternoon, and he was finding her forward advances more difficult to resist. Still, she kept herself in control quite well, sensing that he was not ready and would not appreciate her forcing herself on him.

Once having arrived inside his personal apartment, he was informed that this would be his dwelling place for the next few days. Jay correctly interpreted this whole experience as a type of glorified incarceration. Nevertheless, he praised God hourly for the comfort and convenience that it afforded, compared to what he had come to expect of an "Antichrist prison."

His apartment held a comfortable bathroom, bedroom, and a living room with a kitchenette off to the side. The cupboards and fridge were well-stocked, and even the closet was filled with assorted articles of clothing that fit him perfectly. An assortment of books and movies filled various shelves. It was obvious that his comfort had been of great importance to someone, and despite his natural desire to relax and enjoy it, Jay found it all more than a little fishy.

Filling out the forms took the better part of the first afternoon, and Jay had been stumped more than one time on what he could clearly see were trick questions. He had decided from the beginning to hold nothing back and to be perfectly up front about his beliefs and associations. It was therefore with only a slight hesitation that he checked the "yes" box alongside the question "Member of a religious organization?" and filled out the blank line next to it with "The Family—formerly The Children of God."

He stopped to look at it after he was done, and suddenly reached for his eraser, removing every trace of the words from the line. Then, starting again, he wrote the same thing once more—only this time grabbing a thick black marker and writing in bold capital letters. He viewed his completed handiwork with a sigh of satisfaction.

If they want to know about me, he thought to himself, there are less pleasant ways of finding out, and I'm not about to pussyfoot around with these ...

Right then Fawnie pushed through the front door of the apartment, her coy smile ever on her lips.

"Hi, Jay!" she cooed. "I came by to see how you were doing. Did I leave you alone long enough, like you wanted?"

"Thanks, Fawnie, you're doing great," Jay smiled.

The girl plopped down on the chair next to him, and as her eyes passed casually over the space Jay had just filled out, her glance froze suddenly. She seemed momentarily speechless, and Jay caught on at once and seized his advantage.

"What's the matter? Are you surprised?" Jay turned and grabbed her arm. "What is it? Tell me why you've gone so silent!"

Fawnie shook herself free from his grasp. "Get off me," she said irritably. "I'm not surprised at all." She looked back at the rest of his page, sloppily filled out in smudged pencil writing, and then at his bold statement of faith. "You're pretty convinced of what you do, aren't you?"

"I give my life for it," Jay said simply.

Standing up quickly, Fawnie turned and left the room, shutting the self-locking door quickly behind her.



Su, on the other hand, was facing struggles of an entirely different nature. The first couple of forms she had filled out easily, but now, faced with

expressing her own personal beliefs, she was acutely aware of Terrence standing behind her, rubbing her shoulders. Her pencil hovered, and then she dropped it back on the table, and lifted her hand to her forehead.

"I'm not really feeling so well," she mumbled half-heartedly.

"Of course you're not," Terrence said soothingly. "Look, don't worry about these forms. You can take care of them later. Maybe you don't even need to fill them out at all. I can find ways around these things, you know."

Su smiled. Whenever Terrence spoke, things seemed to sound so much better.

Terrence walked over and sprawled onto the couch. "Come over here," he said.

Su threw herself down near him, resting her fiery red head on his shoulder.

"You must be kind of bored," Terrence said at last.

Not sure what he was getting at, Su didn't answer.

"I've got just the thing," Terrence sat up suddenly. "Do you like clothes?"

"Clothes?" Su nearly laughed out loud. "Well, I don't know. I've never really had a great wardrobe to speak of."

"Well, my dear," he said, grasping her hand and melting his lips into it, "all that is about to change. Wait right here, I'll only be a second."

True to his word, Terrence was gone no less than five minutes, returning with two or three tape measure-wielding attendants. Before she knew what was happening, Su was being measured in all conceivable parts of her body, questioned according to her tastes and preferences in fabrics, colors and styles. Then, as quickly as they had come, the troupe was gone again.

"You've got a great figure, you know," Terrence passed his hand along the lengthwise seam of her pants, as if remembering what lay inside them.

"You think so?" Su was flattered.

"Oh yeah, for sure!" Terrence said. "I haven't seen many girls that have that perfect a shape. Your face too—it's great. You know, I bet I could line something up for you if you ever wanted to get into modeling. Have you ever thought about doing anything like that?"

"Me? You've got to be absolutely out of your mind," Su laughed, but her curiosity was piqued, and her expression showed it.

"No, I'm serious!" Terrence played right along with her.

"I'm like nobody, you know!" Su said.

"Hey, in this business it's not who you are, it's how you look," Terrence spoke this odd opposite of what Su had learned all her life as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world. Somehow the tone of his voice and the glint in his eye made it sound less distasteful than it would have otherwise.

Su shrugged. "I don't know," she said, very quietly, as though she were ashamed to confess even to herself the great temptation that was tearing at her soul.

Terrence saw the look in her eyes right away, and put the matter aside with a wave of his hand. "Hey, don't you worry about it," he said reassuringly. "We've got plenty of time to talk about all this. You look tired, why don't you get some rest?"

"Yeah, that sounds right-on," Su said, relieved at the prospect of being alone. "I'll see you later then."

Terrence murmured a few words of endearment and promised to return before she knew it, but Su's mind scarcely took them in. Her thoughts were far away—incoherent, almost incomprehensible, yet

they fought for existence. Turning her gaze to the cream-colored wall opposite the couch, Su's gaze suddenly froze as a vivid image began to emerge from the twisted brown wallpaper patterns.

Writhing, turning, twisting, Su watched what she could only assume to be a soul in torment and agony. Before her horrified eyes she watched as tiny fire-red tendrils were cast out like darts, ensnaring and encircling the figureless being, binding and trapping it only more. Then from the very core of its being Su heard a cry such as had never met her ears before—a cry so horrifying that she herself screamed out, flinging her hands onto her ears, oblivious to the fact that she was falling clear off the couch onto the floor.

She lay on the carpet for five minutes or more, her hands still planted firmly over her ears, not daring to move a muscle lest that picture of torment should reappear. She did not pronounce the question in her mind of what the symbolism was, for she knew it all too well. The darts were being cast about her own soul at that very moment. But what Su herself did not even know—and what frightened her the most—was the fundamental question of all: Was she strong enough to break free before it was too late?

Still trembling, Su finally dragged herself into a sitting position. She leaned back against the side of the couch and flung her head back onto it.

"It's okay!" she told herself. Saying the words out loud seemed to lend them more credibility—something her argument desperately needed at that moment. "It's gonna be all right. It's not like I'm selling out or anything. I mean, of course I'd never take that stupid mark. Any crawling toddler knows enough not to do that. I'm just gonna..." she paused, and her words faltered, but she forced them further along their desperate path. "I just want to ... try out

some of the perks.” She smiled suddenly, as though a happy thought had occurred to her. “I mean, I’m captive here anyway, so why not make the best of it while it lasts? What’s wrong with having your cake and eating it too, if you can? I can stop anytime I want to.”

Chapter 7

THE MISSION

Having easily accomplished their business at the locker box on Sunday, Stuart and Alana had devoted almost the whole of Monday to the vital task of prepping themselves up spiritually for the big event to come. Alana was fascinated to find whole new worlds as yet undreamed of, which seemed to unfold themselves into her soul with every word that she read. And Stuart, along with the strengthening of his own spirit that was taking place with the refilling, found that the enthusiasm with which he saw Alana drawing from the Word kindled his own hunger and desire for it more than ever.

After some discussion and planning, Stuart and Alana had set out right after lunch on Tuesday. Not knowing exactly what the situation was with the government and what seemed to be a crossing over into a time of mandated registration, and not wanting to draw any undue attention to themselves, they decided to avoid the main roads and the busy city center.

Alana threw an extra jerry can of gasoline onto the back of the huge motorcycle, and fastened it firmly in place. “Got any stuff you need to bring?” she asked Stuart.

He only shook his head. "You?" he asked.

"I pride myself in traveling light," Alana said. "Anything I need, I'm sure I can find as we go. We'll probably be back before we know it anyway." Even as she said the words, she looked uneasily back at the tall apartment building she had just stepped out of, wondering how true her words would prove to be.

Just as she put on her helmet and prepared to climb over onto the bike, the main door of the apartment building opened, and a short, stout woman of sixty-some years stepped out, squinting in the sunlight. Her graying hair was unkempt, and the pungent smell of alcohol oozed out with her into the open air.

"Alana!" she shrieked. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Out, Mom!" Alana said impatiently, stepping onto the bike and revving it up.

"Out where?" Her mother came closer, and the two drew back a little for the odor that preceded her.

"Just out, Mom," Alana said. "Stuart, get on! This is my friend, and we're just going out for a spin."

"At this time of the day? And why are you taking extra gas? I want to know where you're headed and what you're up to. You're never out doing anything at this time of the day, and I know you've got something brewing. I insist on knowing what it is."

"I'll tell you about it sometime, Mom!" Alana shouted over her shoulder as she revved the motor up to full gear and drove away.

Looking back over his shoulder, Stuart could not see Alana's mother for the cloud of smoke that had filled the air around her. "Powerful motor," he commented with a little laugh.

"Oh, she deserves that and more," Alana said, quite unapologetically. "She can be such a nuisance. I mean, you know you do your little prophecy thing—I bet she's in touch with something

on the other side, you know, like the bad side of things. I bet she knew I was up to something other than my usual bummish lifestyle, and she was determined to put a stop to it. ..."

Stuart cleared his throat auspiciously, halting the flow of abuses that he sensed were about to be heaped upon her mother's head. "It's okay," he said. "We've left her behind. You can put it in the past."

"Yeah, man, you're right," Alana said with a shrug. "I just get a bit carried away sometimes."



It was a long drive, and Stuart found himself needing to stop every hour or so to stretch his legs and rest his aching crotch. "You're not used to this motorbike stuff, are you?" Alana laughed as she watched him double over on the ground in gratefulness, about three quarters of the way into their journey.

Stuart just shook his head.

"I rode horses a lot when I was a kid. It's nothing like that, you know," Alana offered. "This is padded and everything. Shouldn't give you a problem at all. I guess if you don't warm up to it though, it can be kinda rough Say, are you hungry or anything?"

Stuart shook his head again.

"Good, me neither. I just realized we didn't bring anything to eat. I suppose that's all in the course of a day for you though, huh?"

Stuart sat up. "I'm sure the Lord'll send some along by the time we're ready for it. He's real good at stuff like that, you know."

"Yeah, I figured as much," Alana laughed. "You know, I could get used to this ... what do you call it? Living by faith? I could get used to it."

"Maybe you should," Stuart agreed. "But I'd give it a few more hours before you make your final decision—you have yet to see the rougher side of our lifestyle."

"Oh, believe me," Alana's eyes twinkled. "That, I am only looking forward to. Come on, let's hit the road again."

The miles flew past, and the eerie glow of the sunset spotted them turning onto a busy main street and flying past buildings and skyscrapers of all shapes and sizes.

"That must be it up there," Stuart shouted above the rush of the wind. "Why don't we stop here."

Alana pulled on the brakes and slowed the bike to a gradual halt. Thrusting her foot out onto the sidewalk, she pulled the bike over and jugged out the kickstand. Stuart dismounted in pained relief. Then, turning together, they gave their full attention to the scene before them.

The street they were on was only medium-sized, but already the traffic immediately ahead of them had begun to be diverted off onto a side road as barricades were being set up in preparation for the following day's events. Several hundred yards ahead stood the impressive new building, with flocks of curious onlookers who thronged the well-guarded barricade, and a large procession of uniformed brutes guarding it with noteworthy vigilance.

Directly in front of the building, scaffolding had been transformed into a makeshift stage. A couple of army tents lined the area surrounding the stage on both sides, and various activity was obviously already taking place inside. Outside of the guarded barricade, various news crews were setting up for the long haul, already reporting live and anxious to be the first on the scene for the following morning's historic events.

"Well, here we are," Stuart said finally.

"Yeah, man!" Alana pounded Stuart's back in her own affectionate way. "What a rush! I can't wait till tomorrow!"

Stuart smiled grimly, perhaps a little more aware of all that was involved in their mission. "Oh, I can!" he muttered, barely above a whisper. "I certainly can."



The huge square had been buzzing with activity since well before dawn on this memorable Wednesday morning. The borders of the stage had been lined during the night with bright red cloth drapes, and huge flags and banners displaying the one-world government's universal symbol were triumphantly waving in the early morning breeze. Though barely seven o'clock, with the day's events not officially beginning until ten, everything was obviously in full motion.

At eight o'clock, the guards let down the barricades, and the hordes of anxious onlookers, many of whom had passed the night on their feet to ensure a place closer to the action, thronged noisily into the area surrounding the stage. Guards were posted in the two-meter radius directly surrounding the stage, which was still off-limits to the public. The remainder of the space in the huge square was open to all. Many had brought their own chairs or stools and packed lunches, and were making a family picnic out of the event. Small children, screaming and irritable because of the early wake-up necessary to bring them, scrubbed and in their best outfits, out at this hour, ran frantically around, annoying the rest of the onlookers.

At eight-thirty, a mild-sounding musical band made their way onto the stage, and the bored crowds cheered them on enthusiastically as they attempted to permeate the large square with their puny sound system. It was obviously the thought that counted, as the crowd cheered wildly and clapped profusely, thrilled just to be watching their lips moving in the indistinguishable din.

Various other speakers and musicians took their turns afterwards, and thus passed the remainder of the time until ten. Then, things began to move in earnest. The several-meter high speakers that lined the sides of the stage were plugged in and geared up for action, and a thin, gaunt man, with dyed-brown hair covering every bit of the gray that obviously should have been there, stepped up to the podium. Raising one hand until silence emerged, he began to speak.

"Welcome, friends, countrymen, fellow-citizens of our glorious one-world community! Neighbors we are all!—And to think that some said it couldn't be done!" The crowd laughed amicably. "But here we are, and where are they?" Not pausing for an answer, he breezed on. "Nowhere to be seen, yet we triumph—and more! We go on to greater heights!" His chest swelled as he surveyed the vast crowds who sat drinking in his every word.

"I am proud to be here today, together with each of you, to commemorate this most special of all days. This indeed shall be a day to remember—a day that you will proudly recount one day to your children and your grandchildren. You shall be the envy of all the masses who were not able to be here, for you shall have not only seen our glorious leader with your very eyes, but seen him on this very special day, as he presents to you an incredible new vision of the future that he himself has conceived."

Some in the crowd began to cheer wildly, but others hushed them up, anxious to hear more about what was going to happen.

"Our beloved leader will be appearing in person on this very stage not long from now. But beforehand, we have a few other speakers who will recount some of the feats and attributes that our government has accomplished over the last several years.

I'm sure you'll welcome them as heartily as we assured them you would when we invited them."

With a few nods and "thank yous," the man descended the stage, amidst a barrage of cheers and wild hoopla.

A portly man with a Nordic-sounding accent mounted the stage first, and gave a lengthy and tiresome explanation of how the one-world government was catching on in other areas of the world. His talk abounded with facts and figures, but a great deal too far above most people's heads to make any big impression on the crowds. When he at last left the stage, the claps were more of relief than of genuine appreciation of the material presented.

The next to come on stage was a man familiar to some present that day—one Brett Marshall, looking his very best and most shiny, and obviously very pleased to be in the spotlight.

"I shall not speak to you long, good people," Brett began congenially, instantly winning the hearts of the onlookers, "but before I begin my active presentation, let me explain to you a little about our program. As you are aware, in years past there has been a great problem in many of our cities with homelessness and unemployment, often resulting in crime and the degradation of some neighborhoods." Brett smiled in smug satisfaction.

"One of the first programs instituted by our glorious leader was the one headed up by myself, known as 'New Start for Youth,' or NSY. For the last several years, we at NSY have been offering new opportunities to deprived and needy youngsters, giving them an entirely new start, job training, and a chance to be of use and make a mark in our great new government.

"Without the vision and foresight of our great leader, none of this would be possible, so let's hear

a big hand for him now!" Brett turned slightly to the left as he clapped loudly, and the crowd before him whooped and cheered louder than most had thought possible.

As the racket died down, Brett began to speak again. "We have selected a sampling of some of our typical case-workers—some who have already been integrated into the program, and others who are just beginning—and asked them if they'd like to give a few words of explanation about their lives before and since their involvement with NSY."

Brett now stepped off to the side a little, and Fawnie took the stage. She was obviously quite nervous, but greatly enjoying the incredible focus of attention she was receiving. In short, nervous syllables she spelled out the mundane hopelessness of her life as a young teen, and the incredible challenge and joy that she now felt in working for NSY, and being able to be a help to other troubled youngsters. "I feel at last that I really have a chance to make a difference, for something I really believe in..." Fawnie's words suddenly faded away, as if something had come to her mind. She hesitated and fumbled with her notes.

Brett noticed and immediately came to her rescue. "A big applause, ladies and gentlemen!" The crowd cheered obligingly as Fawnie, red-faced, scurried off the stage.

Another two or three similar speeches followed, each pasty-grinned young person presenting the whole "then and now" scenario, rounded off with an "I'm so happy with what I'm doing." The crowd clapped and hooted for each one.

"And now," Brett continued, in his very proudest tone, "we'd like to present you with someone very special. She has not been with us for long at all, but we can already see what a find she is shaping up to be. I'll let her tell you about it in her own words.

Ladies and gentlemen—Susannah Ornhigh!"

Far in the back, melted in amongst the crowd, Stuart and Alana could hardly believe their eyes, but it was Su that they saw, looking ten years older, and nowhere near the same Su they had known just days before. Her bright red hair had been streaked with gold and cut into an outlandish style that was so popular at the time, then gathered up into an untidy knot at the top of her head. Her blue eyes were lined with heavy black and glittering purple, and her lips were carefully defined with a brownish-purple shade. She was wearing a mauve-colored version of the earrings that were the rage—a long, thin, leaf-shaped contraption that curved up the side of the earlobe and was fringed with short gold tassles hanging down along the side of it. Her sleeveless dress was of shimmering lilac, and she looked oddly out of place on the plain scaffolding stage.

Nonetheless, to the crowd she made a stunning impression, and many of the men started to cheer wildly as soon as she set foot on the stage. She didn't seem to be nervous at all, and made her way confidently to the podium.

"Thank you, Brett," she said in a smooth, charming voice. Then she turned and addressed the crowd. "Well, I'm afraid I don't have one of those 'escape from a life of horror' stories." The crowd laughed, as Brett frowned and knit his brows slightly. "But I will say this," she continued. "I have been given a marvelous opportunity by NSY—something that I'd never dreamed possible. Just days ago I was a drifter, with no certain dwelling place and no income or plan for my life." Rushing her words slightly, she continued. "But now, I have just signed on to a two-year modeling contract for *Glamor* magazine, and I feel like my life is just starting."

Alana nudged Stuart fiercely. "Now!" her eyes flashed with rage. "Now! We've got to do it now!"

Stuart's eyes looked pained, but he shook his head. "No," he said. "We've got to wait for the right time."

"And just when is that going to be, Mr. Smart Guy?" Alana said impatiently.

"I don't know, but it's not yet. We'll know it for certain when it is."

With a few more words, a smile and a queenly wave, Su swept off stage and Brett returned to the podium. "Just another satisfied customer," he purred. "Need I say more? I think not. We'll now have a short musical interlude, and then will be the moment you've all been waiting for!"

"What's going on, Stu?" Alana said. "I thought we came here to do our big prophecy mission! So when's it gonna happen?"

"Look, Alana," Stuart struggled to stay patient. "You're gonna have to trust me and let me lead on this one. You don't have a clue what's going on, and frankly, neither do I. But at least I have the sense to be aware of that, and wait for my cue. The Boss is gonna tell us when it's time, so just close it and wait." Stuart stopped suddenly, as his attention was drawn to a large marble monument at the back of the crowd. "There!" he said suddenly. "That's where we're supposed to go!"

Alana opened her eyes wide in incredulity. "You've got to be kidding! They'll never see us if we're over there, much less hear us! We may as well do a whole strip routine for all they'd notice."

"Come on, Alana," he grabbed her firmly by the hand and began plowing through the crowd. "We've got to hurry. There's not much time."

"But how do you know that's where ..." Alana quickly started eating her words as Stuart froze to a halt and turned to her, eyes blazing. "Look, it's fine. I'll shut up," she said quickly. "I'm following, let's go."

The two began moving again, shoving the crowds aside as they made their way towards the monument.

They had no sooner completed their task of scaling the awkwardly-shaped surface (thankfully, the guards were all concentrated on the opposite side of the crowd, near the stage and outlying tents), when the shriek of microphone feedback drew their attention back to the stage.

A couple of fix-it men put the finishing touches on the sound system and scurried off the stage, while a handful of armed soldiers in full battle gear mounted the stage and stood on all extremities of it, vigilantly scanning the crowd for suspicious-looking parties. As all the commotion settled down, a stout-looking man slowly and majestically mounted the stage. Stuart strained to see better this man who was the embodiment of so much evil prediction. At first glance he seemed ordinary enough—a portly-looking man, not overly tall and not overly good-looking. His black hair was elegantly tinged with streaks of silver, and he was clean-shaven. His piercing gray eyes scanned the crowd and seemed to take in their collective thoughts, feelings and emotions in a moment.

For more than a minute he stood there, silent and motionless at the podium, while the crowds held their breath. Then he slowly opened his mouth, and it was still some seconds more before words began to emerge. Yet when they did, they were each like a little hand, reaching through the crowd and grasping ahold of the hearts of each onlooker, and bringing them into his lap. While there was nothing outstandingly noteworthy even about what he said, there was some intangible quality—a smoothness, a coyness, yet fraught with such sincerity, emotion and utter dedication, that the casual observer could do nothing less than stand back and admire.

Stuart and Alana, a little out of the course of the main firing line of his tremendous power, observed this scene with fascination.

"They look like a crowd of flies, buzzin' around that maniac," Alana scoffed under her breath, scornful yet always wary of the great leader's spies which were renowned to be in "every place under the sun."

"That they do," Stuart agreed grimly. "And he's got them eating right out of his hand, that's for sure. I wonder what this big thing is that he's going to spring on them, the reason for all this hoopla."

They had not long to wait before they would find out. A few minutes of idle chit-chat began the prelate's speech—a few words of endearment for the little children scurrying around in the crowd, some minutes dedicated to his pride at seeing the unity of the member nations of the new One World Order, and how he felt towards them as a father to his children.

"You bring me great joy, all of you," he said, and Stuart and Alana scornfully noted the put-on twinge of emotion with which he spoke. "And I am so pleased to call each of you my children. Let us all draw ever closer to one another throughout these years to come." Wiping away a token drop of moisture from his left eye, he continued.

"I am honored to be here with you today for the dedication of this new building, and with it, a new era that has come upon all the consigning nations of our New World Order. It brings me great satisfaction just to be here with you at this time, and I would like to take this opportunity to explain further to you all about my great vision and plans for the year to come. I'm sure that you will all be as thrilled as I am about it."

With this introduction, he launched into an animated tale, extolling the benefits of his registra-

tion system, and what incredible changes it had brought to all sectors of the worldwide populace. "There is only one drawback, which has posed a serious problem and which we have been discussing and considering how to deal with almost since the start of this program." He paused for effect, then continued, satisfied that he held his audience's undivided attention. "The vast majority of the peoples of the world have received the registration mark, and have been able to taste for themselves of the many benefits it has brought to their lives. Others, however, have found reason to be hesitant or suspicious of this economical benefit, and have not yet indulged themselves.

"And here, you see, we have the problem. For, as long as this system is only partially implemented across the nations of the world, we cannot have full unity. We cannot truly be a global economy nor have true peace between all mankind so long as many are not willing to give their all and cast in their lots with us.

"After discussing it at length, we have come to the conclusion that the best thing for all of these who are hesitant would be to make the registration process compulsory for all those over the age of twelve. It would then be an automatic process—quick, inexpensive, convenient, and with countless benefits. This would then relieve each person of the necessity of making their own decision about whether to launch into it or not, and they would automatically be entitled to the many benefits that accompany it."

Murmurs of agreement arose from the crowd, the majority of whom obviously thought that it was an excellent idea—or at least did not feel comfortable voicing any opinions to the contrary in such a way that they could be heard.

"This new law, then, will go into effect the Sunday

of this week, and from that time onward there will be a thirty-day period during which anyone not currently registered with our central government would need to report to one of the many registration agencies for testing and application. As those of you know who have done it, it's as easy as it can be!" He tossed into the crowd a smooth, oily smile that sent Alana squirming on her rocky perch.

"Oh gadz, he's so disgusting! Can you imagine going to bed with a guy like that?" she wailed.

Stuart just laughed, and they turned their attention back to the dramatic scene unfolding before their eyes.

"In fact," his voice boomed a little louder than before as he moved closer to the microphone. "In fact, I have something to show you that I think will give an extra boost to any of you who may have had hesitations about this procedure that really is very simple. In order to show you just how very quick and easy the whole process is, we have asked for a volunteer who has not yet received this registration to come up here on stage, and we will demonstrate exactly how it is done!"

A ripple of curiosity span through the crowd. Their full attention was riveted to the stage.

Stuart bit his tongue with a dreadful fear of what was going to happen next. He was right. On the far side of the stage he saw Su being coaxed up. She was obviously quite a bit more shaken than she had been earlier, and not convinced of what she was being told to do. He could see her shaking her head vigorously, and seemed to be asking for a delay or for someone else to do it. But the white-haired man she was arguing with would not take no for an answer, and shoved her towards the front and into view of the crowds.

Forced into public view, Su pasted on a smile and drew closer to the man she had hated her entire life

and now was about to meet in person. Stuart could not guess what was going on in her mind, but he was too fully occupied in prayers and supplications for her to give it more than a passing thought.

"Susannah," the great leader spoke warmly, as he reached for her hand. "I had the pleasure of watching your speech earlier. How do you feel about being chosen to be up here now?"

"Uh ... I ... well, that is, I'm greatly honored, but I don't know if now is ..."

"Nonsense!" he cut in smoothly. "It won't take any time at all. You'll see how quick and painless it all will be. All you have to do is sit right here in this chair, and before you know it, it'll all be over. And just think how helpful this demonstration will be to the many who have not yet made up their minds!"

Su looked helplessly out into the sea of faces, all of them looking directly at her. She looked over at the dentist-like chair which had been hastily set up beside the podium, and the sterilized orderlies with an assortment of medical and technological equipment who were buzzing around it in preparation.

At that very moment, a ripple of shock swept through the crowd. The guards standing on the far right side of the stage fell back in dismay as, seemingly out of nowhere, two figures appeared on the very corner edge of the stage. They were male and female, and Su recognized them instantly and nearly died on the spot.

Stuart raised his hands high above his head, and his voice boomed through the crowd, instantly shattering any hold the sound system may have had over the atmosphere. "Woe!" he bellowed in a voice so loud and deep it could only have come from the depths of the throne of Almighty God. "Woe to these who are gathered here to pollute and destroy

the minds and hearts of the young and innocent! Woe to those who sit in the chair and receive the mark of the Devil! Woe unto them and woe to their souls, for their blood shall flow freely and their pain shall be long-lasting!"

For all this time the guards had remained frozen to the spot, unable to figure out what was happening and why, but now they were getting back in control, and instantly began shooting at the two figures. Mysteriously, the bullets seemed to be going straight through them.

Meanwhile, Alana took a turn—a deep breath, and then her own mind and thoughts were no more. She flowed with the marvel of the rush of the anointing, experiencing it for the first time and loving every second of it. "It is not too late!" she cried, in a voice every bit as resonant as Stuart's had been. "It is never too late to turn around. Do not give your soul unto this impostor! Jesus is there for you. You only have to reach out and ask for Him! He will hear your faintest cry!"

The guards now had rushed up to the two prophets, but found to their dismay that the second they came to the spot where they had stood, the two instantly vanished. They stood for a few moments, looking puzzled and confused, but their leader (being much more aware of the spiritual realm than the guards were), caught sight of them instantly where they stood on their monument recovering from their extraordinary experience, and pointed a crafty finger in their direction.

"There they are!" he bellowed. "Stop them!"

A group of soldiers immediately set off running in their direction, while sharpshooters lined up along the path, taking aim from where they stood.

Realizing they had not a moment to lose, Stuart and Alana leaped to the ground and began a mad dash out of the square, finding at least temporary refuge

in the crowds that swarmed around the square.

Coming to their senses again, the people on stage caught their breath and began to move around.

The great leader purred into the microphone, "Good people, I apologize for this untimely display of eccentricity. I guess it's true that there's a nutcase or two in every crowd!" he laughed condescendingly, noting with some irritation that less than half of the crowd joined him in his appreciation of his own humor.

"Let us be on with our demonstration, then," he jerked Su roughly by the arm and pushed her towards the chair.

That whole scene, however, had been the last straw for Su, and she had made her decision. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I cannot do this."

"What?!!" the cry tore from his lips as Su saw Satan flash violently through his eyes. "What did you say?"

"I said I don't want to receive your mark," Su said, a little more boldly.

"You cursed girl! You will sit in that chair immediately!" he was losing his cool, and the crowd shuffled, visibly agitated at this uncharacteristic display of anger.

"You can't force me," she said quietly. "I am a child of God, and there is no way that I could ever take the mark of the Devil. I'm ready for whatever punishment you have for me, but I cannot do this."

With a grunt, he superhumanly suppressed his obvious desire to end her miserable life on the spot, and oozed, "Of course, well, it is your choice. If you'd like more time to think about it, that's just fine. Perhaps this demonstration wasn't such a good idea." Waving his hands to the guards to take her away, he addressed the crowd once again. "But then, why spoil such a happy event? Let us proceed with the unveiling of our grand new State Building!"

The crowd respectfully returned their attention to their leader, but more than a few stored some small seed in their heart—planted by the prophets and watered by the testimony of one wayward daughter—and would be eternally grateful for it in the life to come.

Chapter 8

KATE

Stuart and Alana kept a rapid pace as they dodged through the crowds, looking behind them every now and then to see the group of fast-approaching soldiers gaining ground by the second. They came to a crosswalk just as the light flashed red.

“So, do we dash across the street and make a clear target of ourselves, or sit here, trying to blend in with the crowd, and effectively wait for the goon squad to catch up?” Alana voiced the obvious question.

Right at that moment, Stuart caught sight of a small red sports car that was flashing its headlights up ahead.

“It’s Kate!” he said in disbelief. “Come on!”

As they bolted out of the crowd along the sidewalk, the red car backed up and around the corner. The two fugitives followed immediately, and seeing Kate motioning vigorously with her hand at them, dove into the back seat of the convertible. Kate immediately stepped on the gas.

“Stay down!” she called over her shoulder. “And hold tight. We should be out of sight in a few minutes but I’m trying not to get on the wrong side of the law just yet, if I can possibly help it.”

"Kate, you're an angel!" Stuart said, breathing a long sigh of relief.

"Just in the right place at the right time, I guess," she said with a smile. "I saw your little performance up there, and I figured you might need a quick getaway of some sort."

Kate turned along various side streets, and after about ten minutes, was satisfied that they had successfully lost the opposition. "You can sit up now if you want," she said.

The two gratefully disentangled themselves and tried to find some measure of comfort on the rather sparse back seat.

"Did you see Su?" Kate said what was on all of their minds, and no one bothered to answer her.

"I guess that took a lot of guts to back out after how far she seemed to have gotten into it," Kate continued thoughtfully.

"What are you going on about?" Alana asked. "Guts to do what? To sell herself out?"

"No, Alana," Kate said. "Oh, you guys must have missed her grand finale while you were on the run!"

"What happened?" Stuart asked, sitting up suddenly in his seat.

"Well, our 'great leader' got this brainstorm to do a big 'receiving the mark' demo up front, and wanted Su to be the volunteer guinea pig, to convince everybody else that it was okay," Kate began.

"We were there for that," Alana said.

"Well, so after you guys did your big shebang, she just basically told the guy, 'No way.'" Kate giggled. "You should have seen his face. She may well have been the first person who ever said no to him, especially in front of millions of people and on live TV. Oh boy, he was fuming! But what could he say—right then anyway. He just sent her away and changed the subject. That's when I took off in your rescue."

"Wow, she's got herself into a pretty sticky

socket," Alana whistled through her teeth.

"We've got to do something to help her," Stuart said.

"Help her? Man, in your dreams!" said Alana. "There's not a chance in hell—pardon me, I mean Heaven, I guess—that we could get within two miles of her. Not after a stunt like that. She's gonna be guarded so thick you'll think she was a state secret or something. She's not gonna be seen for decades, I'm tellin' you."

"There's got to be a way," Stuart said firmly. "I can't just leave her there; I've got to do something."

Kate pulled over on the side of the street, and turned around to give the others her full attention. "Look," she said. "Alana's right. There's no way you could get anywhere near her.—But I bet that I could. They don't suspect me of being anything less than a loyal subject of the government. I'm sure I could cook up some reason to get in and talk to her at least. I can see how she's doing, and maybe even see how we can get her out of there. What do you think?"

"I don't know, Kate," Stuart shook his head. "It's a pretty risky mission. ..."

"A suicide wish, if you ask me," Alana muttered under her breath.

Color flared up into Kate's cheeks. "Don't you talk to me about suicide missions, Alana!" she retorted hotly. "You just went and paraded yourself in front of the leader of the entire world with a big 'woe to the nations' message, and you say that *this* is a suicide mission? Give me a break!"

"Okay, okay, girls," Stuart said. "It's not a competition here. Kate, I wouldn't wish this on you, but you might be right. I think you're Su's only hope. If you really want to do it, I won't stop you."

"Yeah, girl," Alana said, "I didn't mean anything by what I said. You're all right, really."

"Hey," Kate said, suddenly switching subjects. "What was the deal with you guys anyway, that whole disappearing-appearing thing?"

"Oh, wasn't that far-out?" Stuart said. "We were never there on that stage at all. It was the most amazing thing. The Lord told us to go back there on the monument, and we were so far away from the stage we could hardly even see the people clearly on it. It was like, 'Well, whatever, Lord,' you know. Then the moment came when He said, 'Now, start talking.' And so we did, and what happened? I have no idea."

"Yeah," Alana agreed. "It was the weirdest thing! We were still standing there on that monument, but I could also see us standing there on the stage, talking away. And the whole crowd could hear us, clear as a bell!"

"It was almost like our images were projected onto that stage—only of course that's not technically possible—and also our voices were booming out from our projections on stage, not from where we were."

"It was weird," Alana encapsulated it into one concise sentence.

"But definitely the highlight of my week," Stuart said with a smile.

"Oh yeah!" Alana said. "Although the chase afterwards really did it for me!"

The three burst out laughing, and then Stuart grew serious again. "We'll pray for you, Kate," he said. "In fact, I wouldn't mind taking a few minutes to make it 'official' Upstairs right now."

"Hey, why not?" Alana grinned. "May as well go with the blessing, huh Kate?"

"You'd better believe I'll take all the help I can get," Kate grinned nervously. "Let me just pull over on the side for a sec."

She turned the car into a narrow alleyway, and the three closed their eyes as Stuart rested his

hand on Kate's shoulder, binding her about with the strong cords of protective prayer, and loosing extra forces of guidance and safekeeping to go before and with her.

As they slowly opened their eyes, Kate shook her head. "I can never seem to get over that whole thing," she said. "It's quite the power!"

"Sure is," Stuart agreed.

A short pause followed, each wondering what should be said next. Kate finally broke the silence as she tried to smile nonchalantly. "So, where should I drop you?"

"Oh, here's fine," Stuart said quickly. "We have no idea where we're headed anyway. Actually, we'll probably just hang around the streets till the dust settles and then we can go back and get the motorbike. We've got enough gas in there to last us a good while. Though I don't know if we'll ever be able to get it filled up again now."

Kate smiled sympathetically. As they stepped out of the car, she suddenly remembered something. "Oh, wait a minute! I have something for you!" Fishing around in her burlap bag, she produced the little electronic keypad and the ring of keys that she had removed from Jay's pocket. "I got this from Jay before I left the holding room the other day when we were taken. I figured they'd be stripped of all worldly goods and it looked important." She handed it to Stuart.

"Kate!" he burst out. "You are an angel!" Stooping over, he kissed her on the lips. "Thank you," he said. "You don't know how much this means."

Kate mumbled something under her breath, as she fumbled embarrassedly with her bag. "Look," she said suddenly. "You guys are going totally on empty; you haven't got a thing in this world, do you?" She took her big bag in both hands and shoved it across to Stuart. "Take this. There's everything but

the kitchen sink in there. I'm sure there'll be anything you could possibly need as you roam the countryside for the next however-long."

"Kate!" Alana spread her big brown eyes wide apart. "That's your exclusive bag! How on earth will you live without it?"

"I don't think I'll be needing it as much as you will," Kate said, with a nervous smile. "Just don't judge me too harshly by anything you find in there." She revved up the engine. "I'd better get out of here before I change my mind," she laughed. "See you guys later!"

"Hey!" Stuart suddenly shouted after her. "We'll give you a call in a couple of days to see how it went!"

Waving one hand vigorously in the air as a combination sign of acknowledgement and farewell, for her mind was far too occupied to spare any further words for her departing friends, Kate resolutely spun the car around and headed back towards the State Building.

Stuart and Alana watched her until the car was just a dot on the busy street, and then turned a corner out of sight.

"I wonder if we'll ever see her again," Alana mused softly.

Without a word, Stuart threw the bag over his shoulder, and the two slowly started down the street.



The fifteen-minute drive back to the city center was the longest in Kate's short, uneventful life. Over and over she questioned herself, *What am I doing? I must be stark raving mad!* But deep in her heart she knew without a doubt that this whole new scene that she had gotten herself into was the most important thing she had ever done—and perhaps would ever do. She must complete it, or die trying.

She pulled into a free parking space not far from where the big crowd was still gathered. The main ceremony had ended, and people were starting to mill around and entertain themselves on what had become a holiday afternoon. The focus of attention had shifted to the newly opened State Building, where a party for the elite one-world government leaders and their protégés was in progress.

Kate stepped out of the car, put up the cover and pushed the automatic lock button which secured all the doors. Feeling unusually light without her big pouch on her shoulder, she wandered aimlessly into the lavish park that surrounded the building.

"Oh, Jesus!" the words came much more comfortably to her than they had in days past. A certain amount of practice, coupled with her dire necessity, gave her a tangible connection that she had never experienced before—a feeling that she loved. "I need You now more than I ever have. You know I'm probably the least worthy of all the great people You've got down here serving You. I'm the lowest of the low—I've even taken that horrible mark that brings damnation to people's souls. But I've seen I was wrong and I'm trying to make amends, and..." she stifled a sob. "I need You so much now! Not for me," the tears trickled down her cheeks. "Not for me, but do it for Su. She really needs You now!"

Kate looked up suddenly, and saw a young man sitting on a park bench, staring directly at her. From where she stood, Kate could smell the reek of alcohol heavy on his breath. "It doesn't matter, you know," he said clearly, directly to her.

Kate looked away and started to move on, but he kept his eyes fixed on her.

"It doesn't matter what you've done in the past. Ignorance is not a sin, when it is followed by true repentance and a complete change of heart."

Kate spun around and ran back to the bench, grabbing the man by the shoulder. "What did you say?" she shouted at him.

The man hiccuped, coughed and spluttered, mumbling a string of unintelligible words. Kate slowly backed away, suddenly realizing what had happened. "He can use anything—or anyone," she whispered with a smile as she continued down the pathway.— And she knew it held true for that miserable drunkard as much as it did for herself.

Now she knew she was on the right path, and she walked confidently, with a lithe spring in her step. She knew that she would be led and guided along the path her feet were to tread.

Rounding a cluster of trees and bushes, she came to a spot from where she could clearly see the deserted stage, and the cluster of tents alongside it. Remembering where she had seen Su being led, Kate made her way towards the centermost tent.

When she was only a few paces from the entranceway, a tall, foreboding man stepped seemingly out of nowhere. "May I help you?" he asked icily.

Kate froze momentarily, but to her surprise, she found words rushing to her lips. "I certainly hope so," she said commandingly. "I'm Monica Henche," the name came out of her lips without her giving it any thought. "I'm with the *Tribute*, and I'd like to see Susannah Ornigh, the young woman who was on stage earlier."

The man scrutinized Kate for several agonizing seconds, and then said, "If you'll wait right here, ma'am, I'll need to go get clearance for that." Turning on his heel, he disappeared inside the tent.

Left alone in the clearing, Kate looked anxiously about her. For a moment she panicked, and pictured herself running hastily away, as fast as her legs could carry her, never to have to think about danger

again. But she knew that that would never be. She had come this far, and would certainly see her task through to whatever end it brought.

The guard had returned by now, and to Kate's surprise he had a certain look of respect on his face. "We weren't expecting you here so quickly," he said, a trifle apologetically. "We only made the inquiry an hour ago, and Headquarters said you'd be out in a couple of days. I apologize for our ignorance. If you'll come this way," he held out his arm and they started walking down the pathway towards the State Building.

Kate's mind was spinning, but she knew better than to open her mouth and risk betraying her state of inner turmoil.

The man continued rambling comfortably. "The young woman in question is in the state function right now—they figured it was best to keep her in sight for the time being, you know," he laughed in a way that made Kate's skin crawl, "not to arouse any suspicion or anything. I have a feeling she's gonna be a tough one. But hey, I said all along that it wasn't the best idea to get someone so green up there on stage. But who am I?" He shrugged his shoulders in an 'I told you so' manner.

"By the way," he interjected suddenly. "I'm Bud Weisner."

Kate took the hand he offered and shook it vigorously. "Mr. Weisner," she said, forcing out a smile.

"Please, call me Bud," he said. They had now come to the entranceway. "So, the young lady's in there somewhere. I'm afraid I'll have to stay out here, I'm on guard duty. But if you give your name at the reception they'll give you a tag. Just walk around, make yourself comfortable. Mr. Marshall will arrange your interview with the girl sometime this evening, but since you're here you might as

well enjoy the festivities. Please just call on me if you need anything.”

With a smile and another handshake, Bud was gone, and Kate was left alone on the giant marble staircase leading up to the very mouth of the Beast. Realizing that there were most likely many unseen eyes upon her, Kate turned nonchalantly and forced herself to walk up the staircase. Everything within her continued screaming at her to run in the opposite direction, but if her initial conviction had not been enough, the way she had heard Su spoken of only added the further incentive that she needed. It was, however, with some trepidation that she wholeheartedly committed herself to the powerful Savior she was only just becoming acquainted with.

A small moment of panic swept over Kate as she neared the entranceway, and suddenly blanked out as to what her name was supposed to be. The name had obviously been inspired, though she had thought it to be off the top of her head. She nodded curtly now at the secretary who stood at the reception desk, immediately inside the well-guarded glass doorway. At the last possible second, the necessary info came rushing back to her.

“I’m Monica Henche,” Kate said, as briskly as she could. “I’m here on business, and I’ve been told you could fix me up with the right tags.”

“Ms. Henche,” the secretary fumbled nervously at her keyboard. The name was obviously familiar to her. “I’m sorry that I don’t have a tag prepared for you. We weren’t expecting you here so soon. But if you can just wait a few moments, I’ll have one made up. Would you want to take a seat in the refreshment room to the side?”

Kate turned without a word and sailed into the adjoining room, noticing with interest the more standard-fare waiting room which was on the opposite side of the hall. The one she had been

motioned to, however, was obviously more of VIP status, complete with plush furnishings, fully-stocked snack and drink bar, and an assortment of reading material.

Once again feeling painfully naked without the heavy comfort of her pouch on her shoulder, Kate wrapped her arms around herself and sank into an armchair. As she looked around the room, her eyes took in every item therein, and her heart threw itself upwards in noiseless communion with the Force that was all that had kept her going thus far.

She dared not noise any words aloud, nor even so much as blink her eyes, for she noticed the wide-lensed cameras situated in several strategic locations of the room, hungrily drinking in her every move—anxious, it seemed, to absorb the very thoughts from her mind if she would allow them to do so.

To pass the time and to further her nonchalant image, Kate picked up a magazine that was close to her, and began to aimlessly leaf through the pages. She had not traversed more than several pages when she came to an abrupt stop. It was an obscure article, just another blur of words on a splashily laid out page, but something had caught her eye. She looked back at the paragraph that had stood out to her, and there it was again: “Monica Henche.”

Allowing it now her full attention, she read the brief mention of her notable namesake: “... and his partner, Monica Henche, one of the rising stars in TriniTech Industries. Ms. Henche has distinguished herself amongst most other pre-thirty employees by holding three simultaneous posts, and is renowned as indispensable in certain high sectors of government.” The article rambled on, praising her untiring dedication to her work, her highly trained skills, and the reverence which the world government

afforded her. It seemed that she was one of their most trusted operatives, called upon to handle only the most sensitive of cases in certain top-secret situations.

Here the article shifted awkwardly to an entirely different subject, almost as though the remainder of a paragraph or two had been omitted just before it had gone to print.

"This Henche woman is certainly a slippery fish," Kate thought to herself, wondering once again how she could have messed herself up in something so very sticky.

Another thought occurred to her, and she thrust her head forward onto her hands so that she could close her eyes without appearing meditative. She felt the need to block out her bright surroundings for a moment and connect clearly.

Oh, Jesus! She thought to herself. *Please guide me! I feel that You have led and brought me this far, but if I'm supposed to have an appointment with Marshall tonight, he's going to remember me from the other day, and he'll know right away that I'm not Monica Henche. What am I supposed to do?*

Clearly the words spoke to her heart.—Jesus was with her. *"I will be with you and I will never leave you, nor fail you, nor forsake you. You don't need to worry so far in advance. I will bring you into this place that you may accomplish your task, and then I will bring you out so that no harm may come to you. But don't think too far ahead, for it will only worry and concern you. Trust Me, and take each step as I show it, and all will work out."*

No sooner had the words burned into her mind than the brisk young secretary's head appeared around the doorway. "Ms. Henche?" she called.

Kate stood up and walked back out to the lobby, specifically avoiding eye contact with the built-in scanning device which she knew was a routine

check before admittance into any government facility, but which she knew would be fatal to her masquerade.

"Thank you for your patience," the secretary gushed. "Here is your tag. I really am sorry to have made you wait so long. You must have all kinds of people up in arms over the delay."

"Well, yes," Kate said haughtily, securing her mental advantage. "I had better be along. Thank you again." Fastening the glossy nametag just above her breast, she moved steadily past the desk and into the hallway beyond.

Still cautious to keep herself under control, she allowed herself to break into a beaming smile of relief. No words escaped her lips, but her heart was full and it was all going straight up.

A few seconds' walk brought her to a long marble staircase, beyond which she could hear the noise of revelry. Taking a deep breath, she completed the climb in a few moments, and stood poised on the brink of taking the final plunge. Her eyes scanned the crowd that milled around, now picking dainty morsels from the circular table that encircled the outer and inner flanks of the dome-shaped room, stopping to chat or argue with a nearby associate, and trading empty wine glasses for another from the frequently-replenished trays of the many waiters milling around.

For a moment the full crowds parted and Kate instantly saw Brett Marshall. Kate thanked God that he was on the far opposite end of the hall, and launched into the room in the opposite direction. The Power was obviously with her, for she had passed no more than two or three groups of socialites when she caught sight of Su.

Poor Su! She was wearing the same mauve dress as she had earlier on stage, but how different was her demeanor! Her proud and confident spirit was

dragging in the gutter, and even her no-run makeup was smudged from hours of weeping. She was obviously the cast-off in the room, and nobody saw fit to speak with her, so she had finally settled in one of the corner seats where she miserably surveyed the room and the rest of its occupants.

Looking around further, Kate finally spotted two separate groups of plainclothes men some distance away who were obviously giving Su their full attention. *Of course they would have her guarded*, Kate realized she would not have expected otherwise. Nevertheless, she was Monica Henche, was she not? Of all those qualified to speak with Su, she was the one.

Realizing she'd better go through the right channels, she observed for a few moments longer until she sensed which of the groups held the guard who seemed to be in charge, then she walked briskly up to him. "Might I have a word with the ... girl," she raised an eyebrow scornfully in Su's direction. The guard pulled out his personal scanner, but then he caught sight of the name on Kate's shirt.

"Ms. Henche!" he burst out, in hushed tones. "I'm so sorry! By all means. Would you like some privacy? There is a room to the side, away from the throngs a bit."

As Kate opened her mouth to agree to what sounded like a very good plan, she surprised herself by saying, "No thank you. I'll be conducting my regular interview tomorrow. I just want to have a few words with her and see what I'm in for. I'll just be a minute or two."

"Very well," the guard agreed.

Kate looked helplessly towards the open door of the side room, wondering if it was too late to ask him to change plans. Seclusion seemed so much better. ... Only then did she notice, through the

room's semi-open door, the large camera boxes on either side of the empty room. *Of course!* She thought to herself. *Here amid the hubbub, no one can hear what we're talking about, but in an empty, bugged room.* She smiled at the wisdom of her unseen Guide.

Walking up to Su, Kate thrust out her hand and said quickly, before Su's expression could betray recognition, "I'm Monica Henche. I'd like to have a few words with you."

Su nodded blankly, Kate sat down next to her, and the guards obligingly retreated to a respectful distance and turned their glances in the opposite direction to afford them some semblance of privacy.

Maintaining her professional, detached expression and pose, Kate lowered her voice and turned to Su. "Su!" she whispered. "How are you?"

"It's you, Kate, isn't it? My God, how did you get in here?" Su wisely maintained her deadpan expression, but her voice rang with feeling.

"It's a long story and I don't have time to tell it right now," Kate said. "We'll have to save that for another time. I want to hear about you. How are things going? How can we get you out of here?"

Su looked miserable. "I'm not going anywhere, Kate. I've sold my soul and I'm going to have to pay for it."

Kate turned and grabbed the girl by the shoulders. "Don't say that, Susannah!" she said fiercely. She let her go, noticing the guards' attention on them. "Don't say that!" she repeated. "It's not true! You were weak, you compromised, but you didn't give in."

"It's too late," Su shook her head again.

"Susannah, look at me," Kate said. "If I can't convince you of anything else, let it be this: It's never too late. Never! You've got to fight for it."

"You're right, of course you are," Su said. "But what can I do? I signed a two-year contract with the

Antichrist government, for God's sake. Sure, I didn't get the mark God, how I could have been so stupid to think I could have my cake and eat it too—have success and money and fame without having to pay the price? I don't know how I could have been so deluded. None of that matters to me anymore. I can see it all for what it is, and it's a bunch of crap."

"I'd drink to that if I had anything to drink right now," Kate said wryly. "So what can we do?"

"I don't know," Su said, and Kate was relieved to hear her sounding a little more hopeful. "I have a feeling they're not going to let me off easy. But I feel better now since talking to you, and even though I strayed, I am sorry for it and I'm willing to pay the price to get back where I'm supposed to be." She turned and looked earnestly at Kate for a second, then turned away again so as to not look suspicious. "Tell the others that I'm all right, will you? Tell them that I'm fighting, and I'll be with them again before they know it."

"I'll tell them," Kate said, and started to move around as though she were finishing her conversation. "Tell me," she added quickly. "Do you know anything about Jay and the others? What has happened to them?"

"I know that they held fast to their faith, but I don't know what was done with them afterwards. I was only the trusted pet for a couple of days—not much time to make an inroad, I'm afraid. They're not dead though, I know that much.—At least as of this morning they weren't."

They spoke only a short while longer, until Kate was satisfied that she had found out as much as she could, at least for the moment. Then she stood up and nodded at the guards. "Goodbye, Su," she whispered. "May His presence be with you."

Su maintained her same expression, but a silent tear rolled down her cheek, and Kate could sense

that her spirit was a world different than what it had been only minutes earlier.

Nodding again to the guards, Kate elbowed her way through the crowds and back down the stairs. Somehow, she knew that her job was done, and she only wanted to leave as quickly as she could. Returning to the secretary in the entrance, she called out to her in passing. "I've just received an urgent page"; I'll have to go and tend to some business. Would you tell Mr. Marshall that I had a word with the girl and I'll return for my final analysis sometime in the next couple of days?"

Without a second glance the secretary scrambled for her keyboard to take down the precious information, and Kate was soon breathing the free outside air. She moved hastily down the stairs, past the army tents, and thankfully merged in with the thronging crowds that were still gawking at the stage, tents and outside of the newly-opened building.

"Thank God for the sweet joy of completion," she whispered aloud, as she threw her hands up in glee.

Chapter 9

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

It was past midnight when Su reached the door of her apartment, deep in the heart of the NSY headquarters. The head guard unlocked the door for her, and then, confident that she was free from any hope of escape in her exitless habitat, instructed two of the guards to go off and get some sleep. He and his partner set up camp outside of her door.

Su thankfully shut the door behind her, glad to have at last some peace of mind and atmosphere after the raucous noise of the endless party she had attended for most of the day. She kicked off her high-heeled shoes and plopped down on the couch, rubbing her aching feet with a groan.

Only at that moment did she notice that there was another person in the room with her. It was Terrence, but he was sitting just out of the dim lamp's reach, and it took her a moment to recognize him.

"Oh, Terrence," she exclaimed at last, with a little relieved laugh. "It's you!" Then she hesitated. Something did not seem quite right. "What are you doing here?"

Terrence did not answer, but stood up, tall and menacing. Su shrank back into the couch.

"I saw you this morning, up on that stage," Terrence said in a low, threatening voice.

"Terrence, look," Su said. "I never said I would take that mark. And when it came down to it, I just couldn't."

Terrence had reached the couch now, and bent over, grabbing her roughly by both arms and lifting her up. "You *couldn't*?" He breathed heavily into her face, and Su could tell he had been drinking. His breath did not reek of wine, but of some stronger alcoholic substance that brought tears to her eyes just to breathe in its vapors.

She squirmed uncomfortably in his grasp. "Put me down," she said. "I'm sorry, Terrence. It was nothing personal."

"Nothing personal?" he laughed drunkenly. "Nothing to you, maybe." He dropped her roughly to the floor and Su caught herself, trying to stand up again by holding onto the corner of the table.

Then he started raving again. "Nothing personal?" He raised the back of his hand and hit Su with all his might, sending her flying across the room and slamming against the far wall. "It's only my life!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Only my career, my future that's been flushed down the drain. I recommended you, I did, and guess who's gonna get the rap for your little 'decision of faith,' huh? Well, I'll tell you one thing, the least I can do is get you out of the way first."

He charged for her again, fire and hate burning in his eyes. Su pressed back further against the wall, knowing there was nothing she could do against this compelling force of hatred that was determined to end her life. Then suddenly, it was as if a light went on inside her. Of course there was something she could do.

Trembling, she raised her hand towards the fast-approaching figure. "I rebuke you, in Jesus'

name!" she said. "Get behind me, Satan! I belong to Jesus!"

At those words, Terrence froze in his tracks. His eyes glassed over and he stood still for a few moments, as her words hung in the air, glowing and lifelike.

In the midst of this unbelievable spiritual spectacle, the door suddenly swung open and two men in uniform strode in, accompanied by a couple of guards. Terrence snapped out of his trance, and, oblivious to the newcomers, proceeded with his original intent, and leaped upon Su with all his might, clenching his hands around her throat and squeezing with all his strength.

Su tried to scream and move, but before she could do either, she heard the muffled sound of a silenced gunshot, and Terrence's full, lifeless weight descended upon her. Blood from his head started to run down the front of her dress, but she could not move from where she lay, pinned to the ground under his weight.

In another moment the two guards rushed over and dragged Terrence away, shutting and locking the door behind them. Su wiped the blood off of her chin, still shaking from shock, and tried to stand up. Her arm was painful to move and her ankle was beginning to swell. Finally deciding that standing was out of the question, Su dragged herself along the floor to the nearby couch, and pulled herself up onto it.

The two uniformed men in the room had watched her intently this whole time, but made no move to help her. Finally, the man who had seated himself at the table spoke. "So this is the girl?" he spoke to Brett Marshall, the other uniformed man.

Marshall nodded. "That other fellow was her instructor—the one who recommended her."

"Good," the man nodded his approval on the night's deeds. "Very well, then," he said, with a note of finality

that indicated that he could do as he pleased and was only informing the other of his plans out of mere courtesy. "I shall take over from here. Ms. Henche has been taken ill and we have decided we don't have the time to wait for her to conduct her investigation. So I will do the honors. A dirty job indeed," He eyed Susannah with a certain look that made her shiver, "but it must be done, must it not?"

Brett Marshall was trying to conceal his disapproval at the way things had turned out, but obviously held the newcomer in high esteem, and so, after mumbling a few polite words, he made a quick exit out the front door.

Su was left alone with the leering man, and started to shiver uncontrollably, despite the oppressive heat that permeated the room. He stood up now, and lumbered over to sit down next to her on the couch. "I am Carl," he smiled, but any pleasing physical features that he may have held were so overshadowed by the pure evil emanating from him that Su drew back despite herself. Not knowing what to say, she decided to remain silent.

"Put out your tongue, child," Carl said raspily.

Warily, Su did so.

Carl reached out his finger and ran it along her chest, smearing it in the blood that still covered her chest, then rubbed it on her tongue. Disgusted, Su spat it out onto the floor.

"You pervert!" she cried, struggling to stand up. But one grasp of his hand on her arm was enough to pin her bruised frame to the couch.

"Not so fast, my pretty," he said. "You have given yourself over into my power, have you not? You yielded to me, and now you have to pay the price."

Su thought for a moment he had gone mad, but then she realized that it was not this poor deluded man speaking, but the very spirit of evil speaking through him.

"I did not!" she shouted, bringing her face very close to his for greater impact. "I did not give myself to you! I never took the mark!"

"Oh, but you did!" Carl sneered. "No, you haven't taken the mark—yet—but you signed on the dotted line, and the price was your soul. It's only a matter of time now till you pay the full price and yield your all to me."

He clamped his mouth down onto hers and started to kiss her noisily. Su tried to resist, but he held her fast. Still pinning her good arm to the couch, he forced her down and ripped open the front of her dress.

Su struggled but could not move an inch. She wanted to pray, but at this very moment when she needed it the most, she felt trapped by the truth within the evil man's words. It was true—it was all her own fault, and she certainly ought to pay the price for her sins.

"Yes," he leered, as though he had read her thoughts. "This is just a punishment for your sins. You deserve every bit of it, so there's no use fighting it."

At that instant something clicked, and Su desperately raised her eyes—the only part of her that was still free—to the ceiling above her.

"Dear Jesus!" she prayed aloud. "Please, help me! I've been an unworthy servant and a downright bad person, but You've promised that the moment we turn to You in repentance, our sins are no more. I *don't* have to pay the price for what I've done, because You've already taken it upon yourself."

As Su spoke the words that came straight from her heart, she heard a loud cracking noise, and Carl stiffened suddenly, then pulled himself off of her.

"Good heavens, what's going on here?" he said in dismay. "What are you doing, girl, casting a spell on me?"

Su shook her head, trying not to smile, but at the same time felt the tears begin to stream down her cheeks. It was as if Carl was seeing her for the first time.

"Look at you, you're a mess! Go get yourself washed up—and pull together that dress, for goodness' sake!"

Su obediently scurried across the room, dragging her sore foot, and thankfully shut herself into the bathroom. There she heaved a huge sigh of relief and sank to the floor. For a full five moments she did not move anything but her lips, which silently testified over and over the praise and thanks and utter devotion that she felt for the One who had spared her—yet again!

"Whatever purpose You have for me, for which You've saved and spared me so many times, may I do it gladly and nobly, and fulfill Your perfect will," she whispered aloud.

Then she reached up and grabbed ahold of the edge of the sink, painfully pulling herself into a standing position in front of the mirror. She instantly recoiled when she saw the mess of makeup, tears and blood that matted and almost entirely masked the front of her face, her neck and shoulders. Grabbing her stained dress with her good hand, she angrily tore it off, then gratefully stepped into the shower and washed away all the memories of the last hour.

About fifteen minutes later, Su stepped gingerly back into the living room, praying that things were as she had left them. She felt a world better for her clear face and clean hair and body, and had slipped into the simplest dress that she could find in the well-stocked closet. This was no more the time for frivolities, and Su was anxious to show it in every way she could.

Carl was absorbed in reading a handful of papers that he held on his lap, but looked up as she re-

entered the room.

"Ah, there you are," he said, and Su was relieved to see that he was still in his right mind. "Do come over and sit down. This won't take long."

"I am rather tired," Su confessed, as she hobbled over to the couch.

"But of course you are," Carl said with a smile. "It's one o'clock. Of course for me, time is rather unessential, as I'm sure you understand." Su looked rather blank at this comment, and Carl just smiled. "I do a lot of traveling," he finally said. "Well, let's get down to business."

Su wondered what the real point of their discussion was, but was glad to see a more friendly interrogator than the one that she had faced earlier.

"I witnessed your little incident on stage," Carl went on, and he shook his head. "No, we certainly can't have that. You see," and here he pulled out a sheaf of papers, which Su noticed with a sickening wave was her modeling contract, signed only days earlier. "you have signed yourself over to the NSY for the next two years. You have taken on this full modeling opportunity, complete with free housing and a generous stipend for the entire portion of time. You took all of this without question, but then ..." he shrugged, "then, when it came time to 'pay the fiddler,' so to speak—just the merest gesture of good faith ... you fell through."

"I never said I would take the registration," the words sounded empty and hollow as Su said them.

Carl smiled patronizingly. "Of course you didn't," he said. "But that goes without saying now, doesn't it? Nonetheless," he cleared his throat and started looking through his papers again. "I am a generous man, and I'm willing to forget all of today's incidents and put it all behind me."

Su didn't look up—it sounded too good to be true, and she knew there must be a catch.

"Just take the registration now, and there won't be another word said about it," he said with a note of finality. "That's my last and best offer. And believe me, you would do well to take it.—The alternatives are not as pleasant."

Su was trembling all over, but knew better than to waver once more, even in the slightest. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I can't do it. I can never go back on my faith again."

Carl's eyes flashed darkly as he stood up abruptly from the couch. "Very well," he said. "It's your choice. But believe me, you will regret this. Don't think that we're going to make a martyr out of you or give you some easy way out. No way," he said grimly. "It's never that easy."

With those words, he turned on his heel and stormed out the door, slamming it hard behind him. With the familiar sound of the lock falling into place, Su threw herself back on the couch and buried her head in the pillows.

"Oh, Jesus!" she prayed desperately. It was all she could get out, but it was enough. Peace flooded her heart, and she knew that whatever happened, no matter what came her way, she would be able to take it, and it would not be more than she could bear.



Su awoke with a start, sat up quickly and looked around the darkened living room. The vivid dream she had just finished having was still ringing in her mind. In her dream, the powerful world dictator was standing with his back to her, and his words echoed through the silence of her mind: "I need her! I must have her on my side—she must be made to bend!"

Another voice, who she recognized as Carl's—though it was hardly distinguishable for the sniveling, worshipful quality it seemed to hold—now

spoke up. "She is determined, my lord. Yet, we have ways, and will do our best."

"She *will* be persuaded!" the evil words rang out again. "She must be on our side!"

Su jumped off the couch, shaking her head to try to get the words out of her mind. Landing on her sprained ankle, she sank to the ground again. Her watch told her that it was a little before four in the morning, but Su was now wide awake. She so desperately wanted to read something to renew her spirit, but knew that nothing remotely spiritual had been allowed into this prison cell.

She returned to the couch and closed her eyes, drawing on the powers of her memory, and began to run through Bible chapters and verses that she had memorized years earlier. How rusty they were, and how she struggled over every word! Yet as the minutes went by and she went over and over them, somehow they become clearer, and missing words began filling in the blank spaces. She was surprised then at how many things started coming back to her in a flood—bits of prophecies she had read; key quotes of old Letters she had pored over many times—each one a priceless jewel that fit her need exactly, they now came running to her as though by their own will, each wanting to be a help, to lift her up and lend her their strength. Su breathed deeply as she felt them go to work on renewing her spirit, and with it, her aching body.

It seemed that only a few minutes had gone by, but when Su heard the familiar click of the front door opening and looked at her watch, it was nearly five thirty. The bright neon lights harshly illumined the room as Su sat up, blinking at the new arrivals.

Carl was there, and with him a butch-looking, matronly woman. She couldn't have been much older than thirty, but her face was harshly lined. She was obviously a force to reckon with. Her white-

blond hair was cropped shorter than most boys', and her eyes were gray and hard as steel.

"Time to move along," Carl said curtly. "This is Matilda. She will be your companion for the next little while. You'll be happy to know you've been given another opportunity, and you're on your way."

"Where am I being taken?" Su asked the question, but knew the answer well.

"You will be told what you need to know when you need to know it," Matilda spoke curtly, and Su's heart sank at the thought of spending any amount of time with this walking spirit-drain. She felt drained just looking into her eyes, and determined then and there to avoid doing so again with everything that was in her.

"I don't know if I can walk very well," Su motioned to her ankle.

"Never mind that," Matilda said. She reached into her bag and pulled out a roll of bandage, then knelt down and wrapped Su's foot so tightly that she screamed in pain. By the time she was done, her sprained foot was the same size as the other again, and Matilda roughly put on her other shoe.

"There you go," she said sarcastically. "As good as new. Now let's get going."

Several other attendants who had come in with Carl and Matilda now came out of Su's bedroom with several suitcases, into which they had apparently placed all her belongings. Su stood up and dumbly followed her captors out of the room.



It was a relief to be out in the fresh air again, and Su took immense pleasure in watching the sunrise through the tinted windows in the back of the minivan as they drove along to her new destination. But any moments of peace she may have hoped for were shattered by her new companion, who kept up a constant senseless prattle, and insisted on sitting

as near to Su as possible and smoking one cigarette after another.

After the forty-five minute drive, Su thought she would go crazy for the sensory overload, but her early-morning moments of peace helped her to keep her sanity.

The van came to a halt in an underground parking lot, and the small group made their way through the deserted rows of cars and into an elevator. The numbers did not stop rising till they had passed 100 and Su grew sick of watching them turn. More than three or four minutes after entering the elevator, the doors slid open and they turned into a long, narrow hallway.

The first door to the left was where they stopped, and Carl unlocked a thick metal door. "Welcome to your new home," he said.

Su walked in gingerly, not quite sure what to expect. The sun was fully up by now, and the dining/living room she entered, with a wide window lining the full front end of it, offered a breathtaking view of the city below. Several partly-opened doors led off to the side, and Su could see a kitchen, bathroom, and a couple of bedrooms.

"What is this place?" she finally turned and asked suspiciously.

"Your new penthouse," Carl said innocently. "Matilda will be your roommate, and will see to your personal care. After all, you have a job to do, do you not?"

"I don't understand," Su was confused. "I told you I won't get registered."

"We know that," Carl said. "And that's just fine for now. But you signed the contract, and you can't go back on your word now, can you?"

"I suppose not," Su said to herself.

"Excellent," Carl said, with a satisfied smile. "Well, I've got other business to attend to. The

photographers will be here at eight, so that gives you about ten minutes to grab something to eat. I'd make the most of the time if I were you. It's gonna get hectic once things get going."

As the door shut crisply behind the exiting group, Matilda did not waste one moment in silence.

"Excellent, now we're alone!" she said. "You know, I have so much to tell you about my life! I have had an incredibly full and fascinating life—lived a few years deep in the jungle with a fascinating ritualistic tribe; they taught me some things you wouldn't believe!" She laughed gleefully. "But I won't start on that just yet—I'll save it for tonight. Now we'd better eat something."

"I'm not hungry," Su said.

"Oh, but of course you'll eat anyway," Matilda was already busy in the kitchen. "You've got to look your best for those cameras!"

She returned with a bowl of brightly-colored, sugar-coated puffed cereal, into which she had poured sweetened milk and then completely coated the top with white sugar. Su looked at the bowl and thought she would be sick. "I can't eat that," she said. "I'll go make myself something more healthy."

Matilda lowered herself until she was right on Su's eye level. "Even if you were at your peak health—which you are obviously not," she jabbed Su's hurt arm viciously, "I am almost twice your size, and several times more your strength. You will learn to listen to me when I speak, do exactly what I say, and not talk back—and then we'll get along just fine. If not," her eyes narrowed, "I think you will find that I can make your life very miserable."

Without a word Su took the bowl and shoveled it down in a few bites.

She had scarcely finished when there was a rhythmic sequence of knocks at the front door. Matilda went down the hall and busied herself with

the complicated procedure of combination locks and scanner-operated bolts, and then the door swung open.

"Good morning, Madie dear!" a young man greeted the woman with a kiss on her cheek.

"Go on, Patrick!" she slapped him affectionately on the head.

"Where's the business?" he said in a raised whisper.

Matilda cocked her head in the direction of where Su sat on a chair.

Patrick cast a disgusted look in Su's direction and said a few words to Matilda that Su could not make out. If Su had not been so desperate with much worse problems to worry about, she would have felt very self-conscious.

"Well," Patrick was saying, "we'll see what we can do with her, I suppose." He clapped his hands and started briefing his team on lighting positions, set details, and makeup and costume nuances. Matilda looked over suddenly and noticed that Su had her eyes closed and seemed to be taking advantage of being left alone for a moment. She quickly ambled over.

"Oh, you looked so peaceful there, I just had to come and interrupt," she rasped. "I figure, you know, why wait till tonight? These guys could be a while, and the whole makeup and dressing scene takes so infernally long. I'd better start my tale now. Anyway, I don't have anything better to do than to sit around and talk to you all day. I've read a lot of philosophy you know—and I've been told I have a photographic memory of sorts! I bet I could quote you reams of those books. Seems like just the stuff you'd be interested in." Matilda allowed herself to burst forth in a triumphant laugh, sensing fully just how much anguish of spirit she was causing Su.

“So back to those natives,” she continued. “They weren’t cannibals, exactly, but they had a few delightful little rituals, all tied in with their form of worship, of course—oh, that’s another thing I could tell you all about ... I’d better take notes of these things, don’t want to forget them all! ... Yes, I’ve studied all kinds of religions, and I’ve got some favorites that I can quote almost by heart. But let me continue with this story first. ...”

“Madie, do you mind if we work around your narrative?” Patrick asked, as he stood Su up.

“Not at all, don’t mind me!” Matilda said cheerfully. “I’ll just sit here and ramble away, and you just go about your business with the little bitch.”

“Now, now, Madie,” Patrick said, with a wink at Su. “Let’s be polite, shall we? We don’t want to offend our workers!”

“Ah, Patrick!” Matilda said scornfully. “Now I know why they hitched me up with this pile of crap and didn’t give her some three-legged guy. You men are all the same.”

Patrick just laughed and called the makeup girl over. He kept his instructions to a whisper so as not to distract Su from Matilda’s tale, but Su focused her full attention on straining to capture his instructional words, in an attempt to get her mind off the demonic input that was being forced into her mind.

Shutting her eyes for a moment, she managed to block out her surroundings for a fraction of a second. It was just long enough to send her heavy heart heavenward, and receive in return the strength to keep going. “Send me Your strength, Lord!” she whispered noiselessly.

Chapter 10 DARKNESS

Night shed its uneasy blanket upon the city below, and the few brave stars that dared to show their faces at all looked with deep sorrow on their suffering friends. Just over a week had passed since the fateful day which was known to all true believers as the day of the “breaking of the Covenant,” and the promised Great Tribulation had certainly begun in earnest.

The new government’s promise of relative peace for the first thirty days was being upheld in word, but deed found a somewhat different face, and now that the enforcement was law, many could clearly see another side to the “peace-keeping” force who had taken over the local and state police forces.

Yet, while many yielded and caved in under the unspeakable physical and spiritual pressure, still many others banded together and drew strength from each other’s rebellion. Drawing on their power from on High most of all, they turned their unbroken wall of defense into the face of the Beast, and held firm in their beliefs.

In one such stronghold, Stuart and Alana had found a refuge of sorts, having been befriended by someone who had witnessed their courageous display on the

day of the celebration. Although they were not among believers, they were united in their common bond of hatred of the current government, and Stuart and Alana found many amongst these people who had a great vacuum to learn the ways of Jesus, of living love, and of hearing directly from Heaven.

Stuart, who had quickly found himself placed in the role of spiritual instructor for this small group of renegades, found himself teaching from morning till night. Somehow they knew that these days of uneasy peace and stillness would not—*could* not—last long, and they were determined to make the most of them. His thoughts also began to turn more often to his personal little family, whom he had had to say goodbye to, what now seemed like an eternity ago. So much had happened since that time, and all so quickly! He hoped they were still safe and all right in their place of refuge.

Worry about their friends in bonds was the only other factor that diluted this strange time of tranquility. Stuart had called Kate and had gotten the update on Su, as well as the others, who were apparently still being held at the government facility where they had first been detained. Yet much to Stuart and Alana's perplexion, they found that whenever they brought their own desires for a heroic rescue before the Lord, they were again instructed to wait and bide their time.

On this night, Stuart could not shake off a horrible oppressive feeling that he felt circling above his head.

"Alana!" he whispered.

"I feel it too," she said, surprised herself at how she knew exactly what Stuart was thinking—and even more surprised that at this moment she was not thinking about having sex with him.

"Something awful is going to happen," Stuart said, and Alana nodded in the darkness.

"What are we supposed to do?" she asked.

"I don't know," Stuart said. "I'm almost afraid to ask."

Before Alana could answer, there was an urgent pounding on the wooden trapdoor that formed the only way out of their underground bunker. All fifteen people—each some type of refugee from the law—sat up in their beds, instantly on wide alert.

"Open up!" came a hoarse whisper. "For God's sake, open up! You haven't got much time!"

Stuart ran to the trapdoor and flung it open. A middle-aged man half-fell, half-crawled down the steep staircase and settled to the floor in a pool of blood.

"My God, man, you're hurt!" Alana ran over to him.

"Don't worry about me, I'm already dead," the man croaked. "You've got to get out of here. They're ruthless! Get out while you can! They're still searching the house but they have inside information. They will find this place in no time. There's not much chance to escape this way, but it's a better one than you've got by staying in here."

"What do you think?" Stuart said to Alana. Instantly, they closed their eyes for a split second, then looked up and met each other's gaze. "Let's get out of here!" they said in unison.

"I don't think they'll find this place. I'm going to stay," a thin-faced woman said staunchly.

Various other members expressed their pro and con opinions. Meanwhile, Alana threw a T-shirt over her boxer shorts and Stuart grabbed Kate's burlap bag, which was never far from them. Thus, the six people who had decided to run for it, hastily made their way up the staircase and out into the night, shutting the trapdoor behind them, and rummaging some dead leaves over the top, with a prayer for those sealed inside.

The trapdoor came out only a few hundred yards from a large forested area, and the escapees made a beeline for it. Stuart and Alana were in good shape and made fast progress, but to their dismay, it was not long before they heard crashing sounds behind them in the yard they had just left.

"A trapdoor!" they clearly heard a man yell out.

"Torch it!" came the sickening command. "Traitors all of them! May the world be purged of them all!"

The words set their own fire to the runners' feet, who amazingly doubled their speed with no extra effort expended. Stuart and Alana were only a few feet behind the man in front, when they suddenly heard a gunshot and a shout of pain.

"Beware!" the man cried. "They have this area surrounded. There are soldiers everywhere—" Another gunshot and there was silence.

Stuart, Alana and the other three escapees who were left stood frozen in the darkness, not daring to move and risk betraying their position.

"Oh, Jesus!" Stuart breathed. "Please do something! Show Your power on our behalf!"

All of a sudden, his eyes began to burn uncontrollably. He dropped to the ground, and Alana sank down next to him. "What's the matter?" she whispered into his ear.

"My eyes!" he clutched them helplessly. Then as suddenly as it had come, the pain stopped. But when Stuart looked up, he let out an audible gasp. A volley of gunfire brought them back to reality as he dove to the ground, grabbing Alana with him.

He rolled over and pressed his lips to her ear. "I've got infrared vision!" he whispered jubilantly.

"You've got what? Don't go psychotic on me, man!" Alana whispered back.

"No, really! I can see perfectly. Just stick real close and we can go right by without being seen."

"Don't you think they have night-vision goggles on too?" she questioned.

"I have no idea, but this is our only chance. Okay, so there are two guys straight up ahead, but there's a big gap over to the left. Let's crawl along the ground till we get to that tree, and then bolt the rest of the way as fast as we can."

"I don't see a tree," Alana said.

"Stick close to me and don't worry. We'll be just fine."

Painstakingly, they made their noiseless way along the ground till they reached a tall oak tree. There they hesitantly stood up.

"Now we have a clear path, but we probably have just a couple of seconds before they realize where we are and start shooting. We're going to have to be very fast." Stuart let go of Alana's arm. "Are you gonna be okay?"

"I'm fine, don't worry about me," she said with a smile.

The two figures leaped out from behind the tree and started to dash madly across the dark clearing, praying they would not trip on any unseen protrusions. Then the unexpected happened. From behind a large tree directly in front of them, a soldier clad in full battle gear emerged, machine gun pointed directly at Stuart, who was leading the team.

Alana saw the danger immediately. "Stuart!" she shouted, and dove with all her might in front of him, catching the volley of bullets with the whole of her body.

Stuart was thrown partly to the ground, and when he realized what had happened he rose up in horror. "NOOOO!" he shouted, and his voice came from the very depths of his soul and rocked the foundations of the Earth. In that moment, something changed within him. He felt a fire from on High flow through

his veins as he raised his finger at the soldier who stood before him, only feet away and rooted to the ground in terror at the change he could see coming over Stuart.

“May God damn all you sons of Satan!” Stuart shouted as he lifted his finger towards the soldier. In a second, the soldier screamed in terror and fell to the ground, lifeless.

Stuart turned back towards the forest, which he could see as clearly as though it were day. “All of you!” he shouted. “May you all get the portion of Hell that you have given to God’s children!” Tears streamed down his face as a huge fireclap exploded on the musty forest ground, exploding in a fireball several meters high.

Still breathing heavily, he knelt down by Alana’s motionless frame. Her body was torn and bloody, but her face was untouched and her eyes were open. The light from the nearby fire flickered on her white skin as she struggled to hold on to the last vestiges of her life.

“Alana!” he said hoarsely. “Why did you do it? You crazy girl!”

“You’ve got kids, man,” the words were barely audible, but Alana was a fighter in death as she had been in life. “It was the least I could do.”

He grabbed her hand and held it tightly in his.

“You’re gonna be okay,” he said.

“Hey, I’m okay already,” she forced a smile, and a trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth. “Tell your wife she’s a lucky lady, okay?”

“Don’t go, Alana!” he whispered. “Please, don’t go!”

“It’s for the best,” she said. “I know that now. I saw you. ...” she coughed, and her eyes fluttered. “I see that look in your eyes. It wasn’t there before. You’re dead serious now. You need to go back, Stuart. Go with Jesus ... show them who’s the real Boss.”

“I will,” Stuart felt as though he had no more tears to cry. “I’ll do it for you, Alana.”

With a final smile, Alana’s lips formed a kiss which Stuart leaned over just in time to receive. Then, with a sigh and a breath, she was gone.

Stuart stood up. There was indeed a different look in his eyes—a look of utter hatred for the beasts that had killed Alana, and the system they stood for. Up until now, it had been somewhat exciting, even fun evading the Antichrist’s forces and working behind his back. But suddenly it had become all too clear what was at stake, and that the time of “great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time,” had truly begun.



The air was dark and still, but Jay was suddenly startled out of his sleep. For a moment he was disoriented and could not remember where he was, but after a moment or two, memories began flooding back to him.

Seeing his earnest dedication, Fawnie had done her best to persuade him of the error of his ways, and the negative turn it was sure to lend to his life. She, who had never stuck to any one purpose for any length of time in her frivolous life, was filled with wonder to see a man so passionate about his beliefs that he truly was willing to give his life for them.

Over the days that they talked, his words seemed to be having some effect upon her, and she wished there was something she could do to help him. Jay could tell that she was softening, and took every opportunity to mix in bits of quotes, verses—anything he could to try to feed her in any small way that he was able—albeit rather clandestinely, for he had no idea what type of surveillance was going on in the room.

Through Fawnie he heard of Su's caving in, and he spent many hours in prayer for her. He was relieved to hear that Marty and Angelica were holding out, though the constant grating of their partners seemed to be taking a toll upon their spirits.

By the end of their first week in captivity, Jay had been called before the inquiry panel.

"We have reviewed all of your forms and personal information," a stern woman crisply spoke, "and we can see that you are not at all interested in cooperating with us. This we deeply regret, for you are an intelligent young man and would certainly have found a useful and lucrative place of employment."

"I have no wish to be of use to your corrupt regime," Jay said scornfully, and Fawnie suppressed a smirk.

"Do you see humor in this?" the woman barked at Fawnie, who quickly turned beet-red and buried her head in her papers. The woman turned her attention back to Jay. "Is this your final decision then?"

"It is," Jay said firmly.

"Very well, then, there's nothing more that I can do for you."

"What will happen to me now?" Jay asked, seeing everyone beginning to stand up and go about their regular business.

"That is not for us to determine," the woman said crisply. "You will be transferred to a holding lodge, and from there you will go before other authorities. The matter is out of my hands."

Jay had quite obviously now switched places from guest to prisoner, as two guards approached him with handcuffs.

"Might I have a word with her?" he asked quickly, motioning to Fawnie.

The guard nodded belligerently and stood eyeing them warily.

Jay leaned close to Fawnie with the appearance of kissing her on the cheek, while whispering in her ear. "I left something for you under the farthest cushion of the couch in my room. Read it! I'll pray for you! And thanks for everything."

The guards stepped forward and cuffed Jay's hands behind his back, then led him off through the side door and down a long hallway.

On his way into the transport vehicle, Jay caught a glimpse of Marty and Angelica, who had obviously met the same fate as he. He beamed a huge smile in their direction, and they smiled with equal joy at seeing him.

"Su?" Marty whispered questioningly as they passed each other in the courtyard.

Jay just shook his head sadly.

Then they were back in their isolated cubicles, and before long they had arrived at their new dwelling place. Each of them were shown into their own personal cell, not much bigger than the one they had just come out of in the truck. The entire room—floor, walls and door—were all thinly carpeted, apparently in an attempt to keep inmates from tapping out communications amongst each other. A thin, narrow bed garnished one corner, and a two-foot square cubicle on the other side offered modest toilet facilities.

Aside from these meager furnishings, their quarters were bare, and having been long-since strip-searched and removed of every possession beyond his clothing, Jay soon settled into the mundane, timeless routine of life as it passed uneventfully over the next week or so.

On this night, though, something had awakened him. He stood up awkwardly, but the large fluorescent lights were routinely turned off during

the night, and there was not an iota of light in the room.

A flicker suddenly caught the corner of his eye and he spun around to face it. There, along the far wall of his now-faded prison cell, he could see some sort of burning fire. Silhouetted against the flames were two figures. One lay still and motionless on the ground, and the other stood despairingly alongside.

In a flash he knew what the scene was, and he knew that it was real. "Stuart!" he called aloud, a little hoarsely, for he had not called so loudly in quite a while.

Stuart turned around at hearing the familiar voice. "Jay?" he shouted. "Jay, where are you?"

Jay laughed. "Where are *you*, man? I'm stuck in some prison cell somewhere, but I am here and you are there—yet we're together."

Stuart had still not gotten ahold of himself yet, and now he dropped his head once more. "They killed her, Jay!" he said hoarsely.

"I know, Stu," Jay said softly. "But you know that she's okay!—Hey, she's probably the best off of us all!"

Stuart laughed despite himself, knowing that it was true.

"You've got to go on, man!" Jay said. "Keep fighting! We need you! You're the only one of our team that's still on the loose."

"I've got to go back!" Stuart stood up now, and the firelight reflected in his eyes like two burning torches. His face grew hard and fierce. "I've got to go and make them pay!"

"Stuart! Stuart! Wait!" Jay stood up, realizing what perhaps was the main purpose why the Lord had allowed this special method of communication. "Hold up, man! I know that you're put out, and I have no doubt that what you feel is what you're

supposed to do, but I don't know if this is the right time for it. You know? I think you might be a bit big on your own spirit right now, and there's no way you're ever gonna make a dent in the AC kingdom if you're not leaning 100% on the Lord."

"But that was the whole point, wasn't it? I was supposed to get mad and stirred up!"

"I can see how that would be good," Jay said, "but that doesn't mean that you've got to act immediately. Now that you've got that fire in your heart, keep it there. But first take some time away to get filled up. It's not a personal thing—it's the Lord versus the Enemy, not you paying back the System for Alana's death. You've got to tap into the Power before you'll have it to dish out. Or else I'm afraid you're gonna fall flat and end up no different than her."

"You're right, Jay," Stuart dropped to the ground and ran his hands through his long, matted hair. "Of course you're right. Maybe I should just stop awhile, take some time with the Lord, get refilled, and then find out exactly what I'm supposed to do."

Jay could see the firelight beginning to fade, and he knew his time was running short.

"Shoot up one for me too, man!" he called out.

"Hang in there, Jay! It won't be long, I'm sure of it!" Stuart reached out his hand, and Jay looked in amazement at how close and tangible it seemed. Without realizing what he was doing, he reached out his own arm and grasped Stuart's hand, squeezing it tightly. They remained in that clasp for more than a few seconds, silently marveling at the wonder of spiritual communications, until the visions faded and they were each returned to their own personal darkness.



Su tossed restlessly in her soft bed, caring nothing for the silken sheets and soft pillow. Her tortured mind felt as if it were on the brink of shutdown.

"If only I could have a moment of peace ... just one moment!" she moaned softly to herself.

The week had crawled by at a snail's pace for the miserable girl, and in all that time she had not found a moment to herself, to be able to think and bring her thoughts upward in sweet communion. Matilda obviously knew her job, and was doing it excellently.

Su had come to dread the nights worst of all. Her bedroom was adjacent to the living room, and the huge television monitor, with booming speakers filling up almost the entire wall, lined the other side of her wall. Matilda had taken to leaving the television on full-blast for the entire night, and when Su had suggested turning it off or lowering it, Matilda had coldly explained that it helped her to sleep.

A couple of times Su had ventured in the living room in the middle of the night, but with the slightest step towards the television, Matilda, who lay sprawled and snoring on the couch, would spring into instant alertness and run to the kitchen for a sickeningly sweet cup of hot cocoa, or some other energy-draining substance, which Su would then be compelled to consume while watching some carefully-chosen horror movie or anti-cult propaganda show.

Su quickly learned that midnight interference was not the way to go, and contented herself by piling pillows, cushions, blankets and anything else she could find, over the top of her aching head, trying to at least dull some of the noise that was threatening her very sanity.

This night seemed to have brought Su to the very brink. The shrieks of pain and accompanying cackles of delight that had been pumping through her wall had been impossible to block out, and drained as she was from the never-ending and

unavoidable input she had been forced to absorb over the last week, she felt entirely incapable of forcing a prayer out through what had now become a spiritual prison as well as a physical one.

In despair, she jumped out of bed, her bare feet touching the cool tiled floor without feeling. Tears streamed down her face as she walked haltingly over to the big picture window that lay on the far side of her room.

Abruptly, she turned to look at the huge walk-in closet that stood nearby. Despair turned to hope as a sudden impulse struck her. Sinking down into a corner of the closet, she carefully swung the big door as far shut as she could without it latching shut.

She stopped and listened carefully. All that came to her ears was the low murmur of voices, all but drowned out by the refreshing silence that swept through the heights and cleansed her soul with its wonderful magic.

In the stillness, her heart soared heavenward, and down in return came one precious promise. It was all she had the strength to draw, but she knew it was directly for her, and she clung to it with her life. "Fear none of these things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the Devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days. But be thou faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life."

Clasping her hands together, she wedged herself in that corner and formed in her mind's eye the well-beloved words until they blurred into Heavenly designs and gave way to the blessed release of sleep.

Chapter 11

THE SIGN

The persistent ringing tore through Kate's sleep molecules until she was coerced into a state of semi-alertness, and fumbled around for her phone. "Oh, for the days when phones stayed in one place!" she groaned to herself, adjusting the knob by her bedside till the room emanated a dim glow.

Finally pulling aside enough covers, she grabbed the contraption and murmured sleepily, "Hello?"

"Kate?" the male voice on the other end sounded hoarse, almost desperate.

"Hello?" Kate said again, suddenly wide awake.

"Tomorrow morning at ten, in the main square. Be there, Kate," the voice spoke quickly and roughly. "Tell everyone. Tell the press. We need a big crowd. Do it, Kate. Do it for Alana!"

"Stuart?" Kate said. "Stuart, is that you?"

But the dial tone rang dead, and Kate clicked the device off and tossed it back on the bed.

Sleep being now far from her, she jumped out of bed and looked at her watch. *Three o'clock in the morning. Well, that's as good a time as any, I suppose,* she thought, with a yawn. Then she threw herself back onto the bed. What, oh what was Stuart up to? She wondered if something had happened to Alana

that could have caused Stuart to lose his sanity. *Why would he want me to amass a crowd for him? I should think he'd have had enough excitement for one week—maybe for a lifetime, in my opinion!*

Nevertheless, Kate knew desperate urgency when she heard it, and she lost no time. Flipping through her personal phone book, she began dialing up the numbers to her contacts at the main press agencies, and leaving cryptic and tantalizing messages on their answering services.

After more than forty minutes she finally put down the phone, and gazed out the window with a satisfied expression on her face. *We should have quite a turnout for you, Stuart,* she mused thoughtfully. *I hope you can keep your side of the bargain.*



Su's eyes somehow fluttered open with the first morning light, and she pushed the closet door open a little to view the awesome spectacle of the sunrise from the adjacent window—never had she found it more real or more moving. Dreading her return into her torturous lifestyle, yet fearing to remain away for too long lest her retreat be discovered and raided, she pulled herself together and tiptoed back inside the room, shutting the closet door behind her.

As she moved inside, though, she knew instantly that something was wrong. It only took her a moment to place it: the silence. All was eerily and deadly still. Su shivered despite the warm morning air, and pulled her thin dressing robe closer around her shoulders. Every beat of her heart was a prayer shot above, which seemed to increase in frequency and intensity as she quietly opened her bedroom door and moved into the semi-lit living room. The TV was on, but seemed to have been muted, for no sound was coming from it at all. Matilda was nowhere to be seen.

"Matilda?" Su's voice came out like a low squeak. "Are you there?"

A tiny flutter of wind behind Su caused her to spin around in a sudden panic, and then she was face to face with Matilda, wild-eyed and raving. She had that same panic-stricken look of despair that Terrence had had when he had attacked her.

"You thought you could outsmart me, did you? Did you?"

Su took a step backward, seeing that Matilda was holding some sort of a large wooden club. *Oh, Lord!* she prayed inwardly, unable to believe that this was happening to her again. *Oh, Jesus! Give me the strength for whatever I am going to face. But if it be Thy will, deliver me in full safety and show Thy mighty power!*

"You thought you'd find a way around things and get some time to yourself!" Matilda took another step closer to Su, and Su took another back.

Su noticed that a tiny spot in the center of Matilda's forehead—undoubtedly the place where the laser injection had taken place—was heated up to a flaming red. In a curious flash of remembrance, she saw Terrence in her mind's eye as he had made his final lunge towards her—he had had the same glowing mark. Su wondered how much of these rages were enacted knowingly by the person, and how much was beyond their control.

Matilda continued her insane rantings. "Ah, but you're not more clever than me. You may think that you've gotten the better of me, but I'm a lot stronger than you realize."

What is the problem here? Su shot the words up above in the silence of her own mind. Just as clearly, the words came back to her: *She knows that in the short time that you had in the stillness, the spell of her power has been broken. All that she has worked so long and hard to program you against has been ruined. She has failed in her mission and is afraid that she will have to pay the price.*

Su looked straight into Matilda's eyes, and suddenly she could see past the burning hate, to the torturous fear and anguish that lay buried beneath. She felt her heart soften for this ugly little creature, so caught and tangled in the evil spider web that she was now willing to take the life of another in an attempt to ease her own pain.

"You don't have to pay the price," the words burst out of Su's mouth unexpectedly and almost startled her.

"What did you say?" Matilda snapped suspiciously, raising her club a little higher.

"You can still break free," Su whispered, and took a small step closer to the woman. "You've given them your body—don't let them have your soul! Jesus can still free you!"

Su almost thought she was getting through, but when that fateful word sprung from her mouth, she knew that she had said the wrong thing. Matilda let out a terrified scream that sounded as though it came straight from Hell, and lunged at Su with her club.

Su watched the club as it approached her, as if in slow motion. In the split second before impact she screamed out at Matilda with all her strength. "Say 'Jesus' and you'll be free!"

The club hit Su on the side with a sickening blow and she fell to the floor. In the same moment, Matilda's face began to contort. Barely conscious, Su watched the agonizing spectacle with tears in her eyes. She knew that Matilda knew what she should do, but the evil forces were so deeply entrenched in her soul that it seemed she could not bring herself to do it.

Towering above Su, Matilda raised the club again, high above her head, and Su closed her eyes and waited for the final blow. Seconds passed and nothing happened, and Su opened her eyes again, only to

watch Matilda fall to the floor, writhing and moaning in agony. She was scratching herself all over and screaming in pain. Finally she let out one last shriek, and her body turned limp and lifeless.

Su turned her head to the side and cried. Then, overcome by her own pain, coupled with her weakness of mind and body, she mercifully passed into unconsciousness.



Kate looked anxiously at her watch. It was just past nine AM, and the square was already teeming with people. Word had spread quickly that a spectacle of some sort was to take place here, and many who had nothing better to do had turned up for the show. Kate couldn't suppress a feeling of nervousness and dread at what it was that would take place.

Minutes seemed like hours as they crawled by. But the moment finally came, and Kate spotted Stuart on the outskirts of the square. Time, the square, the bustling crowds about her—all stood still for a moment as she watched him, entranced. He moved as though in slow motion, his hair waving in the gentle breeze, the sweat on his skin glinting in the morning sunlight. His shirt was off and he was breathing heavily. He was holding a large bundle in his arms, and from the strain that showed on his face, Kate guessed correctly that he had carried it a very long way. He had obviously not slept a bit during the night, but tiredness was the least important factor in his life at that moment. He looked rugged and handsome.

Kate sighed and pulled herself together. "Stuart!" she called out, and started running towards him.

He turned and looked in her direction, but did not say a word. He looked around, sizing up the situation, then silently dropped to one knee, lowering his head for a moment. Then he lowered

his burden to the ground and threw off the musty old blanket. Kate gasped to see Alana's form, lifeless and covered in blood.

Crowds were starting to gather around Stuart, figuring that their spectacle had arrived. He moved quickly now, and put Alana's body up on the top of an old yellow minivan that was parked nearby. He climbed up next to her and picked the body up, lifting it high above his head with both of his hands. He stood precariously, every muscle twitching with exertion, but his eyes burning wildly with an unearthly fire.

"O foolish and wicked generation!" he called out, in a voice that instantly captured and held the heart and attention of every onlooker present. "You who are so easily led astray, who believe so easily the lies of the wicked one. You say to yourselves, 'What else is there to do? We have no alternative! There is no other way to go!' And you say, 'Oh, we do not know what is the truth. If there were but one to show us a sign, then we would believe. We would risk our lives if only we could see with our own eyes.'"

His eyes scanned the crowds, and many passersby looked down, ashamed at his words. Cameras flashed, and girls with microphones hustled closer to the vehicle. Several video cameras were rolling also.

"You ask for a sign?" His voice grew even more shrill. "Then a sign will be given to you! Do you see this?" He thrust Alana up higher. "She was not only my friend, but she was a servant of the living God. She refused to bow down and worship that Satan in the flesh that you call your leader. This is what happened to her! But there's more. Our Lord Jesus said: 'He that believes in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.' So you want your sign? This is what I was sent here today for, to give you your sign."

Stuart lowered his arms and placed Alana's body gently down on the roof in front of him.

At the back of the square, the sound of an approaching siren came closer, and in seconds a squadron of soldiers clad in army fatigues began elbowing their way through the crowd.

Stuart looked up. "Stand back!" he called out. "In the name of the living God, stand back if you value your lives!"

The soldiers looked up in surprise at his commanding tone, but kept moving determinedly closer.

Without another word, Stuart lifted his hand and pointed it at a soldier in the center—a particularly mean-looking man with a butch haircut and an evil glint in his eye, who seemed to be the darkest and most menacing of them all. A beam of ultraviolet light shot from Stuart's hand and hit the soldier square in the chest, and he fell down, clutching his heart.

The other soldiers stopped in their tracks and looked up towards Stuart.

"Get back!" he yelled hoarsely. "Get out of here, all of you!"

To a man, the squadron ran back to their jeep, where the commander got on his cell phone to try to determine what to do next.

Dropping to his knees, Stuart placed both of his hands along Alana's body, and shouted out into the morning air: "Give them the sign that they seek. Jesus, You are the powerful King of Heaven and Earth. Show these groveling mortals who is worthy of their respect."

Silence hung thickly in the air, and even the soldiers watched, entranced. Alana moved not a muscle, and Kate thought to herself that never in her life had she seen a person look so very dead. She cringed inwardly, hoping against hope that

Stuart's faith would not be disappointed.

"Come through for him, Jesus," she begged silently.

Then it began to happen. It was only a quiver at first, a tremor along Alana's leg. But soon her entire body began to twitch violently, then she was thrown over onto her stomach, where she began to vomit violently off the back side of the minivan.

Kate's eyes were filled with tears, but she couldn't help smiling at Alana's ungraceful return to the world of the living.

Stuart was crying too. "Oh my God!" he kept saying. "Oh my God, You did it! You did it! I knew You would, but ... Alana!" He reached over and pulled her into a sitting position.

Alana opened her eyes and looked up at Stuart. In her own characteristic way she said, "I can't believe you brought me back to this, big man!"

Stuart threw back his head and laughed aloud.

But their troubles were far from over. Six more police cars had now driven up. A new commanding officer stepped onto the square, and the man who had led the first attack and subsequent retreat was nowhere to be seen.

"Surround them! And do it quickly!" Stuart and Alana heard the man yell. He then whispered a few words to a handful of other soldiers, who ran over to the filming crews and began pulling the plugs on their equipment, and removing the tapes and the rolls of film from the still cameras. Kate quickly put away her hand-sized video recorder and hastily put on a pair of sunglasses, blending back into the crowd as unobtrusively as she could.

Having finished the rather unceremonious display of emptying the contents of her stomach, Alana looked around herself curiously. Amazingly, she seemed as healthy as she had ever been, and looking down at her body she saw that her skin was

completely smooth and whole. Only her clothes remained torn and blood-covered. She shook her head in wonder.

The two stood up on the roof of the van, uncertain of what they were supposed to do. The crowds were dispersing fast, but Stuart knew that the message had gone out, and that he had done what he was meant to do. Yet it didn't seem that it would be worthwhile to have resurrected Alana if she was only to be killed again. No, the Lord must have another way out for them.

The soldiers had them surrounded and now started firing, but no sooner had they begun than they found themselves firing upon each other, and before they realized what had happened, half of the men lay dead or wounded. And from their midst, Stuart, Alana, and the yellow minivan had all completely disappeared.

The burly commander had been watching the entire scene from further back in the square. Reaching into the car and pulling two weapons out of the holster of the dead body of the former commander, who lay where he had fallen in the back seat of his jeep, he walked resolutely forward to where the five or six remaining men stood gasping in shock at what had happened.

Without a word he raised both weapons and leveled the remaining men.

The few passersby who had witnessed the outburst turned their eyes to the ground and moved along quickly, fearful of being the next victims.

"Traitors!" the commander justified himself to the heavens. "Traitors all of them! They got what they deserved for letting those two escape!"



Stuart and Alana, meanwhile, suddenly found themselves driving along a dusty back road in the yellow minivan. They looked at each other in

surprise, then both began to speak at once, Stuart recounting the events of the night till the morning, and Alana her own brief version of what had taken place in those hours of absence.

"Yeah," she said, "Jesus said I'd probably have to go back, but it wasn't for sure at first. It was dependent on you and whether you'd be strong enough to make it. I guess you were," she grinned.

"I had to," Stuart said with a smile. "You couldn't just leave like that."

"Oh man, would I ever have wanted to!" Alana groaned, but her smile betrayed her. "Well, I don't really relish repeating that whole dying experience. It's sort of a one-time thing, you know? But hey, maybe He'll give me a break next time since I had such an honorable first death."

"I'm sure He'll take that into account," Stuart said.

"So where are we heading?" Alana asked.

"I don't know," Stuart said. "We'll need to wait till we get to some signpost so we have an idea of where we are. I suppose we're going the right direction, though, since this is where we were put."

"Oh my God, look at this!" Alana laughed. "It's Kate's burlap bag! He's got all the details down, doesn't He? Let's see what's in here."

Alana picked up the bag and started rummaging through it. She pulled out a couple of granola bars and tossed one to Stuart. "Here," she said. "You must be famished. I know I am. With all I had to do up There before I came back down, I never did get time to eat."

Stuart laughed and devoured the food in one bite. "Boy, I was!" he said. "So what else does she have in there?"

"Oh, you name it!" Alana said. "A key ring, two or three notebooks, tampons, a whole stack of pens, mascara, eyeliner, a little cologne bottle. ..." she pulled

it out and gave herself a squirt. "Sorry, Stu, it's girl's. What else? ... Oh, here's that little magnetic thing she got off Jay before his capture."

"The databank!" Stuart said. "I'd forgotten about that."

"What's in it?" Alana asked.

"Everything," Stuart said simply. "I suppose it was very naive of us to keep it all in one place. It just seemed like the best thing to do at the time, and we were going to transfer it to separate places, but just hadn't gotten around to it yet."

"So what's *everything* exactly?" Alana said, fingering the contraption curiously.

"You know, phone numbers, PO boxes, combination numbers, stuff like that. There's an identification code we have to send in every three months to get our mailings, and it's passed on by word of mouth. That's how they verify that we're bona fide members and not some spy who is going to compromise their security."

"So losing that would have been a pretty big deal, huh?"

"Well, yeah," Stuart said. "I mean, I've got most of it memorized, as do most of the others—like the ID code, you'd better believe we all know that one. But the problem is, no matter how great the encryption, you get some government genius on it and they're bound to crack it sooner or later. So it could have meant real trouble if it fell into the wrong hands. Thank the Lord Kate got it first."

"Seems kind of dumb to keep something like that in a databank," Alana observed.

"Yeah, I guess it is," Stuart agreed. "Like I said, it was only temporary, but I guess temporary is always long enough to cause trouble. Some of the folks hadn't gotten the memorizing down yet, so that was why we gave in. I guess we'll know better next time."

Alana was holding the tiny device in her hand as she rested her elbow out the window. All of a sudden, from nowhere, it seemed, an extra large gust of wind came and swept the items that she had in her lap clear out the window—and the databank with it.

Stuart screeched to a halt on the semi-deserted road. “Alana!” he said. “What are you doing?”

“Hey, don’t look at me!” Alana said. “Some unseen helper just up and picked ‘em out of my lap. What am I supposed to do about it?”

Stuart pulled the car over and got out. “We’ve got to find it,” he said.

“Good luck, Sherlock,” Alana said. “I don’t mean to be a wet blanket or anything, but if you’ll take a look at this road, you may have better luck looking for a needle in a haystack.”

Stuart looked up and down the tree-lined road, each inch identical to the one before it, and knew that she was right.

“Let’s give it a try, though,” he said. “There was some other stuff with it, like a granola bar, right?” Alana nodded.

“So that should be easy to find. Come on, hop back in.”

Turning the car around, Stuart drove back a few hundred meters at a snail’s pace, while they both intently scanned the ground. It took about twenty minutes for Stuart to concede defeat.

“Come on, Stu,” Alana finally said. “You’ve done the best you can. Let’s keep going.”

“Wait,” Stuart said stubbornly. “At least let’s pray about this and make sure we’re not meant to find it. The Lord could always have it appear right before our eyes if He wanted to.”

“Well, if He wanted to, don’t you think He would have done so? It’s not like we’ve not been praying to find it,” Alana said practically.

“Still, let’s ask Him specifically just to make sure.”

And so they did, and not until Stuart heard the Lord’s Words in his own heart, encouraging him that it was all part of the plan, and that they were to keep going and trust Him for what lay ahead, did he have the full peace to turn the car around and drive on. And so the two continued on towards their unknown destination.

Chapter 12

TRIAL

Su opened her eyes with a start at the flash of bright lights and the bustle of movement all around her. Seeing the room crowded with people, she struggled to sit up, but found that she could not move at all.

“You’re awake, lassie,” Patrick’s voice nearby sounded friendly and reassuring.

“What’s happening?” Su asked weakly.

“Came for me morning shoot, that’s what happened—and I found a bit of a mess! So I called in some help, and that’s where we’re at now.”

Su looked around the room. Four or five men and women in stiff suits were running around with notebooks and cameras, documenting every inch of the room. Matilda was gone, and there was a chalk mark where her body had lain on the floor.

“I think my hip is broken,” Su finally said.

“You don’t look well at all,” Patrick agreed. “I’d ask you what happened, but I suppose I’d best let you save it for the officials.—I’m sure you’ll have plenty of explaining to do!”

Su knew he was just being friendly, but she groaned inwardly at the truth of his words.

Just then, Carl walked over and squatted down

next to her. "And how are you feeling this morning?" His words were amiable enough, but Su shivered at the icy bite beneath the surface.

"Not very well, I'm afraid," Su kept her eyes on the floor.

"Never mind," Carl said icily. "We'll have you back on your feet in no time. We've got a lot to talk about!" He stood up again. "Patrick, have you shown her some of her latest work? I know she'll be pleased to see it."

Patrick turned and fumbled in his bag, but Su could see a hint of disgust on his face at Carl's tone. She soon saw why, as Patrick tossed her an issue of *Life* magazine. There on the front cover was a full close-up photo of Su, smiling and content—with a little red mark in the center of her forehead and a splashy headline preaching the advantages of the new system of registration.

"You'll love the article inside," Carl smirked.

Patrick obligingly turned to page 73, where Su dismally saw two or three more full-length shots of herself in various poses, with either her hand or forehead prominently featured and a laser mark clearly superimposed on them.

"I never said any of this," Su protested weakly, reading some of the statements attributed to her, all glorifying the new one-world government.

"Oh, but you did, though," Carl said smoothly. "or you will yet. We have a great deal of faith in you here—all of us do. Isn't that right, Patrick?"

Patrick nodded silently.

Carl abruptly got up and walked off to converse with one of the attendants.

"Hey, girl," Patrick said under his breath. "I'm sorry I had to do that. I didn't realize, you know? Even if I had known, there's not much I can do. But I admire you. You're really getting the treatment."

"I'm afraid it's only the beginning," Su smiled

grimly, and Patrick knew that she was right.

"If there's anything I can do ..." Patrick's words trailed off and he launched into a lively description of the photographic effects and details used in the photo, as Carl returned and surveyed the scene warily.

There was a slight bustle at the door and several white-clad men entered, pushing a stretcher alongside them.

"She's over here," Carl waved them towards Su, and she soon found herself being lifted gently onto the stretcher.

"Strap her down well, gentlemen—and keep a close eye on her," Carl said in a joking way, but everyone present knew he was dead serious. "She is a star, after all."

Suddenly he turned towards Patrick. "What are you still doing here, boy? Don't you have work to do?"

"I surely do, sir," Patrick said nonchalantly. "Just waiting anxiously to be dismissed."

"Well then, you're dismissed. Be off with you," Carl said annoyedly.

Patrick respectfully gathered together his bags and made his way out the door.

There was barely room for them all in the elevator, the stretcher taking up as much space as it did, but Su was thankful for the tiny spark of friendship that she felt from Patrick, and drew a certain small measure of strength from looking into his eyes during the long ride down.

As the doors opened he mouthed some words to her, but she could not make out what they said. Then stepping casually out into the lobby, he was gone, leaving Su alone once again.

As the stretcher rolled out into the mid-morning sunlight, Su found herself praying desperately for Patrick, that if he had any plan and purpose to be

used of the Lord, that he would come through for Him and not fail to deliver.

Just as she was being loaded into the ambulance, Su felt a slight prick in her arm and looked over to see a syringe being drawn out. Before she could say another word, a heavy cloud engulfed her, and she passed into unconsciousness.



“So you see,” the stone-faced lawyer paced continuously from one side to the other of the tiny interrogation room where he and Jay had been for the past two hours, “that’s just the way it goes. It’s only a matter of time till you all follow suit. You might as well choose now and make my life a lot easier.”

Jay gazed down in silence at the *Life* article, looking expressionlessly from one picture of Su to the other.

“You can be glad they even gave you a lawyer,” the man continued belligerently.

“I never asked for one,” Jay responded.

“Well, it’s the law though,” the lawyer said, to which Jay gave him a scornful look and said nothing.

“I mean, she looks pretty well off, you know,” the man continued. “Perhaps you could give it a try. ...”

“Look man,” Jay burst out suddenly. “I’ve had enough of your badgering. I’ll take my chances with the court, do you understand that? I will not take the stupid mark, and that’s the end of it. I don’t care if the whole world and everyone I know gives in, I WILL NOT!”

The last words came out so forcefully that the lawyer was obviously taken back, and moved hastily towards the door.

“That’s fine then,” he said pettily. “But don’t say that I didn’t warn you. I just want you to know that they passed a new law in the World Congress

yesterday.—As of now, directly refusing to register is a capital crime, punishable by death.” Stepping outside the door, he looked icily in Jay’s direction. “Think about that for a while, will you?”

As the door slammed shut, Jay pounded his head down on the table. “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me!” he cried out in his heart.

He looked up again at Su’s smiling face, then all of a sudden, the darkness behind her shoulders turned into shadowy faces—evil faces, threatening her; he could see her arm being twisted and held tight in place, then a snap of bright light. In an instant he knew—it was all a fake! Su had not taken the mark and she had said none of the things that were written in the article. She was just another pawn in their hand, and they were using her against them all, just as doubtless they were also being used against her.

Just that knowledge sent a new rush of strength flowing through his veins, and when the door opened and the guards came in to reattach his handcuffs and take him away, he knew once again that he was in God’s perfect will, and that He would not fail him, come what may.

Silently he prayed for Marty and Angelica, that they would also see the truth clearly, and not be deceived by appearances.



The new government was obviously wasting no time in enforcing their new law. Jay was led in to a small courtroom, with a deadpan woman who looked like she had been alive forever presiding over the gavel and wig.

Jay’s heart leapt when he saw Marty and Angelica, cuffed and guarded, seated in the last row from the back of the spectators’ seats. Jay rejoiced in his heart that they would be able to draw strength from each other’s testimony.

But no sooner had they entered the room than Jay's lawyer also entered, and seeing the group in the rear of the room, moved over to them quickly and with great consternation. He pulled the lawyers for the other two aside and spoke to them in angry and agitated tones. Then just as hastily, the guards rounded up their prisoners and herded them out the back exit.

They thought I had given in, Jay suddenly realized, and they wanted the others to be a witness to it. But now seeing as I haven't, they don't want them near.

The group was almost out the door and Jay suddenly saw his chance. He had no idea what the others had been told, and he suddenly shouted out, as loud as he could. "Never give in! We will never, never give in!"

Marty turned and locked eyes with Jay for only an instant before the door slammed shut between them, but as they were led off their separate ways, all three sang out in their minds the rest of the words to the FTT song that they knew so well and had sung so often: "We'll fight to the death and never say die; They'll try to kick us down, but we'll beat 'em back; They can only kill our body but our soul is gonna fly; Never give in! We will never, never give in!"

Each knew right then where the others stood, and that resolve strengthened their stand still further.

As Jay turned his eyes towards the haggard face in the judge's chair, he knew he would need all the resolve he could, and he set his face firmly as his spirit inwardly beseeched on High for strength and firmness.

It was all over in less than fifteen minutes. Jay's "lawyer" was obviously only a government-appointed stooge, who had now completed—and failed—in his sole purpose of trying to persuade Jay to take the

mark. That behind him, he found no need to pursue his duties further, and did not make so much as a move in Jay's direction.

Having a lawyer, however, Jay was forbidden from speaking out other than answering direct questions in as brief a manner as possible, and this frustrating catch 22' soon became almost too much for Jay to handle.

He had been prepared for a stacked deck, however, and so he was not too surprised at the turn of events, and the final pound of the gavel did not sink as deeply into his soul as a completely unexpected blow would have done.

"As judge of this court and by the power vested in me, I condemn you to death by lethal injection, to take place no more than fourteen days from today."

"Fourteen days!" Jay burst out, but the judge pounded the gavel again.

"Silence in the court!" she croaked crisply. "This case is closed and I will hear no further testimony. Take the condemned away."



It was not yet noon, and Jay was already back in his cell. Now he had nothing to do but wait for his death. He sighed rather dismally. It seemed a fairly inglorious end to a life that he felt he had not yet fully lived.

"Yet I wonder ..." he sighed to himself. He knew that he himself had no power to blast through the doors or strike all the guards dead. That type of thing was not something that you could just do—it happened when it happened, that is, when it was ordained by the Lord's power. So until that burst of power came pummeling out, there was nothing for Jay to do but wait and see if it would.

But even in his time of greatest doubt, somehow he could not bring himself to believe that Jesus would leave him to die alone and forsaken, unless

for some reason a greater testimony would arise from his death than from his life.

Lethal injection doesn't seem to be a terribly message-filled means of death, Jay reasoned to himself. Therefore I feel pretty safe in the assurance that I will probably be delivered before that happens.

Having relieved his mind somewhat, Jay now turned his thoughts to the more reasonable and worthwhile task of praying for the rest of his friends and those that he knew would need the strength as sorely as he had, not long earlier.

Engaged as he was in this activity, he scarcely heard the gradual sound of voices gaining volume in the hallway, until a scratching at his door announced that someone was fidgeting with the lock, and soon the little window swung open and Fawnie's face appeared before him.

"Fawnie!" Jay burst out, dashing over to put his hands up to her face. "Oh, it's so nice to touch a woman again!" he sighed in relief.

"You were having withdrawals, weren't you?" Fawnie laughed. "Well, perhaps now you wish you'd touched more of me when you had the chance!"

"Perhaps not," Jay smiled. "At that time, you'll remember, the conditions were rather different. But I won't say that I don't wish for that now."

"Well, well, all in good time," Fawnie smiled promisingly, "but now we'd better stick to business lest we appear to be getting too cozy for the guards' liking."

"What are you doing here, anyway?" Jay suddenly realized. "This could be very dangerous for you! I've just been condemned to death, do you know that?"

"I know," Fawnie said soberly. "That's why I had to come. I knew that no matter what the risk, I had to see you. You're the only one I know who ... well, who would understand."

"Understand what?"

"Understand that I'd rather die just to be with you than to go on living the way I have been."

"Fawnie, lower your voice," Jay whispered urgently. "This is serious business, do you know what you've just said? I've been an outlaw from day one, but you're one of *them*—you've got the mark. If you're going to go against this, it could get messy for you."

"I know that, Jay, but I've got to. I read what you said in that paper you left for me, and it's all true. Every word of it. I prayed like you said and now I can see. For the first time in my life, I can see! I've just got to act on it. But I don't know what to do. I can't go where I can't see, and if there's no one to lead me, what will I do?"

"Fawnie, I'm not going to die here, I know that much."

"What? I thought you were sentenced just a couple of hours ago."

"But what is a sentence? Is not God more powerful?"

Fawnie smiled. "I can see there's a lot I don't know about your God. But I do want to learn," she looked up earnestly. "I do desperately. But what do I do now? I think Brett can tell I'm getting restless, because..." she lowered her eyes a little.

"What? What is it?"

"He called me into his office today, congratulated me on my work and told me he was so proud of me, blah blah blah. Then he offered me a new job—a much higher salary, coveted position, extra perks, you name it."

"And the price?"

"Well, I'd have to go for a higher level of security, he said. I'd need to get the second level of registration."

"The mark in your forehead, huh?" Jay narrowed his eyes.

"Yes," Fawnie said. "Of course I acted all thrilled, and pretended I was eager to jump on it, and I did such a good job at being overeager that he told me to give it a while to sink in and let him know my decision the day after tomorrow."

"So what are you going to do?" Jay asked, hoping for, yet dreading the answer he expected to hear.

"Well, of course I can't do it!" Fawnie said. "Not now, not after what I know. It just means I've got till the day after tomorrow to make my getaway. And since you're not going to die after all, perhaps we could make our getaway together. I certainly wouldn't last two days without you. Please, Jay! Please, will you come with me?"

"Fawnie, I would love nothing more, but ..."

"But what, Jay? Don't leave me like this!" Fawnie started to get desperate, barely controlling her tears. "You can't just start my life turning in a completely different direction and then just dump me in the middle of the road and say, 'Sorry, fend for yourself.'"

"Fawnie, Fawnie!" Jay reached out his hand to her face again. "It's nothing like that, okay? Please calm down, you can't let the guards see you so worked up. Look, I promise I won't let you down. I have no idea what's going to happen, but we will get out of here together. All right? You go back and act normal and I know the Lord'll come through for us. We're His and He's leading, so He's not going to fail. Okay?"

Fawnie dried her moist eyes. "Okay," she said. "I'm sorry I got so excited. That's just me, always falling apart over something or other. Thanks, Jay." She grabbed his hand and squeezed it, then pulled his face up to hers and kissed him passionately. "I'll wait for you," she whispered.

Then patting her face and straightening her hair, she turned and walked casually back towards

the guards, where she made some civilized comments and then returned the way she'd come without a backward glance.

"Two days!" Jay groaned to himself. "Two days to break out of here. Oh Jesus, give me the clarity to hear Your Word, the faith to believe it, and the strength to act on it when the time comes!"



Su struggled to regain control over the fog that still overwhelmed her mind.

"She should come around in another minute or two," a medical-sounding voice boomed through her consciousness.

"W-where am I? What is ...?" Su tried to lift her hand to her face but found both of her arms securely fastened to either side of her bed with strong plastic straps. As her mind settled, she looked down and saw that a huge cast was encasing her from the waist down. "What is this?" she finally asked.

"Precautionary measures," Su turned her head quickly as she recognized Carl's smooth voice. To her dismay, as she looked into his eyes she could see the burning flame of evil lurking in them again. She closed her eyes wearily. How she had hoped to never have another encounter with that filthy demon!

"Nurse, unfasten her arms," Carl said in a moderately civil tone.

Su smiled in relief and began to massage her wrists, which now ached sorely as feeling was beginning to return to her body.

"I thought I'd only broken my hip," Su looked questioningly down at the bed.

Carl only smiled again. "Precautionary measures," he said quietly again. "But that is not why I have come. I have come as a friend," he smiled sickly, and Su turned her eyes away from the disgusting sight. Instantly any sign of amiability vanished and

he waved his arm brusquely for the nurse and other attendants and guards to leave the room.

“Look here, little girl,” he grabbed her viciously by the chin and forced her to look into his face. “You’d better listen and listen good. You’ve got one chance to get out of here alive and that’s if you do exactly what I say. Is that perfectly clear?”

Su nodded, as much as she was able with her face being held so forcefully. “Let me go,” she finally managed to gasp.

“I’ll do more than that if you don’t watch out,” Carl hissed. “So listen carefully. The council is now going over your testimony, but—”

“Testimony?” Su struggled vainly to sit up. “What testimony? I’ve been out cold since ... since whenever it happened. I don’t even know what time it is now. I haven’t said a word to anyone.”

“My dear,” Carl said patronizingly. “I understand that this is not a peak time for you. You’ve been under a lot of stress and a lot of medication, and a certain amount of memory lapses are to be expected. But that’s not important right now. What is important is that we do have your testimony, and a number of witnesses who will swear to that—good, upstanding citizens. Since you are unable to move around at the moment, the court will go ahead and process your case introducing the evidence given in your testimony. I hope that this is acceptable to you.”

“Look, you’re forging the whole thing anyway, why did you bother coming in to tell me about it now?” Su asked bitterly.

“Now, now, dear,” Carl crooned. “Don’t get so worked up. I’m sure things will settle down as time moves along. Of course ...” he hesitated deliberately, “there is always a way out. ...” He cast his eyes to her bedside table, whereon was a newly-released portable version of the registration device.

Su reached her hand for the machine, and picked it up with a curious look on her face. She turned it over and examined it carefully, then, looking straight into his eyes and shooting up an inner prayer for unearthly strength, she slowly and deliberately held the device in her hand and crushed it with all her might. There was a small snap and puff of smoke as various bits of now-bloody metal and plastic fell onto the bedcover.

Carl’s face turned livid with rage, but he just grabbed both of Su’s arms—her hand still coated in cracked machinery fragments which had pressed through her skin—and yanked them firmly up to the sides of the bed, making sure they were fastened at the most uncomfortable angle possible.

“Don’t forget, missy,” he hissed. “You’re on trial for murder!”

Without another word he went out the front door, which he locked behind him. Su could hear him telling the nurse. “I gave her another dose of medication, so she’ll be out for the next ten or twelve hours. The guards can keep an eye on things out here till then, so you can be relieved for the time being.”

Su felt faint with hunger and her throat was parched with thirst, but her greatest problem was that the angle her arms were pulled to was pulling her hip in a way that made it difficult to even breathe for the pain.

“Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus!” Su begged, hoping against hope for a miracle, yet not knowing if she could really expect one, or if it was foolish even to dream.

Chapter 13

ONE STEP AT A TIME

Stuart and Alana had been driving for hours, and the mid-afternoon sun was high in the sky.

"I can't believe in all this time we haven't seen a sign of civilization," Alana commented to pass the time. No sooner were the words out of her mouth than the little yellow van rounded yet another bend in the windy, mountain road, and stumbled directly upon a small cluster of dwelling-places.

Stuart immediately slowed the car. "I wonder if this is where we're supposed to stop?" he said.

"Bruce's Tavern," Alana pointed towards a rough-hewn sign that seemed to be handmade, swinging in the slight breeze. "That sounds like a good place to stop."

"Stop and do what?" Stuart asked the obvious. "Won't be much use to us outlaws."

"You're right," Alana said, then continued in a naughty tone. "But why don't we get out and sniff around. Maybe we'll find something edible in the trash." Stuart swung the car over with a laugh and pulled it to a stop. "Or maybe," Alana continued, "our mighty Protector will do something else a little more tasteful for us."

The two stepped out of the car and began walking

the few steps towards the entrance to the tavern.

"Do we go in?" Alana wondered aloud.

"You're the one who seems to have the faith for this venture," Stuart smiled. "You lead the way."

"Oh, no way, man!" Alana countered. "You're the lifelong missionary. I'm a big talker, but I'm not one for *this* sort of action."

"Of course, you've been a few places I haven't," Stuart said with a grin, bobbing his head upward.

"Now don't you go pulling that 'you've been to Heaven' trip on me, Big Stu," Alana laughed. "It's your fault that I am back here on this stinking earth, so you'd just better stay quiet and do your best to take care of me."

As they stood there occupied in their playful bantering, they hadn't noticed the curious onlooker who had noticed them, and then drew closer by several steps. They were suddenly shocked into realization when they heard his clear voice ring out loudly, and seemingly echo through the entire neighborhood: "Why it's the miracle-people from TV! It really is! It's them!"

A housewife across the street heard the commotion and stuck her head out the window. Stuart and Alana stood frozen in their tracks for a moment, unsure of whether they should run for the van or stay and defend themselves.

Then they heard a loud whisper coming from behind the tavern. "Pssst! Over here!"

They turned warily to see a husky, bearded man with a red striped apron around his broad midsection. "Come on!" he waved a friendly hand in their direction. "It's all right. We'll take care of you!"

Warily, the two moved quickly in his direction, and were glad when he sternly shooed away the other onlookers who had gathered to gawk.

"Please excuse my friend there, he's not known for his discretion," the man said warmly. "Let me intro-

duce myself. I'm Bruce. I run this place." He held open the back door which led into a bustling kitchen.

Seeing them hesitate on the doorstep, Bruce smiled. "Look, I understand your hesitation, but it's okay. We're all on your side here. We saw you guys on TV—pretty good stunt. I can't say I know all about what was going on, but anything to buck the tide is good in my books. Now it's up to you if you want to come in or not, but I've got plenty of hot food that's just waiting for two hungry people to eat it up."

Bruce had struck a responsive chord, and Stuart and Alana, both famished beyond words, followed him inside without another hesitation.

He led them discreetly to a small back room, whispering a few instructions to a waitress along the way. In no more than two or three minutes, the pretty girl returned bearing two giant plates of steaming spaghetti.

"We don't have any ..." Stuart began, his mouth watering at the sight, but Bruce waved away his words.

"Have no fear," he said. "This one's on me."

Stuart and Alana ate with relish, and Bruce sat back and watched them with obvious enjoyment.

"I bet it's been a while since you had a hot meal, eh?" he chuckled.

Finally the food was all gone, and Stuart and Alana could think straight again.

"So what is this place? Are you some sort of contraband operation?" Alana asked.

Bruce laughed. "Well, not exactly. But we do pride ourselves in helping the resistance in any way we can. When I saw you two drive up here, I figured that was where you were headed, to meet up with them."

"Actually," Stuart said. "We had no idea where we were going. We had a bit of a miraculous escape from government forces earlier, and ... well, through

various means, we found ourselves on this road, and this was the first place that we came to.”

Bruce looked questioningly at them. “You’ve been driving south along this here road, coming from the city?”

The two nodded.

“Why there’s dozens of little outstops, just like this one, all the way ‘long it. You couldn’t spit upwind without hitting one or more of them.”

“You must be thinking about a different road,” Alana said. “The road we were on was nothing but trees and sky.”

“I don’t know,” Bruce shook his head, “but there’s only one road that comes out this way from the city, and that’s the one you’re on, and there’s more habitation than I’d care to elaborate on.”

Stuart and Alana exchanged puzzled looks. “Well, I’ll certainly take your word for it,” Stuart finally said. “It looks like we’ve been led directly here then.”

Then Alana asked, “Is there any way we could meet up with this resistance?”

“Well,” Bruce said, “under normal circumstances I wouldn’t even have mentioned them. But you being who you are—celebrities of sorts, you understand—I imagine they would count it an honor to have any association with you at all.”

“How soon could we go to them?” Stuart asked.

“I can take you right now if you want,” Bruce stood up eagerly.

After a brief pause (which Stuart utilized well to inwardly confirm this plan with the forces Above), he said, “Well, it appears we don’t have anything better to do, do we Alana?”

“We certainly do not,” Alana agreed. “Let’s be on our way then.”



Dusk settled into evening, and before long the cool blanket of night descended over the city. Inside

Jay’s windowless room, however, everything looked the same. He could tell that time was passing simply because he felt that he had been sitting there longer than before. He also knew that precisely at nine o’clock was when the overhead neon lights went off, so he always found a sense of comfortable oneness with the rest of the time-keeping world when his own world was plunged into darkness.

This night, however, something was different. His senses were finely tuned, and when the lights went out he moved hastily over to the door of his cell. Somehow, something told him that tonight was the night.—More than tonight, *now!* He didn’t know what was about to happen, but he knew it was something.

He closed his eyes and quickly committed the entire situation to prayer, especially praying that he would be able to meet up with Fawnie. If by some miracle he were to get free, he would have no way of contacting or finding her. But getting free would be miracle enough that he would have no trouble believing that anything would be possible after that!

Even as those words echoed through his mind, all of a sudden, his door buzzed unlocked, and swung wide open. Jay hesitated on the threshold only a minute before leaping cautiously out into the corridor. Seeing the guards’ forms at the other end of the hall, he stepped back into his room, but everything was strangely still.

A slight rustle near him made him turn around, and then he saw that a couple of doors down, two other doors were also open. Two figures slowly made their way towards him. Overjoyed, he realized that it was Marty and Angelica. Not daring to say a word, the three moved carefully up the hallway.

Arriving at the front, they found a single guard snoring loudly with his head buried in a stack of

papers. They lost no time in passing by him, and found a fire escape exit outside the door immediately to their left.

As soon as they were outside and had shut the door quietly behind them, Jay dared to speak. "Have we seen a miracle, or what?"

The other two laughed out loud—albeit quietly, for their getaway was nowhere near fully assured as of yet.

"I feel like Peter the Apostle all over again," Marty exulted.

"Come on, boys," Angelica said practically. "We've got some praying to do to get us the rest of the way."

They came down the stairs in a matter of seconds, and took a moment to survey their surroundings. They were on the far wing of the complex that held the prison as well as the other government buildings wherein they had spent the last weeks, and the entire grounds were surrounded by a high wall. Bright floodlights scanned strategic spots through the yard and wall, but all seemed to be running in a routine manner. Obviously their escape had not yet been noticed.

They came around the corner of the prison building, to another more residential-looking row of apartments. On impulse, Jay suddenly looked up, and his heart nearly stood still. There, in a window two or three stories up but almost directly above them, Fawnie stood, clad in her bra and panties, and brushing her hair.

He beckoned the other two and quickly told them of his discussions with the girl and how much she wanted to come with them. "I bet she'd come right down if we could just get her attention," he pleaded.

"It certainly seems worth it to rescue anyone who wants to be rescued," Angelica said.

"She certainly looks like she's worth rescuing," Marty joked.

Jay was looking around for a means of notifying her. He picked up a couple of pebbles, and after a few tries, he managed to hit her window squarely in the center with a light tap. Fawnie instantly looked towards the window, squinting her eyes into the darkness below. After another moment, realization dawned and she began a frantic volley of gestures which the others could not interpret in the least. Then she vanished from the window, and they figured she was probably on her way down.

They huddled together against the surface of the wall, but they only had to wait about five minutes before they heard light footsteps coming around the side of the building. Fawnie had obviously not stopped to do much other than throw the first thing over her that she could find, which happened to be a large bathrobe.

"You're not bringing anything?" Jay asked.

"There's no time," Fawnie said. "And none of that is important any more. Let's get out of here quick. They're bound to discover you any minute. ..." She stopped and shook her head. "I won't even ask how you got away. You'll have to tell me all about it later."

They were already moving across the courtyard, but then Fawnie grabbed Jay's arm.

"Wait, we'll never make it out through the main gate. Come over here, I know a back way that's not usually guarded."

It was a brisk five minutes' walk, and the four were breathing heavily when they came to a rundown looking gate on the far side of the property. Fawnie reached into her pocket and pulled out a ring of keys. "Thought this might come in handy," she said with a smile, as she slipped one into the lock. "I picked this up the other day at the base office when thinking about how we were going to make our getaway." Then she looked down rather demurely. "I hope you don't mind, but ..." she hesitated.

"What?" The other three asked immediately.

"Well, I really believed you, Jay, and I knew that we'd be getting out of here soon. But see, we're out in the middle of nowhere, so ..." she paused again.

"What are you getting at, girl? Spit it out!" Jay was getting anxious to get out of harm's way.

"Well, I parked my car not far from here, just in case we did make it out, so we'd have something to escape with."

"Well, that's a good thing!" Marty burst out in relieved tones. "Nothing to be ashamed of at all! Can you find it in the dark?"

Fawnie nodded.

"Let's go for it then!"

Not bothering to shut the gate behind them, they passed through it, and a sense of compelling urgency seemed to flow through them as they passed further and further into freedom. Of one accord, they all broke into a feverish run, with Fawnie in the lead. They finally stopped at a place where the tall bushes parted, and slipped through to find a small compact car parked skillfully out of sight.

"Pile in, all!" Fawnie said with a beaming smile. "We're going for a ride!"

Revvng up the engine, she pulled out of the bushes and began tearing down the road as fast as the old motor would go.

All was still dark and silent around them, but before they were completely out of sight of the compound, Marty let out a sudden exclamation. "They're onto us!" he said.

All but the driver turned back and saw every light in the entire place was turned on, and loud sirens began blaring.

"Step on it, Fawnie!" Jay said urgently. "We've got a headstart but we'll need every inch of it if they take off in pursuit as fast as I expect them to."

"Never fear, teammates," Fawnie said. "You've got the right gal here. I know these streets like the back of my hand. In another thirty seconds we'll be so deep into the back alleys that they couldn't find us with a fine-tooth comb. I'll take you out of harm's way, and you just tell me where to go from there."



"My name is Julian," the tall young man reached out an eager hand. He seemed unable to contain his delight at getting to meet Stuart and Alana in person. "It's just great to finally get to meet you! Please, won't you sit down?"

The heavily camouflaged tent was elaborately set up on the inside with everything needed for comfortable living, and obviously was not moved around much. Stuart, Alana and Bruce seated themselves in plush armchairs, and Julian also took a seat near them. Another man and woman, who had not been introduced to them, sat silently nearby.

"Natalie, would you get some drinks for our guests?" Julian asked suddenly, and the brown-haired girl nodded quickly and slipped out of the room.

"I'm honored beyond words to welcome you into our humble abode," Julian continued, looking Stuart and Alana up and down with great admiration. "And I certainly have a lot to ask you. Will you be staying awhile?"

Stuart and Alana looked at each other, then Stuart said, "We don't really have any plans at the moment.—We're just moving along step by step, as the Lord leads."

"This is a very nice setup that you have here," Alana commented.

"Oh, yes," Julian smiled. "All the modern conveniences! It's our home away from home. Well, for most of us it's our only home for now, as our old

residences have long since been confiscated or burned to the ground.” He suddenly looked serious. “Speaking of which, I heard about the big firestorm that happened outside of the Whithall residence. Weren’t you two involved in that? One of our men escaped and told us some stories about it. ...”

Alana looked blank. “Don’t ask me,” she said. “I was dead at the time.”

Stuart just cleared his throat and looked a little embarrassed. “Perhaps I could tell you about it some other time.”

“Of course,” Julian said quickly. “There’s no rush. We’re just eager to learn everything about you and how you work. You seem to be much more advanced technologically than we are. I mean, what we have is state of the art as far as we know, but somehow ... you just seem to be able to do so much more, and so much more effectively. Will you teach us?”

“We’d be happy to teach you everything that we know,” Stuart said. “But we don’t have any secret weapons or fancy tricks. Our power boils down to a basic belief in a very real God who seems to be willing to do just about anything to protect us and defeat our enemies.”

Julian leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hands together. “I see there’s a whole lot I have yet to learn,” he said. “But I will relish every moment of it. Could we start tomorrow?”

Alana laughed. “You’re eager, man!” she said.

“Time passes by very quickly,” Julian said soberly, “and we never know how long it will be until our time comes. I am anxious to make good use of every second of it.”

“And so you should be,” Stuart agreed. “Tomorrow would be just fine.”

Julian stood up. “Let me show you to your tent, then.”

The others stood up, then Stuart said suddenly, “You know, I’m just thinking about the car that we drove here in. We left it parked out in front of the tavern, but it was all over TV and I’d dare say probably an excellent advertisement as to our whereabouts.”

“I’ll dispose of it,” Bruce said quickly. “I’ve got to be heading back anyway.”

“Excellent,” Julian said. “Come this way.”

As they stepped out of the tent, Alana inquired curiously, “How do you stay hidden in this forest? I mean, it’s dense and out of the way and all, but what about all the infrared devices and heat and breath scanners and all?”

“State of the art,” Julian smiled. “Our tents are each equipped with special filters that block out any heat, breath or motion sensors from being able to detect anything. As long as we’re not outside in large groups or for extended amounts of time, we’re pretty safe—for the time being, at least, until they develop something to counteract our scanner blocks.”

“What a clever idea,” Alana chuckled. “That’s just top of the line.”

“Here you go,” Julian said. Then he turned to the side. “Oh, Natalie, there you are! Here, why don’t you give them the drinks and they can just take them into their tent. We’ll have a busy day tomorrow, and they’ll probably want to get an early night.”

Taking the tray from the girl, Alana nodded her thanks, and then she and Stu stepped inside the spacious but cozy tent.

“Here we are,” she said, passing a glass to Stuart. “And how far we’ve come!”

Stuart just shook his head. “I can’t help feeling there’s some sort of a plan for my life—do you ever get that thought?”

Alana grinned. “Occasionally, I must say the thought crosses my mind.”

"Do you know what I want to do tonight?" Stuart asked.

"Oh, no you don't!" Alana joked. "Don't you go getting horny on me! I'm supposed to be the one who makes the come-ons!"

Stuart laughed. "That's not what I was thinking of," he said. "Although that sounds like a nice nightcap, now that you mention it. No, I want you to tell me more about the time when you were dead. I mean, you told me the basics of what happened, but besides that, what was it like? What did it feel like to die? What about when you went to Heaven? Do you like remember anything more about it?"

"Oh, Stu! We're supposed to get some sleep, aren't we? If I get started talking about that I'll be here all night!"

"Come on, Alana, it's early!" He cocked his head to the side pleadingly, but she stood steadfastly in place, mocking him.

"You're going to make me beg, aren't you?" he asked.

Alana nodded, with a naughty smile.

"All right then, for this I will beg," Stuart groaned as he dropped awkwardly to his knees in front of her. Then he lunged forward and grabbed both of her legs with his hands and started nibbling the inside of her thighs. "Please, please, please ..."

Alana resisted as long as she could, then dissolved into a pile of laughter on top of Stuart's head. "What a fool you are!" she laughed. "Okay, you win. But let's make it short, all right? I feel like I need some mental prep time before tomorrow. I know you've been training for this all your life, but me ... well, it's a rather new experience being so highly in demand."

"I will perform your utmost wish," Stuart said with a smile. "So tell me, what was it like to die? Did it hurt?"

"Uh, let me see ..." Alana paused thoughtfully. "You know, it's very hard to say. That part of the experience was so very quick, and so overshadowed that I can actually hardly remember it at all." She frowned. "I'm sure that if it was extremely painful I would have remembered. Hmm ... let me see. ... Actually, now I do remember a little. It hurt at first. Well, no, at first it was just sort of a reflex, you know, like jumping to catch a fly ball."

"That was some fly ball—or six or seven, more like!" Stuart laughed admiringly.

"Yeah, really!" Alana agreed. "I didn't think about it really, but when the little suckers hit, at first it was like, 'Oops!' You know? I wasn't really planning to do the whole martyr thing."

"Your inherent goodness just kicked in, huh?"

"Oh, I should say so, goodness is just me all the way," she laughed. "Now Stuart, quit your commentary and let me finish. I'm trying to be brief here but still tell you what you want to know."

"All right then, I'll be good. Go on."

"Okay, so where was I? Oh yeah, so I looked down and there was the whole blood deal and at first I didn't feel anything at all except I couldn't stand for beans. I just fell down like a deflated balloon. By the time the pain started to kick in, everything was getting all faint and sparkly, and it was just a few seconds before I left, I guess."

"So you hardly felt a thing," Stuart said.

"Yeah, I guess not. And then when I left my body it was the weirdest feeling—definitely a total different wavelength, it actually felt kinda good ... oh, I can't even bother describing it. It's much too unearthly."

"Okay, what about up There?" Stuart laughed and rubbed his hands over his unshaven face. "I can't believe I'm sitting here saying, 'Oh, tell me what it was like when you were in Heaven.' You can't imagine how weird this is."

"I can't imagine? Uh, I would say I have the weirder situation, don't you think? You didn't have your dead body bench-pressed into the air and then do a big resurrection scene before the entire believing and unbelieving world population."

"How do you know that I did that?" Stuart sat up suddenly. "I never told you that I held you up in the air."

Alana smiled. "I was around," she said simply. "They told me that you had made the choice to call me back, and so I was waiting around for you to get to the point. I thought you did pretty good. Now have I said enough?" She crawled over to him and burrowed her nose under his shirt, starting to playfully yank on the scattered hairs on his chest. "Can we move on to other things?"

"Other things sound just fine to me," Stuart agreed. "Did you learn any new tricks while you were away?"

"Oh, what do you wanna bet?" Alana smiled coyly. "That's the part I remember best! After all, I was taking careful mental notes. I wanted to make sure I'd impress you if I ever got back."

"All right then, Lazarus girl, show me your stuff!"

All of a sudden, Alana pulled her head out of his shirt and sat up. "Stuart, what about your wife? Isn't it awful for us to be carrying on like this? She probably would have been happy if I'd have stayed in Heaven. It would have made things so nice and tidy."

"But nice and tidy things never are, are they?" Stuart responded. "Look, Alana, you don't have to worry about Kim. She's a wonderful person, and the one that is dearest to me in the entire world. She knows that, and I know that you know that too. But the reality is that we're apart from each other for some time, and I'm sure," Stuart smiled sheepishly, "I'm sure that where she is, she probably has some nice guy to cozy up to as well."

"Oh, you don't say!" Alana widened her eyes as if it was the first she'd thought of that.

"Yeah, I bet she does," Stuart said. Then he laughed. "A lot of guys were probably just waiting for me to step out of the picture! No, I'm just kidding. It's not like that at all. I'll have to give you our whole doctrinal spiel on this sometime. It's called the Law of Love. I can't get into it all right now, but basically, we are humans, and humans have certain needs, and ... well, I like to rephrase that verse of Paul's: 'It is better to pair up than to burn.' No?"

"I guess so—well, no, I mean, it's absolutely fabulous on my end. I just wanted to make sure I wasn't plowing up someone else's garden, if you know what I mean."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Stuart jumped up and playfully threw her down on the bed. "I'm the only one who's going to be messing with anybody's garden tonight!"

Alana laughed and started to struggle, but the matter was settled and there was to be no further discussion.

Chapter 14

CAMP LIFE

Stuart and Alana had slept well after their previous exhausting day, but by the time the morning heat had seeped its way through the thick overhead tapestry of the forest and descended oppressively upon their tent, they were only too eager to lend the day their full zeal.

Natalie appeared at just the right time and led them to the wash-up tent, then pointed them in the direction of the “food hall,” as it had been locally dubbed. As she was taking her leave, Julian came up, and greeted the two with a friendly smile.

“I see you’ve had a good sleep—your faces show it,” he said with a grin.

“That we have—better than in a long time,” Stuart smiled. “Thank you again for your hospitality.”

“The pleasure is all ours,” Julian said earnestly. “If it’s all right with you, we’ve set up a meeting in the big gathering tent over there for nine o’clock—that’s just forty minutes from now. I hope that’s not too soon for you?”

“Not at all,” Alana said. “We’ll be there.”



Stepping uneasily into the door of the food hall, they were relieved to find Julian at their sides

again. It was just as well, too, for the bustling room seemed to pause in midair upon sight of the two newcomers, as full and undisguised wordless interest was spread across them as thickly as jam on toast. Everyone was much too polite to mob them outright, but although the room quickly returned to stifled muttering, all eyes were in the sides of their head and all ears were carefully trained on that special table on the far right, where the two celebrities were trying to nonchalantly eat their toast and eggs, while pretending they had no idea that they were the focus of such concerted attention.

"Just give them a day or two, they'll get over the awe," Julian whispered with amusement. "You really are very famous around here. You've been quite the talk since last week—and especially after yesterday morning."

"I still don't understand how we got on TV," Alana said, shaking her head. "You'd think that in this type of government they wouldn't allow stuff like that out."

"Oh, they don't," Julian said quickly. "I suppose they had had a live broadcast going at the time that you started pulling your little stunts. ... Well, that's what happened at the big announcement speech at least. What hot timing that was!" He slapped his hand down on the table and laughed heartily. "I'm quite certain that nearly the entire world was watching that broadcast, and there you were—right on target!"

"It's no credit to us," Stuart said, through a mouthful of food. "We're just following orders."

"So I hear," Julian said admiringly. "So I hear. And I am duly impressed. I am very anxious to learn more about your methods."

"We're quite happy to share what we know with you," Stuart returned.

"We, of course, meaning mostly Stuart over

here," Alana interjected quickly. "He's sort of the spiritual leader. I'm actually a rather new recruit of his, right Stu?"

"Alana's a bit new to a lot of the concepts of our lifestyle," Stuart explained a little further, "but she's made amazing progress in the past couple of weeks. I'm sure she'll find that she has a lot that she can pass on."

Alana raised her eyebrows at him in disbelief, and Stuart continued, "What? You didn't expect me to go in all by myself and do all the talking, did you?"

"Well, actually, now that you mention it, yes I did!" Alana laughed.

"Come on, girl, get with it! You're one of us now, and you may as well accept it and make the best of it."

Alana looked unconvinced, and Julian saw his cue and came to the rescue.

"Look around the room at all these people," he lowered his voice. "Are you going to tell them that you are green and don't have anything that you can teach them? Do you think they would take that for an answer?"

Alana looked discreetly around at the sponge-like faces so carefully trying to absorb any word they could from the prized table in the far corner of the room, and knew that the two men were speaking the truth.

"All right then, that's just fine," she said begrudgingly. "But if you don't like my style or if I start going off on some tangent, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Just give it a try, Alana," Stuart looked pleased. "You'll see that as you open your mouth, He'll fill it."



Breakfast and a little spiritual prep-time being over, it was with a certain amount of trepidation

that Stuart and Alana braced themselves before stepping through the entranceway into the meeting hall tent.

"I hope they have a small corner area for us to be in," Alana whispered. "I'm kind of intimidated by large empty spaces."

Before Stuart had a chance to answer Alana's absurd statement (as for her to confess intimidation by anything was so uncharacteristic that it was obviously a ploy to try to relinquish some responsibility), they had made their way into the tent, where they were both instantly rendered completely speechless. For there before them was a tent crowded with more than 300 people! Every available chair had been filled, and several rows of people were standing along the back walls of the tent.

"What is wrong with this picture?" Alana whispered under her breath.

Just then Julian spotted them and came running up. "There you are," he said, sheepishly noting their panic-stricken faces. "I'm sorry I didn't give you advance warning on the numbers. ... To be honest, we didn't know ourselves. We sent out word to a couple of our other affiliate camps, in case they wanted to send a few representatives. It looks like nobody wanted to miss it!"

"I should say not," Alana remarked dryly. "You must have every rebel in the country here."

"Oh, no," Julian laughed. "There are many more of us than you'd imagine. But I do believe that you have a great percentage of the shakers and movers of the underground right in this tent." He gave Stuart a hearty pat on the back. "I hope you're well-prepared!"

Stuart couldn't even laugh out a response, so he busied himself with moving up to the front of the room, where a makeshift stage had been erected,

containing two chairs and a small table.

"Here goes," he whispered to Alana, who simply waved her hand with a little "you take the lead" sort of gesture.



As the now-hungry crowds were being organized into small groups, and timed exits were being planned for each group to make their way to the food hall, Julian slowly made his way towards the front of the room, where Stuart and Alana, thoroughly exhausted from their morning's exertion, sat motionless in their chairs.

Julian's eyes were shining. "Man!" he exclaimed as soon as he was within earshot. "Man, but you are *eloquent!* I don't think I've ever heard someone speak like you do!"

Stuart shook his head. "It's not me," he said. "That's what I've just been trying to tell you, remember?"

"I know, I know," Julian agreed, "the power of God. But man," he shook his head again, "such richness! Such clarity ... you know, if I could have that same speaking ability, it would revolutionize my leadership of this camp."

"I'm sure that you could," Stuart said. "It's definitely nothing of myself. Alana will testify to that."

Alana nodded vigorously.

"The prayer that you all prayed this morning started you off on the right road," Stuart continued. "Now if you just start reading the Word and spending time with Jesus, it will come.—And I bet it will come sooner than you'd imagine. It's not something that you work up—it just comes."

"About this Word thing that you keep saying, though—I don't know what we're going to do about that. We don't have nearly enough Bibles for everyone. A few people have their own copies, that's about it.—And they're not about to part with them."

"Don't worry," Stuart said. "I know that the Lord will make a way. He's never failed us or left us without what we needed. Cultivating the hunger is the first step, and once that is there, the Lord will supply the food."

The three looked up and noticed Bruce approaching them with a rather hesitant look on his face.

"What's up, Bruce?" Julian asked.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Bruce said, "but your new friends apparently have some visitors."

"Visitors?" Stuart echoed curiously.

"Yes, well," Bruce quickly explained, "a group of people pulled up in front of my tavern this morning after they spotted some sort of magnetic keypad on my driveway. They asked me if I knew where it had come from, and how it had ended up there," he said as he handed the device over to Stuart.

"The databank!" Alana exclaimed, looking over at Stuart.

"I assumed it was yours," Bruce continued, "and that you had most likely dropped it while you were over at my place. But I wasn't sure what I could tell them, exactly, you know, these strangers. But they looked sort of like, you know, the 'on-the-run' type, and they seemed to be familiar with whatever this keypad was."

"We did lose this very keypad—but that was way back on the road!" Stuart tried to sort out the perplexing situation. "Who are these people, anyway? What do they look like?"

"The main talker was a dark-skinned fellow, I think he said his name was Jay."

"Jay!" Alana exclaimed.

"Then there's another guy and two girls, all of them young—about your age, actually," Bruce finished his description.

"Marty, Angelica and ... Su?" Stuart wondered hopefully.

"So you know them?" Bruce concluded. "I halfway suspected you would, but I wanted to make sure before I brought them here."

"Where are they now?" Stuart stood up.

"They're back at the tavern. But I can have them escorted up right away," Bruce said quickly. "Just give me fifteen minutes."

"We'll rendezvous in the food hall, then," Julian called after his retreating form.

Bruce waved his agreement, then slipped back out into the midday heat.

"So these are friends of yours?" Julian asked.

"Yes, other members of our group," Stuart said. "They're definitely trustworthy."

"I don't suppose they'd have any accommodations planned for the night, would they?" Julian mused thoughtfully.

"Oh," Alana said. "You don't need to trouble yourself about that. We'll probably all be moving on soon."

"Not at all!" Julian retorted hastily. "There's too much that we need to learn from you! At least stay a few more days, please? I'm sure we can find a place for your friends as well! What do you say?"

Stuart and Alana looked at each other, and finally Stuart said, "Well, we don't really have another plan of action right now, so I suppose that will do just fine until we get other orders."

"Thank you!" Julian exclaimed. "Now, let's be off to the food hall."



It was a joyful reunion, though Stuart and Alana were disappointed to discover that no one seemed to know what had become of Su. The next few hours passed in a blur of talking, introducing their new member, Fawnie, and updating each other on everything that had transpired since they had last been together.

Stuart was thankful beyond words to have some support in the instruction department, and they quickly devised a way to divide the large group of listeners into several small ones, which provided at least a moderately smaller crowd and thus slightly less intimidated teachers. This also enabled them to teach the different groups of people on their level, as there were those who had only the merest notion of Christianity, while others knew the Lord and were just a little rusty in the day-by-day practices of living by faith.

Busy as they thus were, there was not as much time as they would have wished for catching up on the events of the days recently gone by. But as they bade each other good night and curled up in various corners of the same tent where Stuart and Alana had spent the previous night, they promised to compare notes in a full time of hearty discussion as soon as the opportunity arose. Thus, exhausted from the day's activities, each fell into a sound sleep.



In the pitch blackness, Stuart sat straight up in his bed. Alana, who was laying nearby, was startled at the sudden movement and propped herself up on her elbow.

"What's up, Big Stu?" she whispered, so as not to wake up the others.

"I've got to call Kate," Stuart said, rather dazedly.

"Stuart, are you sleep-talking?" Alana said doubtfully.

"I'm as awake as you are, Alana-girl," Stuart returned.

"Well, that's not saying much," she giggled, but was obviously convinced. "So where are we gonna find a phone?"

"I'm sure that Julian has one in his tent. Did you notice where that was?"

"Yeah," Alana said coyly. "He called me over there this afternoon for a while."

"He called you into his tent?" Stuart pulled up his pants and pulled Alana out of the tent with him, where they could talk without disturbing the others.

"Yeah, and what's that to you, *husband*?" she laughed again.

"Nothing, I'm just concerned for your safety, that's all," he said.

She pointed her arm in the direction of the tent, and they started walking. "Well, thank you kindly, sir," she grinned. "But I am quite capable of managing my own life."

"Oh, come on, Alana, don't be like that," Stuart said. "I'm just curious. What did he want?"

"Not much, really. I don't suppose he knew what he wanted. He asked me about my 'resurrection' and stuff. I guess I don't do a lot of talking, so he wanted to see what my opinions on the matter were. He didn't make any passes at me or anything."

"Bet you're sad about that," Stuart grinned.

"Nah," she replied. "I mean, he's okay and all, but you know, I could have made the move if I was interested. It's just not the time for it right now. Plus," she smiled naughtily, "I am well-enough supplied as it is."

"This is it?" Stuart lowered his voice as they approached a medium-sized tent.

Alana nodded, and Stuart cleared his throat.

"Julian?" he called out. "Julian, are you there?"

A few minutes passed and then Julian, groggy with sleep, emerged from the front entrance.

"What in the dickens are you doing here at this time of night?" he asked in amazement.

"I'm terribly sorry to disturb you at this hour," Stuart felt a little embarrassed, "but I need to borrow a phone and I wonder if you might have one?"

"You need a phone at this hour? And it couldn't wait till the morning?"

Stuart nodded earnestly, while Alana snickered quietly on the sideline.

Shaking his head, Julian stepped back in. "Sure, you can use my cellular, but you'd best do it inside here. I have a portable transmitter that reroutes the signal to a distant location, making it virtually impossible to detect where the call is being made from. But when it's used out of doors, it will hook directly up to the satellites, and instantly betray our position to anyone who might be monitoring the airwaves."

The two stepped into the tent and Stuart quickly punched in the numbers. It took a few minutes before a groggy voice sounded on the other end of the line.

"Hello?"

"Kate, is that you?"

"Stuart? Are you waking me out of a sound sleep *again*? Don't tell me this is going to be a new trend!" she moaned, rubbing her eyes briskly.

"Kate, I can't tell you how sorry I am, but I had to call you right away. I know this is going to sound crazy, but I was woken out of a sound sleep just a few minutes ago, and I had a very strong impression that now is the time that we—or perhaps more specifically, *you*—need to go after Su."

"An *impression*?"

"No, it was more than that—it was the clearest thing I've ever felt or heard. It wasn't like words..." Stuart struggled to express himself, "but I knew from the bottom of my soul that this is the most important thing in the whole world right now. I think her life depends on it."

Despite herself, Kate smiled. She could tell from the tremor in Stuart's voice that he was deadly earnest, and that despite feeling terribly awkward,

he had utter confidence in the necessity of what he was asking.

"You do know what this means, don't you?" she finally said.

"I have no idea how it will work or anything, but I'm sure the Lord can give you detailed instructions. I think this will be Su's last chance to get out."

"So I'm supposed to infiltrate myself you know where—*again*—and this time, break out their star prisoner," Kate mused thoughtfully. "Yes, I suppose that would qualify as needing a middle-of-the-night phone call. Stuart, you may consider yourself forgiven for the interruption."

"Kate, you're wonderful!" Stuart burst out. "I promise I will make it up to you someday!"

"You've already done wonders in my life," Kate smiled. "I am after all an entirely different person than I was, am I not? You can ask Alana if you're not fully convinced."

"Convinced I am!" Stuart agreed, then added earnestly, "You will not be out of our prayers for a moment.—Know that."

"I will count on that with all my heart," Kate said.

"All right, I guess I'll call back tomorrow night, as I can't give you a number where I am right now," Stuart said.

"I understand, and I'll be expecting to hear from you." She paused, and then added hesitantly. "I guess if you don't get an answer after a few days, or if the number rings out as disconnected, you'll know that something went wrong. ..."

"Kate, don't even say that! It's God's plan, so if you follow Him, you have all the power of Heaven on your side—there is no way that you can fail! No way at all!"

"I wish I had your faith," Kate shook her head doubtfully.

"Kate, your faith is infinitely greater than mine. Don't you see?" Stuart almost laughed aloud. "You're the one who's going to be doing it! Don't talk to me about having faith—you're the star hero, and He has promised that you will have *everything* that you need, not a second later than you need it. Just reach out and claim it and it will be there."

"Thanks, Stu," Kate said. "I will."

With a few customary closing words, the conversation ended, and Stuart looked up to two sets of puzzled eyes. He smiled sheepishly. "I guess that's that!" he said, not knowing what else to say.

"You're going to have Kate go by herself and try to free Su? Stuart, you've got to be nuts! You may as well ask her to go jump off a bridge in the middle of the night!" Alana shook her head.

"I don't know what to say," Stuart said. "All I know is that's what the Lord told me, and the final decision rests with Kate. I can't just not pass on a message because I think it's crazy or that it would never work. A messenger doesn't decide if he likes what he gets before he delivers it—we just have to do it and let the Lord take care of the consequences." He looked earnestly into Alana's eyes. "This is Su's last chance," he said quietly. "If we don't get her out now, she's a goner. That in itself is worth any price to try for."

"I thought you folks prided yourselves in being martyrs and dying for the cause," Julian remarked casually.

"To a certain extent, yes," Stuart said. "But in my mind there's a difference between dying as a witness in front of others, where your death can be a testimony and cause others to turn to the Lord or take stock of their own lives or whatever it does, and just dying off in a room somewhere." He shrugged. "I mean, I'm sure that'll happen too—some of us will die in a little dark room, holding to our faith, and no one will even

know about it. The Lord knows, and that's what counts.—And the guards who are right there, maybe it would be a witness to them too. Who knows? But all I know is, where there's life there's hope, and I'm not going to condemn Su to a martyr's fate until I know that there's absolutely no other way out for her. If she dies not because of the Lord's plan but because of our own lacks, that's a bit of a different story, isn't it?"

The other two nodded their hesitant agreement, conceding that even if they did not fully agree with everything that was at stake, at least Stuart's motives and reasoning were sound.

"Well," Julian finally said. "We all have a lot of praying to do."

"Thank you for that," Stuart said earnestly. "It's so needed!"

"Come on, Stu," Alana said, grabbing his hand. "We'd best head back to bed. We've got another big day tomorrow."

Chapter 15

THE INFILTRATOR

Kate's night of sleep now effectively over, she nevertheless tossed around for almost an hour, trying to clear her mind of the nebulous clouds that were sinking down upon it—worries, uncertainties, and outright fears were engulfing her in a way that she had never encountered before. At last she sat up, and crouched over on her knees and forearms, burying her face in the bedcovers.

"Oh, Jesus!" she moaned aloud. "I can't do this! I don't know what to do, or how to do it. ... I don't know anything at all! Please help me!"

She stopped suddenly as she felt a warm touch on her back. She remained motionless, knowing that she was alone in the room, and with the door still tightly shut, that no one could have entered. Assuming therefore that the touch must be coming from some sort of spirit, she stayed with her back turned, not wanting to frighten it away by trying to determine for certain its presence.

Two strong hands now moved gently down her bare back, caressing her firmly but with a touch so smooth that she felt the ripples all the way in the pit of her stomach. Back up to the nape of her neck, then contouring every vertebrae down to her waist

and a little below. Now around the front to her thighs, gently caressing her stomach, sliding gently up and down. As the touch came to her breasts, Kate could stand it no longer, and flung herself wildly around, hoping that if she moved quickly enough she could catch at least a fleeting glimpse of this ghostly intruder.

To her complete surprise, she found herself nose to nose with Jay, half-naked himself and smiling at her unabashed surprise.

“Jay!” she burst out. “What are you doing here? I thought you were a spirit!”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” he raised an eyebrow, then grabbed her firmly around the waist. “Let’s not waste time on words.”

Pressing her tightly into him, he silenced her lips on his, all the while moving his hands continuously as he explored the soft delights of her responsive body.

Whenever he would remove his lips, Kate would open her mouth again to ask a question, and each time she did, somehow she seemed to feel an answer flowing through her mind—encouraging, strengthening and uplifting her spirit with each turn it took through the channels of her heart. Then he would kiss her again, and then pause for another strange time of unspoken answers to her questions, until finally all of her questions were answered and their lips no longer needed to separate themselves at all.



Kate woke with a start, and blinked at the morning sunlight coming through the half-closed blinds. She looked at her watch. *Seven-thirty*. All of a sudden the events of the night before came rushing back to her, and she looked wildly around the room. Everything seemed just as it had been. Jay was nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps it was all a dream, she wondered slowly to herself. But yet, something that was so real ... she could still feel every touch, every movement She shook her head. *That was no dream*, she finally determined.

She stood before the long mirror a moment, and then suddenly moved closer. With a triumphant smile she suddenly laughed aloud with glee. There, nestled directly above her right breast was a small, dark pink heart-shaped hickey.

With this as proof that something very unusual indeed had taken place—though exactly what she could not have told you, Kate’s peace of mind was restored, and she put her thoughts towards the more sober events of the day. Apparently she would need to return to her portrayal of Monica Henche—and just pray that the woman had not yet showed her face around the area . As a matter of fact, Kate tried not to think much at all, for the more she thought, the more problems she could find with her attempted plan, and it seemed that going “on blind faith alone,” as Jay had explained in one of their discussions, was the easiest and simplest all around.

She paid careful attention to her makeup job, and dressed in her most austere business suit and a pair of thick black heels. Completing the outfit was a small soft shoulder case, and Kate moved towards the door. Only a few paces from it, she abruptly dropped to the ground, as tears flooded over her face. Wordlessly she remained there for fifteen minutes or more, begging for and receiving the grace and the strength that would be needed to carry her through her ordeal.

When she finally stood up, she felt like a new person. A quick glance in the hallway mirror, however, told her that something distinctly unpleasant had happened to her carefully-painted

face, and so she wearily traipsed back to her bedroom to begin that process all over again.

At last she emerged from the front door of her house, and ran quickly to flag down a taxi that was cruising by at that moment.

"Just start driving," Kate said, quickly moving her hand over the taxi's payment meter. She suddenly realized that she had no idea where to go. She shook her head and brought her hands up to her face. *Where to, Lord?* she thought desperately. Minutes flew by and still she heard no words, saw no flashing neon signs—nothing.

Yet she noticed that the taxi was steadily moving along—a left turn here, a right there, two more turns, and heading along at a resolute pace.

She leaned suddenly forward. "Hey, man!" she called out. "Where are you headed?"

The driver turned around and looked at her like she was mad. "Why, 2135 Main Avenue. Isn't that what you said?"

Kate looked startled for a moment, then burst out into a smile of understanding. "Why of course," she said quickly, as the driver turned his attention back to the road. "Of course I did!"

Leaning back comfortably in her seat, she almost laughed aloud, as another of Jay's quotes came back to her in a flash of remembrance: "*How marvelous are the ways of the Lord, how past finding out!*"

She grinned and tossed a silent prayer of thanks upward.

"Ere we are, miss!" Kate almost jumped as the words startled her out of her reverie. Almost in awe, she stepped out of the taxi and found herself looking up at a huge, imposing white building which stood not more than a hundred meters away.

On an impulse, she suddenly leaned back inside the cab. "Can you wait here?" she asked. "I'll be out in ten minutes at the most."

The driver grunted out a slightly less than civil agreement, which Kate figured would do, and she made her way somewhat apprehensively towards the towering structure.

She pushed through the revolving doors and instantly found herself translated into a hubbub of activity. It seemed like an exceptionally busy morning, and the huge entranceway was teeming with white-clad workers and patients alike.

Letting all of her timidity swing back out the other side of the doors, Kate strode masterfully up to the desk and pounded on the bell. A red-faced young girl trotted up, and Kate looked her over sternly. "Who is in charge here?"

"Why ... I ... uh ..." the girl stammered at this sudden show of authority. "Nurse Perkins, Ma'am."

"Well, get her at once. I don't have all day," Kate said, softening her tone a little so as not to frighten the girl further.

This not being entirely successful, the girl scurried off like a scared rabbit, returning in less than a minute with a gray-haired, matronly woman.

"Can I help you?" the new arrival drawled suspiciously, obviously less easily rattled than her youthful counterpart.

"I certainly hope so," Kate said. "My name is Monica Henche, and I'm here on official government business. I hear ..." Kate paused dramatically, and hesitated. Nurse Perkins shooed the younger girl away, and then returned her attention to the desk.

Kate continued in a slightly lowered voice. "I hear that you have a *special* patient residing here ... a young lady ..." she hesitated slightly, desperately grasping for things to say but trying to look like she was pausing for effect. A word suddenly sprung to her mind. "A special selection patient." Kate smiled knowingly, hoping that she had just said something very significant.

And there was every appearance that she had, for the nurse just poked around on her keyboard for a couple of seconds, and then nodded briskly.

"Susannah Ormigh," the nurse said quietly. "She's on total recall, I'm afraid. Not allowed any contact with those outside of her direct physical supervisors. Actually..." she frowned and looked puzzled, "even those have been called off now. She's being handled directly by some other caretakers."

"Of course she is," Kate said impatiently. "Why do you think I'm here? And my time is going by very quickly, so I'd be obliged if you'd take me to her."

The nurse looked embarrassed. "Why of course, I'm terribly sorry." She paused suddenly. "I'll need to scan your registration, of course."

"Of course," Kate said, matter-of-factly lifting her right hand. But the nurse had already reached her scanner for Kate's forehead. For a split second Kate panicked—she had no mark there whatsoever. What would happen if she was discovered?

The nurse frowned. "I'm getting some type of error message," she said, and reached for her phone.

"Of course you are," Kate said again. "You don't think my registration info will show up on any city scanner now, do you?"

The nurse bristled a little, and said, "All right then, just give me your hand."

Kate rolled her eyes in disgust, and reluctantly reached out her hand. "Do you mind if I mention your name when they ask me why I'm fifteen minutes late?"

Finally the nurse said, "Fine, just go up then. It's the fifteenth floor, room number 1534."

Nodding curtly to her, Kate moved quickly through the crowds to the nearest elevator, where she kept her composure until the metal doors slid shut and the peaceful quiet engulfed her. She had only seconds to rebuild her faith before the next round, but the

short pause was sufficient, and when the doors slid open on the fifteenth floor, Monica Henche strode through them with renewed vigor.

She instantly noticed a room on the right side of the hall, three or four doors down, which had an enclave of guards hovered around it. All the rest of the rooms on the row seemed quiet and dark. Understanding that this must be her target, she moved quickly in the their direction.

The guards quickly saw her coming, and one of them opened his mouth to speak as she drew near.

Kate quickly cut him off. "I'm Monica Henche. You've been expecting me."

"We are expecting no one," the nearest guard drawled. "We have strict orders that we're only to allow the chief in there. Absolutely no one else."

"Chief who?" Kate snapped.

"Carl Stanowitz," the guard said again.

Kate let out a little laugh. "Do you know who I am, soldier?" She drew herself up to all of her five foot five stature.

The second guard sat up straight in his chair now, and suddenly began jabbing the first soldier forcefully in the ribs. He leaned over and muttered a string of words into his ear, then stood up. "Ms. Henche!" he said. "Do you remember me? It's Bud! Bud Weisner!"

"Mr. Weisner!" Kate allowed herself a small smile. "How could I forget."

Bud grinned from ear to ear. "Please go in," he said.

"I'm glad to see you have some sense," she said with satisfaction. "I assume that you also know that this patient is being transferred."

"Transferred?" Bud hesitated a little, and looked at his companion.

"Yes," Kate said impatiently. "We have to get her to a more advanced facility. This place is terribly

out of the way and years out of date." She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

The first soldier laughed aloud. "I'll agree with you on that one," he said, as he reached over and fingered the combination formulas, then passed his hand over the door to open it. "There you go, she's all yours. Oh," he shoved over a stretcher-trolley that was situated nearby. "You might find that useful."

Taking a deep breath, Kate stepped through the dimly-lit passageway and then into the room, pushing the trolley in front of her. It took a couple of seconds for her eyes to adjust to the dim lighting, then she saw a motionless figure in a bed on the far side.

Maintaining her composure, she forced herself to walk slowly across the room till she came near to Su. She bit her lip and fought hard to keep control as she took in the situation. Su was in a miserable state—stripped entirely naked, aside from the cast which covered her from the waist down. Her arms were stretched tightly up and rigidly tied to the bedposts. Her hands were quite blue and there were bruises along both of her arms.

She was unconscious now, and her cheekbones screamed out of her sunken face. She looked far more dead than alive.

Looking around the room, Kate saw a pair of large shears, and quickly grabbed them, cutting easily through Su's bonds. She helped Su sit up, threw a thick hospital robe over the emancipated body and tied it tightly in front. Su was a fair bit taller than Kate, but at this moment, Kate felt no weakness. She picked up Su's unconscious frame and placed her on the stretcher.

Then shoving her briefcase alongside, Kate quickly moved the trolley back through the door.

"Need some help?" Bud offered genially.

"I'm afraid not," Kate said. "I have to have total blackout on this one. I'll need you both to stay here for the next fifteen minutes until my chauffeur and I are out of sight. Is that understood?" she looked them squarely in the eyes.

They both nodded obligingly, and Kate slowly made her way to the elevator. As she got in, she thankfully noticed that it was deserted, but her heart sank when it stopped on the twelfth floor. Only one person entered, however, a lanky, brown-haired young man. He eyed her a bit suspiciously out of the corner of his eye, and then suddenly let out a low shout.

"Susannah!" he cried. "Is that her? Where are you taking her?"

"Hush up, boy!" Kate said crossly. "This is a high security matter. I want you to get off at the next floor and forget everything that you've just seen."

The man pulled himself obstinately in front of Kate and locked eyes with her. "I'm not letting her out of my sight again," he said. "I don't like you people. I don't care what you do to me, I'm not going to let her go. I'm more than a match for you, I don't care how many goons you've got out there."

Kate tilted her head to one side. "What exactly are you telling me? You're willing to risk your place in society—even your life—to defend this girl? What is she to you?"

"She's not anything to me," the man shrugged. "It's just that ... well, I worked with her for a while—I'm a photographer. Something about her was just so different—she held out, she never lost strength. She fought as long as she could, and I'm not going to let her down now when she can't fight any more."

"What is your name?" Kate asked.

"Patrick," he said.

Just then the doors slid open to the main lobby. "Do you know a back way out of this place, Patrick?" she asked, under her breath.

His eyes opened wide as full realization of what was happening struck him. He quickly pressed the door shut again, to the annoyance of the crowd that stood poised to enter, and pressed the button for the floor below.

"Who are you?" he said, but Kate lifted a finger.

"None of that now," she said. "Let's just get out of here."

The busy basement halls were considerably less populated than the upstairs, and Kate was glad to not be leaving in full view of Nurse Perkins.

"I have a taxi waiting at the front," Kate said. "If you hold Su I'll run ahead and have him drive around here." She handed Patrick her precious cargo, then looked at him with murder in her eyes. "Don't you dare move from this place or I swear I will call on every power of Heaven to hunt you down!"

Having thus nailed him to the spot, Kate shot off like a bullet, and a minute or two later a taxicab screeched around to the door. Patrick pushed Su in alongside Kate, then moved her over to make more room.

"What are you doing?" Kate asked.

"I'm coming with you, of course!"

"Coming where?" she asked again.

"Wherever she's going, I'm going," Patrick said.

"I'm not going to lose her again. Plus," he grinned, "I've got to make sure you're not just tricking me this whole time."

Kate shook her head. "All right then, well, shut the door. Driver!" she said. "Drive your fastest!"



Fire flashed in Julian's eyes as he clapped his hand down on Stuart's shoulder. Stuart turned around amiably, but stopped short upon seeing him. "Why Julian, what's the matter?" he asked quickly.

"What have you done to us, Stuart?" he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"You've brought a spy right into our midst!" he said despairingly, almost as though he could not fathom the consequences of what he had just discovered.

"A what? What are you talking about?"

Julian pulled Stuart aside, and lowered his voice even further. "I'm certain it's nothing that you have engineered, because I've seen your earnestness. I know that you people are for real. But one way or another, we've been busted. The feds are probably on their way here right now. We're all going to have to pack up and leave—if we can, that is."

"Julian," Stuart said. "Can you start from the beginning? Tell me what's going on!"

"You ever heard the story of Hansel and Gretel?" Julian laughed bitterly. "Well, it looks like we've got a little Gretel at work. The men were doing their routine scan of the area and they picked up some micro-tracers." Noting Stuart's blank look, he added. "It looks like a handful of powder, but every grain contains a microscopic transmitter. All you have to do is sprinkle a little of that all along your path, and the trailblazers just click on their gear and follow you right to the rat's nest. Bingo! Clean sweep!"

"But who could have ..." Stuart froze in his tracks as the truth dawned on him. "Fawnie!" he said. "She's not one of us; I think Jay picked her up in the prison. She must have been deceiving him all this time."

"Don't you guys have some sort of quality control before you let people into your group?" Julian asked irritably.

"Well, yes," Stuart said. "I mean, normally it's a very time-consuming process, but these days things are so topsy-turvy you can make a lot of headway without being an official member, you know? So what are we going to do?"

"I've ordered an immediate evacuation, but I know that we can't have all of our equipment out of here in any less than four to six hours—and I'm afraid that may be much too late."

"I wonder if we could talk to her. ..." Stuart began, then stopped when he saw Julian shaking his head.

"Don't you see? It's too late! There's nothing she could do now, not even if it would save her life. The transmitters are coating the entire trail from the vehicle right into our camp. And the car itself is government-issued, and equipped with their standard global positioning system, which means if they are onto your friend's escape, and they undoubtedly are, then they already know the general location of our hideout here." He shook his head again. "We're doing our best to demagnetize as many of the transmitters along the trail as we can—that might buy us a few extra minutes at least. But this camp and location are history now. So everyone is packing up and heading out."

Stuart ran his hands through his hair and prayed for wisdom. Then a sudden inspiration struck him. "Why don't you get all your people out of here, and as much of your equipment and files as you can quickly load up. Leave the rest of your setup here. We'll stay behind and handle it for you."

"What, you're seeking an early death or something?"

"We can handle it," Stuart said again, looking him full in the face. "Trust me in this, I just know it. Keep an ear to the ground and when things look like they've settled down, it will be safe to come back." He hesitated. "That is ... that is, unless things go differently than I expect. That's always a possibility, and if that's the case, then ... we will have done all we could do, and you will at least know that we died fighting."

"I admire your guts, man!" Julian shook his head. "All right, I'll clear everyone out. I think we can manage that in just under an hour. But I'm staying with you."

"It's too dangerous, Julian. Your people need you."

"My people will be just fine," Julian said firmly. "There is *no* way I am going to miss this—not for all the people in the world!"

"All right then, if that's the way you feel," Stuart nodded. "We'd better get going. We both have a lot of preparation work to do."

Chapter 16

A QUESTION OF VENGEANCE

“Where is Fawnie?” Stuart burst into the tent and looked around quickly, realizing that the girl was not present.

“What’s up, Stuart?” Jay asked quickly. “She just stepped out to the bathroom.”

“When?” he asked again.

“I don’t know, maybe ten minutes ago.”

“We’ve got to go find her, and right away!” he spun around and started fumbling with the door-flap, but Marty stood up and put an arm around his shoulder.

“Stuart,” he said calmly. “Why don’t you sit down for a minute. You look a little frantic.”

“I can’t sit down right now,” Stuart said desperately, but followed Marty’s leading. “I’ve got to go find her.”

“Whatever it is,” Jay said. “I’m sure it can wait a few minutes while you explain to us what’s happening.”

“You’re right,” Stuart said, breathing deeply as he ran his hands through his hair. “I’m sorry. I got so carried away with worry that I haven’t been very desperate or prayerful.—When I suppose that’s the thing we’re going to need most of all.”

"Stuart," Angelica said softly. "We're all in the dark here. Can you shed some light on what's going on? What's up with Fawnie?"

"Jay," Stuart said. "I hope this doesn't come as a blow to you, but it looks like our dear Fawnie has double-crossed us."

"What?!" Jay stood up. "What are you talking about? How do you know this?"

"Calm down, Jay," Marty said. "Let him finish."

Jay sat down.

"I don't know what to say, Jay," Stuart shrugged. "I don't like the sound of it any more than you do, but I'm afraid there are not a whole lot of alternatives, unless we're supposed to believe that one of us here is a traitor and spy for the government."

"What happened?" Jay asked, with his eyes on the ground.

"Julian told me just a few minutes ago that they found micro-tracer residue all along the path leading from Bruce's tavern to our camp here—and God knows how much before that."

"Oh my God!" Alana said, then suddenly jumped out of her chair. "That girl is loose! She's running around the camp right now—she could be anywhere! She's probably calling the authorities in on us! She's got to be stopped! We've got to go get her right away!"

Now it was Stuart's turn to put on the brakes. "Let's get our battle plans straight first, Alana. Why don't you sit down for a minute until we figure out what the Lord wants us to do."

"Jay, is such a thing possible? Could Fawnie have done this to us?"

"I don't know," Jay shook his head. "I don't know anything anymore. If you'd have asked me the same question five minutes ago I would have denied it on pain of death, but I don't know if I could say the same thing right now."

"Well, she's going to be back any minute," Marty said. "What are we going to do?"

"I told Julian to clear everyone out, and I volunteered us to stay back and face the attackers."

"Oh yeah!" Alana stood up again. "What a glory! Maybe we could be martyrs—again!"

"Sit down, Alana," Stuart sighed wearily.

"Julian wants to stay on with us, and of course, any of you who want to clear out are welcome to also. I just have this strong feeling that we are supposed to stay, and not make these people pay for whatever neglect of ours may have caused this."

"Look guys, I'm sorry," Jay looked on the verge of tears. "This is all my fault. I guess I wasn't being prayerful or in tune enough"

"Hey," Stuart crossed the floor quickly and threw his arm around Jay's shoulders. "That's not what I meant. For whatever reason, the Lord hid this thing from our eyes. Don't you think He could have shown us in a second what was happening? Yet for some reason He didn't, and we've just got to trust that He knows best and was planning this all out. Now we've just got to take it in stride and do what we're here for!"

"What is it that we're doing?" A new voice shattered the atmosphere and plunged the room into an instant, icy silence. It was Fawnie.

"Fawnie!" Stuart stood up and moved quickly over to her, pulling her by the arm to a chair on the far side of the room. "We've just been talking about you."

"Yeah, and so what's up?" she asked eagerly, her eyes bright and innocent.

Jay couldn't stand it any longer. "How could you do it, Fawnie? How could you betray us all like that?"

"What are you talking about? What is this?" she stood up suddenly, her eyes narrowing.

"It's too late," Stuart said. "It's all out. They found the micro-tracers, and we know that it was you."

Fawnie tried to keep up her front and act nonchalant, but those words seemed to take away her power of speech for several seconds. She opened her mouth several times, and then finally stammered out a few intelligible words. Then she looked down at her lap, with an ashamed look on her face.

"I ... I couldn't help it," she started out in a shaky voice. Then, she looked up abruptly, her eyes zeroing in on Jay. She looked straight into his eyes and saw the pain and hurt that registered in them. Feeding and drawing strength from it, she turned to the rest of the room, her eyes narrow and her mouth curved into a sneering smile. "I'll take that back," she said icily. "I couldn't help *not* doing it. In fact, I practically begged Marshall for it. And it was pure pleasure, every step of it. And you!" she threw back her head and laughed—an unpleasant, screeching sound that grated on their ears. "You were all so gullible, so easily deceived! It was so convenient, wasn't it? The doors just swung open ... the guards just happened to be asleep ... I just happened to be at my window, had my car parked just nearby. ..." she dissolved into laughter once again.

As Jay was faced with this shocking display of Fawnie's true nature, a sudden peace came over him. He smiled, looking her straight in the eyes. "I suppose we shall see then who will get the last laugh. I don't really care how I got out of that prison cell; it was engineered of the Lord—even if the *Devil* had to bring it!"

Brushing her aside with his glance as something of no further consequence, Jay turned to the others. "So what are we going to do with her?"

"Let's kill her!" Alana offered. "At least then we

know she won't stab us in the back while we're trying to fight the enemy."

"Um, I beg to differ on that account," Angelica said quickly, and the other boys nodded their agreement.

"We may feel like that, Alana," Jay said, "but I'm afraid it's just not part of the deal for us."

"Why?" she asked. "Stuart killed those soldiers in the woods after they killed me."

"That was different," Stuart said.

"And how so?"

"Well," he struggled for an explanation, then the differentiation suddenly became clear in his mind, "the difference is that *I* didn't kill those men—God did. It's one thing if we're being pursued, attacked or threatened; then sometimes God gives us supernatural powers of self-defense, or even of attack. But ultimately it's Him that 'pulls the trigger,' so to speak. But for us to take matters into our own hands when it's not the only alternative," he shook his head, "I wouldn't feel right about that."

"Okay, that's fine then," she shrugged. "Whatever. So what are we going to do with her?"

Stuart looked over at Jay, who said simply, "I guess we ought to make sure she doesn't go anywhere for the time being. Perhaps the Lord will show us what to do as the time approaches."

At that moment there was a rustling at the door and Julian stuck his head through. "Can I come in?" he asked.

"Sure thing," Stuart said. "How is it all going out there?"

"Troops are on the move," he said with a sigh, throwing himself wearily down onto the couch. "I expect the coast will be clear within the hour. And..." He looked up suddenly, and caught sight of Fawnie sitting sullenly in the far corner of the room.

"What is that creature doing here? Isn't she the one—the traitor? How can you all just be sitting here in her presence?"

"Well," Jay began, "we figured that we—"

Julian reached into his pocket and quickly whipped out a small automatic handgun, leveled it at the girl, and fired without warning.

"Julian!" Stuart shouted.

Jay ran quickly over and grabbed the gun from Julian's hand, while Angelica moved over to where Fawnie had fallen limply to the floor.

Stuart was fuming. "You have absolutely no right to barge in here and shoot her like that," he stormed. "We were taking care of it."

Julian sneered a little. "I suppose you probably would have slapped her hand and sent her on her way, with a prayer for forgiveness and a promise that she would never do it again."

"That's not the point," Stuart said. "You can't just go shooting people down on a whim. It's not fair and it's not Christian."

"Who said anything about Christianity?" Julian shrugged. "That's your bag, not mine."

"Julian, you prayed with us yesterday, but prayer is not enough. You've also got to show your beliefs in the way you live. You can't say one thing but live another. I'm not saying that she didn't deserve to die, but when we take things into our own hands it doesn't give God a chance. Sometimes He is working out something far greater than we could know."

"Look, guys," Julian said. "I'm sorry. I guess I got a little hot under the collar. This whole thing has hit me a lot more personally than it has you."

"Sure, Julian," Alana interjected. "I mean, if I was in your place I wouldn't have waited even that long to do her in."

"She's thrown your whole life into chaos, I guess," Jay added.

"Anyway, what's done is done," Julian said, "but for what it's worth, I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"Hush, everyone!" Angelica said suddenly, and they all moved a little closer in to where she stood leaning over Fawnie. The bullet had hit her in the chest, and the wound was obviously mortal. She was still conscious, though—albeit just barely—and was motioning weakly with her hand.

"Gather 'round," Angelica whispered. "I think she wants to say something."

Fawnie's lips moved and she struggled to form words. "If I could do it all again from the beginning ..." she coughed painfully, splattering blood around her. "If I could do it all again," she paused again, and looked around at each of them, through glassy eyes, "I wouldn't change a thing!" she finished defiantly. "Jay!" she said, a little more loudly, and he looked over at her. "Jay, go to Hell!"

With those auspicious words, Fawnie's head drooped and her body grew limp.

There was a moment of silence while they sat pondering the significance of Fawnie's last words. But before anyone could comment further on them, a commotion outside the tent drew their attention back to reality, and Julian stepped quickly outside, followed by the others. A couple of young men stood there, and launched into an animated rundown of how things were progressing.

"The last of the groups are heading out in all three directions. We should have the area clear in less than twenty minutes. We have also set up the light and motion sensors at key points in a circular range around the camp, at a distance of a mile and half a mile. So you should have at least a meager warning before they descend on you."

"Thank you," Julian said. He turned to the others, as the men moved quickly away. "Well now ... it seems there remains nothing to do but

wait!" Then he turned suddenly to the others. "Have you thought about what exactly we are going to do when the enemy arrives?"

Stuart looked around at the others. "I don't know," he said slowly. "But I do know the best way to find out."

"Let me guess!" Alana said with a laugh. "Julian, get ready to get down on your hands and knees for some serious séance work!"

"Come on, Alana," Stuart slapped her on the back affectionately. "Let's get inside the tent. Every minute counts."



They did not have long to wait, as it seemed that the government bloodhounds had lost little time in picking up Fawnie's trail. No more than an hour had passed before a piercing alarm sounded through the deserted camp. Julian walked slowly over to the display monitor, and clicked the alarm off.

"It's the one-mile mark to the east," he said dryly. "That's the way across the creek and through the valley. They'll be here in less than ten minutes."

"I guess it's come to that then," Stuart said.

"Come to what?" Julian asked nervously.

"We're just gonna have to trust the Lord!" Jay laughed aloud, albeit with a hint of nervousness in his voice.

"How can you guys just stand here calmly, waiting to die?" Julian asked, getting up suddenly and starting to shuffle nervously around.

"We're not waiting to die, Julian," Marty said quietly, "we're waiting for victory."

"Well, whatever you call it, it seems like a sure death to me," Julian shook his head.

"Julian," Alana cut in suddenly. "Look, we checked in about this, remember, and God told us it was gonna be okay. So you've just got to take it at face value, and trust that it's gonna be so."

"So you're willing to stake your life on that?"

Alana turned her head to the side a little, and then looked around at the others. "Yeah," she said, and burst out into a big smile. "I guess so."

"The thing is," Stuart said. "We have to confront them. They're on our trail now, and if we had left the camp, they would have trashed the whole place and confiscated all your equipment. We were the ones that brought this on you, and we couldn't just leave you with that burden. Plus," he said, "they've asked for it."

"This wonderful man that we know once said," Jay added, "that God can only take so much flack from His enemies. But once they start poking their fingers into His eyes by harming or trying to harm us, then it's gone far enough and He's ready to see them stopped."

"Well, I guess that's where we're at now," Julian said, "because I can see some movement on the far side of the camp."

"Let's get going then. Do you all know your battle stations?" Julian asked quickly.

Everyone nodded, and each with their hearts full of silent prayer, they moved quickly to their appointed spots.

Chapter 17

REUNION

The loud rumbling of the engine increased until nothing else could be heard. From their various hideouts, the six carefully viewed the oncoming spectacle. All they could see at first was a huge army truck, which drove in between the first tents on the far side of the camp. The engine slowed to a halt and a man jumped out, dashing in and out of a few tents.

“They’re gone, sir!” he shouted excitedly. “All gone!”

He moved from tent to tent, repeating his proclamation several times.

“What do we do now, Cal?” he called out to the driver.

Cal turned off the engine, and jumped out of the vehicle. “Well, if they’re gone then they must have made it to safety. I don’t know how they caught wind of this so quickly. It seems they left in a mighty big hurry though.”

From their secluded spot, Jay and Stuart looked at each other. Still unsure, they held back, until all of a sudden Jay saw something that confirmed it all. Dashing out of his hideout, he shouted, “Kate!”

The two soldiers standing in front of the truck turned around quickly, and Cal called out, "Who goes there?"

Kate moved to the front of the truck. "It looks like they're not all gone after all."

"What is this?" Jay asked.

"We came to warn you of an attack, but it looks like someone beat us to it," Kate said.

"But how ... who ..." Jay suddenly realized that he had so many questions that he could not think of an adequate one to start with.

Stuart took charge by expressing their questions in one general query. "Who exactly are you?" he motioned his head towards the two soldiers, who now stood, grinning a little.

"It's really a long story," Kate sighed, as though even the thought of reliving it in memory was wearying beyond words. "I'll have to give you the detailed version some other time. But basically, when I went in for your commando mission to try to rescue Su—remember that?"

Stuart smiled. "I remember. Kate, we all owe you one!"

"How did that turn out, anyway?" Jay asked.

"It went surprisingly well—must have been a lot of prayer power on my back, I'll tell you that. These type of things don't happen very often outside of Hollywood. But anyway, I went in one, and came out three.—That is, I picked up a traveler of sorts on the way. I'm sure you'll meet him soon enough—he's sort of a package deal with Su at the moment. Devoted himself to being her caretaker, he has, and a more caring one I don't think you could find. God knows she needs a little tender care after all she's been through!"

The boys suppressed the flood of questions that rose to their lips, and Stuart just said: "And these guys..." he paused helpfully.

"Well, this guy of Su's is called Patrick, and—Cal, do you want to take over?" Kate asked.

The taller of the two soldiers cleared his throat somewhat, and brushed his hand sheepishly through his close-cropped hair. "I'm sorry to intrude on you all like this," he said. "But I couldn't turn down this opportunity when it came my way. See, I've been getting restless with this whole new regime and one-world lifestyle, and all that bull that this grand new leader so-called puts over on us. Sometimes Patrick and I would go out drinking together, and we'd talk about what we'd do if we could ever get away. So when he made the breakaway with Kate and her friend, he confided in me."

He shook his head pensively. "It so happened that I'd just gotten out of a top-security briefing in which we discussed a huge mobilization attack against this very camp.—Due to take place at the crack of dawn tomorrow, as a matter of fact. I knew of a few others of my men who were also loyal—or I should say *disloyal* to this new government—and I tested the waters out with a couple of them, and those who took the bait, well, we were off within the hour."

Kate continued, "Then Su got one of those messages ..." she struggled to remember the right word.

"Prophecies," Alana offered helpfully, having just walked up to join the group.

"That's it, a prophecy," Kate continued. "Yes, Cal had just finished telling us about what the army was planning, and Su got this thing all about how you guys were here with them, and that we should come warn you and also join up with you. So off we went, and ... here we are!"

By this time the others realized that the coast was clear, and most of them had trickled out of their various hideaways in time to catch the drift of Kate and Cal's tale.

"And you're all here!" Kate said exultantly. "I was so disappointed when I thought I'd missed you! And there's someone that you're probably all very anxious to see."

"Su?" Angelica asked, hoping against hope.

"That's right!" Kate said. "Come on, she's back here."

They moved quickly to the back of the truck, and climbed up easily into the back. Su was lying on the floor in the corner, and Patrick sat near her, obviously quite attentive to every aspect of her care. Several other soldiers were sitting on the benches that lined the sides of the truck.

Patrick looked up at the newcomers. "Hi," he said. "I'm Patrick. It's very nice to meet you all—Su's been telling me all about you."

Su looked up and smiled. "I'm sorry I can't sit up," she said weakly. "I'm afraid I've had my share of trials and tribulations over the past few weeks.—Every bit of which I've deserved."

"Don't worry about that," Stuart said. "We're just glad you've escaped safe and sound."

"The way of the transgressor is hard," Su said, as a little tear trickled down her cheek. "What I wouldn't give to do it all over again differently, but I'm glad for the Lord's forgiveness and that at least I can go forward from here and do it right this time around."

"Su, you look like a much wiser and more mature woman," Jay said admiringly.

"That I am, Jay," she said. "I feel like I'm about fifteen years older!" And she laughed, but it was a laugh filled with joy, without a trace of bitterness or remorse, and the onlookers thanked the Lord in their hearts. They knew that once Su's body healed, she would be as good as new—or better.

Julian and Cal were talking outside of the truck, and Stuart moved over to join them.

"So what is the latest?" he asked.

"Well, if that crack attack is planned for dawn tomorrow morning, we'd better clear out what we can and head for safety," Julian said.

"We were going to stay and fight it out," Stuart offered hesitantly.

"I have a feeling," Jay came up behind them, "that perhaps the reason the Lord wanted us to stay was so we could reunite with the others, and having done that ... I wouldn't be adverse to moving on.—Especially now that it looks like we have a vehicle."

"You mean this government-registered army truck?" Stuart asked doubtfully.

"Oh, don't worry," Cal offered. "We've disabled the global positioning system, and altered the vehicle's registration signal. We should be able to have smooth sailing through any checkpoints, and across any borders you'd like—at least for awhile, until they catch onto us."

"So you'd be coming with us too?" Stuart asked Cal.

"We'll be wanted for mutiny, or even worse—treason—after what we've done. We don't exactly have anywhere to go but to follow you now—if you'll accept us, that is!"

Stuart looked around at the others, who appeared as impressed at the offer as he was himself, and nodded his consent. "Of course, we'll have to confirm that with our Boss Upstairs," he added after a slight pause. "I hope you understand. You know, after what we've been through, we just can't be too careful."

"I understand," Cal said. "Take all the time you need. I do hope we'll meet His approval, though."

"Well," Julian said. "While you guys take your deliberation time, I'll call the others. We still have a few good hours of daylight which we'll need to pack the rest up, and hopefully we can have all the essentials ready to load into the trucks by the time

they get here. We'll be way off in the distance by the time the army even starts heading this direction."

"Let's do it!" Jay said, as Stuart and a couple of the others retreated off to the side. "You just lead the way—and let's pray that the army doesn't step up their attack when they realize that part of their elite is gone."

Julian started eagerly passing out instructions, and soon all the team were busy packing and dismantling, with the exception of Angelica, who took over Patrick's post at Su's side, and spent most of the next several hours sitting with eyes round and transfixed as Su related her many horrific tales of the past two weeks.



By the time the low rumble of returning vehicles could be heard in the distance, the team lay sprawled out in the late afternoon sun, surrounded by piles of equipment and folded up tents and other belongings.

"There they are!" Julian was the first one up, waving excitedly at the approaching four-wheel drive. The driver hesitated uncertainly at seeing the large army truck parked auspiciously in the center of things, but saw after glancing around that all was well. Rolling down his window, he called out at Julian.

"We're doing ten-minute intervals," he said. "Load me up and I'll be on my way before the next truck pulls in."

"Sure thing," Julian nodded, and motioned to the others.

Now the sun had fully set, and the last bit of stuff had been crammed into the army truck. Cal jumped into the front, and most of the others headed for the back. Julian stood in front of his jeep, also loaded up for departure, and grabbed Stuart's hand warmly.

"Thanks, buddy," he said. "I don't know how I could repay you."

"I'm just sorry that we caused your having to move and all," Stuart said.

"Hey, it wasn't you," Julian returned. "And besides, don't worry about it. I'm sure it was for the best. We've been here long enough and were starting to get settled down. It does us good to keep moving about—makes us harder to find and reminds us of our own mortality."

"I'll agree to that," Stuart grinned.

"Well, let's keep in touch," Julian said. "You know the number to my private phone?"

Stuart nodded.

"Just remember, if I'm outdoors, or beyond the range of my displacement transmitter, I won't be able to return your call."

"Yes, I'll remember," Stuart said with a smile. "You've really got this whole thing screwed on right-side-up, don't you?"

Julian just laughed. "You're sure you don't want to come with us?" he asked.

"I don't think so. With this truck caravanning with yours we'd stick out like a sore thumb. Plus, I think there's somewhere else that we need to head. But I'm sure that our paths will cross again someday."

"And with the input that you all have given us," Julian said, "I'm sure you'll find us to be worlds different by the time we meet again."

"Of that I am sure as well," Stuart said.

The two hugged each other warmly, then moved to their respective vehicles.

As Stuart walked back towards the front of the truck, Kate came around from the back.

"Do you think you could drop me off on the main road, where I can catch a cab back to my place?" she asked.

"Go back?" he asked. "Whatever for?"

Jay had walked up behind her in time to hear Stuart's comment, but he did not say anything. Kate saw him and grabbed his hand.

"I'm sorry," she said, fighting back the tears. "I know this sounds horrible and all, but I just don't think I can come with you all right now. I love you all, I love what you do, I love the way you live, but ... I just don't know if I'm ready to give up my whole life and go with you this very minute. You know?"

"But how will you live?" Stuart asked.

"The authorities don't know me by name, although I'm sure they'll be on the lookout for an impostor who impersonated Monica Henche soon enough. But I can give myself a good hair-dye and makeover, and that should keep the guards and Brett Marshall from identifying me. No one got any pictures of me as far as I know, so I think I'm pretty safe for the time being. And if things change, well ... I've always got a way out, right?"

"That's right," Jay said. "You're welcome to come with us anytime."

"It sounds like you've given this a lot of thought," Stuart said.

"I have," Kate nodded. "It just feels right. Who knows, maybe in the future you'll need someone in my position. Maybe I could be a bigger help to you where I am than if I were to leave it all and come with you."

"I'll debate that," Jay made a futile attempt at humor, but Kate smiled, and turned to him, as he threw his arms around her and buried his head in her shoulder.

Reveling in the sense of his lips on her skin, Kate suddenly remembered something. "Jay," she said. "I had the strangest dream the other night. ..."

He lifted up his head and she searched his eyes until she saw it ... a glimmer of recognition that

sparked and snapped between them like a live electrical cable.

"I know," he said. "So did I."

And that was all that needed to be said on that.



And so it was that the following morning found them all on the road again—Cal, Stuart and Alana in the front of the truck, with Jay, Marty, Angelica, Patrick, Su and the other soldiers sandwiched in the back amongst their various belongings.

"This may be a minor question," Cal called out to Stuart above the engine's roar, "but where are we headed?"

"We're going home!" Stuart said, with a shine of anticipation in his eyes at the thought of being reunited with his wife and family.

"Home sweet home," Alana said, then with a wry smile added, "to loved ones dearly missed."

Stuart grabbed her leg and squeezed it tight. "With many new loved ones coming along too," he added softly.

"Forward then!" said Cal, and the three smiled to hear the faint sound of voices raised in musical harmony coming from the back of the truck.

"Never give in! We will never, never give in!"

THE END

Glossary

- acutely:** keenly perceptive or discerning
- adjacent:** next to; lying near
- ambience:** the special atmosphere or mood created by a particular environment
- amiable:** friendly and agreeable; good-natured
- amicably:** showing friendliness or goodwill
- bantering:** to exchange playful or teasing remarks
- belligerent:** hostile or aggressive
- bloodhound:** a type of dog with a smooth coat, drooping ears, sagging jowls, and a keen sense of smell
- bona fide:** sincere; genuine
- brazen:** shameless
- brusquely:** in an abrupt manner; discourteously blunt
- catch 22:** a situation in which an agreeable solution is impossible to reach because conditions illogically and automatically conflict with each other (as in “heads, I win; tails, you lose”)
- clandestinely:** kept or done in a secret manner
- commemorate:** to honor the memory of with a ceremony.
- concede:** to acknowledge, often reluctantly, as being true
- concerted:** coming from multiple sources
- confidante:** a woman to whom secrets or private matters are disclosed
- congenial:** having the same tastes, habits, or temperament; sympathetic
- consigning:** to give over to the care of another; entrust.
- consternation:** a state of paralyzing dismay
- contouring:** to move along a surface, especially of a curving form
- contraband:** goods prohibited by law
- converse:** to engage in a spoken exchange of thoughts, ideas, or feelings; talk
- culinary:** of or relating to a kitchen or to cookery
- deduced:** to reach (a conclusion) by reasoning
- demeanor:** the way in which a person behaves
- deterrent:** something intended to prevent
- emanating:** to come or send forth from
- emancipate:** to free from bondage or oppression; liberate
- encapsulate:** to express in a brief summary
- extravaganza:** an elaborate, spectacular entertainment or display
- garnished:** to enhance in appearance by adding decorative touches; embellish.

BLOOD AND FREEDOM

generic: general; common
genially: having a pleasant or friendly manner; cordial and kindly
grimace: showing contempt or disgust
haggard: appearing worn and exhausted
hickey: a reddish mark on the skin caused by intense kissing on that spot
impervious: incapable of being penetrated
impostor: one who engages in deception under an assumed name or identity
incontinence: being uncontrolled, unrestrained
infernally: abominable; awful
inherent: natural; inborn
innuendo: indirect or subtle action or expression
jargon: a specialized form of speech associated with a certain trade or style
leering: looking with a sidelong glance of sexual desire or sly and malicious intent
masquerade: a pretense or disguise
nebulous: vague
orderly: an attendant who does routine, non-medical work in a hospital
ornery: disagreeable, difficult to handle
page: to contact someone by sending a signal to an electronic device known as a "beeper"
paltry: lacking in importance or value
past-less: without a past
pensive: deep in thought
perplexion: jargon for the state of being mystified or puzzled (taken from "perplexed" and "complexion")
pique: to provoke or arouse
precarious: dangerously lacking in security or stability
prelate: a high-ranking member of a religious order (used in this text as a spiritual, rather than a literal description of the Antichrist)
protégés: persons whose welfare, training, or career are promoted by an influential person or entity
psychotic: a person with a severe mental disorder, characterized by derangement of personality and loss of contact with reality
pummeling: to beat with the fists
pungent: with a sharp or disagreeable odor
raucous: rough-sounding and harsh
receptacle: a container
reciprocation: to show, feel, or give in response or return
renegade: an outlaw or rebel

resonant: continuing to sound in the ears or memory; echoing
similes: a figure of speech in which two essentially unlike things are compared
stipend: a fixed and regular payment
swarthy: having dark complexion or color
trepidation: uneasiness; apprehension
unobtrusive: not noticeable or blatant
vestiges: the last remaining elements

